



Popular Movement in Nilgiri State of Odisha: 1938–39

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(Abstract: Nilgiri State was one of the princely states of Odisha that suffered socio-economically and politically under British colonialism, leading to frequent popular unrests. With the beginning of the anti-colonial mass movement, the tenants, both tribals and non-tribals, rose in revolt against the ruling chief as well as the colonial power under the banner of Nilgiri State Prajamandal during 1938–39. To mobilize the people in Nilgiri State, the leadership was provided by the Congress and the State Peoples Movement. In spite of the state's repressive measures, Prajamandal mobilized the people of the state to agitate against the ruling chief in a non-violent way to redress various agrarian and political issues. Consequently, the popular people's movement in Nilgiri State had far-reaching consequences. Most importantly, in Nilgiri, the Raja was compelled to grant civil liberties and introduce necessary agrarian reforms, including the abrogation of various illegal cesses. The success of the Nilgiri movement had a meaningful impact on the people's movement in other parts of the princely states of Odisha. The struggle of people therefore could be understood as an inseparable parts of India's march towards freedom)

(Key Words: Nilgiri, Durbar, Princely States, Congress, Prajamandal, State Inquiry Committee, Yubak Sangh, Odisha State People Conference)

In Odisha, the native state, known as *Garjat*, was largely found in hilly regions in the north and western parts of the province, ruled by local chieftains. Before colonial rule in 1803, they were paying annual *peshkush* to the Marathas, who seldom interfered in their internal administration. After British occupation, these *Garjat* states, 26 in number, were divided into 'A', 'B', and 'C' classes. [1] The states were more or less primitive, and people largely lived on agriculture and forest lands. These general socio-economic structures of the states were

in contrast to the system in vogue in other parts of India. The administrations of the states were run by the rulers under the direct advice and guidance of the colonial political officers. The forms of government prevailing in the states of Odisha were patriarchal, autocratic, and medieval in nature and character, which defied all canons. [2]

In Odisha, the princely states were divided into various class categories. Nilgiri State was put into the category of 'B' class state, which came under the Eastern States Agency. After India's independence, the state of Nilgiri was integrated into Odisha, which formed a sub-division of Balasore district. The geographical location and physical setting of the state of Nilgiri were in the north and north-east; it was bounded by Mayurbhanj State and in the west and south by the British province of Balasore district. It was a small state, being about 281 square miles and having a population of nearly 75,000 in 1947. It consisted of Hindus (including caste Hindus and untouchables) and aboriginal tribes. The aboriginal tribes were primarily *Santal and Kulba, Mundand Bathudi* touching about 15 percent of the total population, and Hindu untouchables formed nearly 10 percent. Like other 25 princely states, Nilgiri suffered a setback under the colonial regime due to socio-economic exploitation, misrule, and the arbitrary rule of the ruling chief. [3]

Agriculture was the primary means of livelihood for the people of the state. The land revenue system that existed in Nilgiri state of Odisha during colonial rule was unjust and oppressive in nature. Compared to British Odisha, the land revenue collected was much higher in the Nilgiri area. In 1939, the land revenue collected was Rs 5 per acre in the Nilgiri State of Odisha. Besides the higher land revenue, the people of the state were subjected to various kinds of illegal exactions, such as *Bethi, Begar, Magan* (forced levies on ceremonial occasions), *Salamis* (presents), and *Rasad* (cesses collected for the provision of British officials and troops assessing through the state). The higher land revenue and illegally collected various *abwabs* from the subjects were appropriated by the rulers and proved a coffer to the state treasury. The State Inquiry Committee Report 1938 stated that 'the annual domestic expenditure of the state was Rs 50000 out of the state annual income of Rs 1, 50,000 during colonial rule' and that the burden generally fell on the people. The ruler of the state managed to spend more than half of the state's income for his personal purposes, which could be possible because there was no clear-cut demarcation between the public treasury and the ruler's private purse. Besides the above, the people of Nilgiri State suffered due to maladministration and various kinds of oppression by the state authority during the colonial period. [4]

The socio-economic condition of the states of Odisha in general and Nilgiri in particular was deplorable, leading to spontaneous and frequent popular political upheavals since the 19th century. If we closely look at the history of the people's resistance in the states of Odisha in the past 25 years of the twentieth century or so, there were several popular movements aiming to redress the economic and political grievances. Similarly, from the Report of the Odisha State Inquiry Committee, 1938, it is reflected that the people in Nilgiri rose in revolt against the arbitrary enhancement of land rent, *bethi*, and other glaring economic and political issues during the mass phase of India's national movement. The severity of *bethi, begars*, and requisitions of goats and buffaloes for sacrificial purposes, fees for killing wild beasts and damaging the crops in the fields, grazing fees, and

increments in land rent are some of the prominent causes that were responsible for the risings. There was no remission of rent or confiscation of land rights by the defaulters (de-peasantization) of land revenue. In the case of rich peasants, the land rights were given to the highest bidders.

The agrarian situation in the states, including Nilgiri, further deteriorated owing to the beginning of World War II and the world economic depression in the 1930s. Naturally, the burden fell on the agrarian peasant society. Around that time, the popular resistance movement in the Nilgiri state of Odisha surfaced after the birth of the State Peoples Movement in Odisha in 1931. [5] Besides, the daily news of growing nationalism in the adjoining Balasore district had its' reverberation in the princely state of Nilgiri. Consequently, during the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1920–22, Khirodananada Devagoswami, Lakhmidhar Mishra, and Pranabandhu Agasti from Nilgiri State participated in the Satyagraha movement of the Congress. Later, under the dynamic leadership of Hare Krushna Mahatab (the Congress leader of Balasore), the popular movement in Nilgiri got further momentum.

During the Gandhian phase of the Indian nationalist movement, particularly in 1928, the Nilgiri state people rose in revolt against the prolonged injustice and various kinds of oppression by the ruling chief, as stated earlier. On the atrocities of the Nilgiri Durbar, Hare Krushna Mahatab, a popular Congress leader of Balasore District published an anonymous booklet known as “*Nilgiri Atyachara*” (Oppression in Nilgiri). In that booklet, Mahatab described the notorious rule and atrocities committed against the people and the illegal collections of *bethi*, *magan*, etc. by the ruling chief. [6] Since the Raja wanted to suppress the popular agitation of the people, he adopted various means. Fearing the oppression of the Raja, the people of Nilgiri fled away to Balasore district for shelter. The State Inquiry Committee of 1938 recorded that, due to the severe atrocities of the Raja, around 2000 people left for Balasore and took refuge as refugees. Finally, C. F. Andrews, who was a Christian missionary and philanthropist, represented the colonial government in negotiations over the matter. C. F. Andrews, in his well-known book “*India and the Simon Commission*,” narrated that the people of Nilgiri state agitated peacefully and in a non-violent way against the Durbar. [7] He was also highly pleased at the non-violent and peaceful behavior of the agitators (tenants). Finally, with his intervention, the issues were resolved peacefully with the ruling chief of Nilgiri. The Raja agreed to pay proper remuneration for services obtained from the people. As a result, the tenants called off the agitation and returned home. [8] But the settlement was short-lived because all those promises made by the Raja were not implemented.

The trouble in Nilgiri was later aggravated during the Salt Satyagraha movement. The revolutionary movement reached a great height due to the participation of Balasore district in the Satyagraha movement. During the Civil Disobedience Movement, the people who fought against the Nilgiri Durbar for various injustices actively participated in the 1930 Salt Satyagraha. Many prominent leaders, such as Bipracharan Mohapatra, Daitari Prasad Rath, Gajendra Nath De, Hadibandhu Sa, Jagannath Rana, Kali Charan Parida, Kasinath Agasthi, Maheshwar Pradhan, Nimai Charan Choudhury, Pranath Agasthi, and Pranabandhu Parida of Nilgiri, participated in the Salt Satyagraha movement. Punitive action was taken against these Satyagrahis' by the state

authority, which was in collaboration with the colonial power. The British government suspended the license of Golak Nath De (Secretary Balasore DCC and member Odisha PCC), who was a pleader by profession.

During the course of the civil disobedience movement, the first Odisha State People's Conference (1931) was organized at Cuttack Town Hall with Pattabhi Sitaramayya as President. The prominent Congress leaders, Nabakrushna Choudhury and Malati Devi Choudhury, who had a socialist inclination, made sincere efforts to organize the conference. Consequently, Sarangadhar Das the popular Prajamandal leader of Nilgiri highly influenced by the Odisha state peoples conference attempted to organize popular agitation in the Princely States of Odisha. [9] Nearly 100 people from 8 states out of 26 attended the first State Peoples Conference. Many representatives failed to attend the conference because of the preventive measures taken by the state authorities. Balukeswar Acharya was the Chairman of the Reception Committee in the second session of the OSPC at Cuttack. Many resolutions were passed, consisting of grievances of the state people, including framing up a constitution for the Odisha State People Conference (OSPC). In the conference, the OSPC demanded that the state rulers immediately confer the rights of occupancy on land holdings and fundamental rights of citizenship, with a strong plea for the abrogation of the illegal practices of *Rasad*, *Magan*, *Bethi*, and *Bheti*. In order to investigate the illegalities, excesses, and acts of repression in most of the Odishan states, a demand was made at the conference at the conference to form a States Inquiry Committee for better administration and responsible government. [10]

The OSPC also strongly objected to the idea of the federation of Indian states as laid down in the Government of India Act, 1935. Due to the demand of the OSPC, the State Inquiry Committee was constituted in 1938 with Hare Krushna Mahatab (chairman), Lal Mohan Pattnaik, and Balawantray Meheta as members. The formation of the Inquiry Committee created a ray of hope in a period of despair for the people of Odisha. Simultaneously, it created the circumstances for the real beginning of the state people's movement in Odisha. The committee toured various states of Odisha with some questionnaires containing the grievances of the tenants, but they were not welcomed by the rulers. Hare Krushna Mahatab requested all the ruling chiefs of Odisha to cooperate in the inquiry into the grievances of the state people of Odisha. However, except for the Raja of Patna, no one replied. [11]

In mobilizing the people of the state to redress the popular grievances, Nilgiri came out first among all states. They put forward their grievances to the State Inquiry Committee, 1937 without any fear. But in Nilgiri, the real trouble began when the villagers of Ayodhya, inspired by Gandhian ideology, organized an annual inter-dinner in 1932, which was cooked and eaten together by the lower caste and caste-Hindus as a mark of social-political solidarity. In 1938, the Nilgiri Durbar served a notice prohibiting regular conduct of such inters-dining on social occasions. This sparked off a movement of popular protest against the Nilgiri State Durbar [12] organized by the *Nilgiri Yubak Sangh* (Youth Association), founded in 1931. However, the *Nilgiri Yubak Sangh* revived its' political activities in 1938 and made regular contact with the Congress Office at Balasore. It demanded several reforms, including the restoration of civil liberties of the people. In May 1938, the *Nilgiri Yubak Sangh* took out a procession from Patpara village to Nilgiri Durbar against the ill-treatment of political

prisoners in the state. In order to stop the procession, the state police asked a large gathering to disperse, but the agitators declined to do so, resulting in the in the arrest of eleven people. The dissatisfaction of the people continued for a long time. [13] Around that time, the Working Committee of the Odisha State Peoples Conference was held at Cuttack, and it passed a resolution condemning the oppressions of Nilgiri Durbar [14], which stirred unprecedented enthusiasm among the people of Nilgiri as well as the Congress Circle of Balasore. To continue the agitation in Nilgiri, the Balasore District Congress Committee conducted secret meetings at Balasore in the house of Mukunda Prasad Das. Consequently, a Congress Center was set up at Alsun (Nilgiri border) to regulate and to keep the flame of agitation alive in Nilgiri against Durbar's maladministration and oppressions. [15]

Finally, at the initiative of Sarangadhar Das and Hare Krushna Mahatab, the *Nilgiri Yuvak Sangh* formed the Nilgiri Prajamandal in June 1938 under the twin leadership of Kailash Chandra Mohanty and Banamali Das as President and Secretary, respectively. A Prajamandal training center was opened under the guidance of Gourmohan Das. On July 11, 1938, the day of the popular car festival (*Rathajatra*), the Nilgiri Prajamandal addressed a public meeting criticizing the state administration on various pertinent issues. [16] The other prominent Prajamandal leaders, such as Sadhu Prasad, Bidyadhar Mohapatra, Pranabandhu Agasti, Rama Chandra Mohapatra, and others, made sincere attempts to mobilize the Nilgiri tenants against the state authority.

In the 1930's, there were spectacular political changes in the state political leadership of Odisha due to the formation of the popular Congress Ministry (1937–39), the emergence of a socialist trend within Congress, and the formation of Kishan Sangh, leading to a greater focus on demand for agrarian transformation in the state. Keeping in view of the growing demands, the popular Congress Ministry formed a State Inquiry Committee in 1938 to look into the demands of the state people. Subsequently, the Inquiry Committee submitted its report in 1939. Accordingly, the popular Congress Ministry attempted to resolve many issues relating to the agrarian problem in Odisha. During the tour of the State Inquiry Committee, Nilgiri Prajamandal proactively laid out the grievances of the tenants, which contained 28 demands. The Raja forced tenants to desist from giving such evidence to the Committee as the tenants turned up in large numbers and prayed to the Inquiry Committee to redress their grievances. [17] The most important demands were: change of forest laws; reduction of land rent by 50%; abolition of *bethi*, *beggar*, and *salami*; abolition of the Sabarkari system; stoppage of high rates of interest if the tenants failed to pay land rent on time; abolition of wood rent in the state; right to hold meetings and processions as the raja is forbidden in the state; etc. [18]

The Raja of Nilgiri passed an ordinance that banned the State Prajamandal and prohibited holding any political meetings in the state. Even he denounced the 28 demands of the Prajamandal. [19] In June 1938, the Odisha State Peoples' Conference was held in Balasore. Sargandhar Das, the Secretary of the of the Odisha State Peoples' Conference, exhorted the people of the state not to violate the ordinance of Nilgiri Durbar. The Nilgiri Prajamandal started non-violent protests in the state for the restoration of civil liberties for the people and the establishment of responsible government in the state. The state police force harassed the agitators in various

ways, even though they were beaten in public by some hired miscreants. Two young boys of 12 or 13 years, namely Giridhari Singh and Dukhi Dalei, were beaten mercilessly with a brass badge from the policemen's belt. Both of them became unconscious, were left at night in the forest, and returned to the Congress Ashram in the morning. Although the state authorities, with the help of the colonial police force, returned to extreme cruelty and acted in a barbaric manner to dampen the courage and enthusiasm of the tribal people, the popular agitation did not stop. The Nilgiri Durbar, within 11 days of the movement, arrested 116 people and imposed heavy fines. The actions of the state authority escalated further trouble, and a large number of people came forward and joined in the movement in Nilgiri. They were ready to face the bullet and determined to fight to a finish strictly in non-violent lines. The most notable feature of the popular movement was the participation of Santals and other aboriginal tenants in the Nilgiri State. [20]

In July 1938, a negotiation for settlement was started between the Raja and the Nilgiri Prajamandal. The terms of the settlement were to allow people to elect their Prajamandal leader to place grievances before the Raja, fines to be imposed, and imprisonment sentences to be abrogated. On the other hand, the leaders of the Prajamandal promised the Nilgiri Durbar that they would not return to mass agitation until their demands were met. [21]

Although the negotiation started for settlement, in Gariamal village, the tenants of Nilgiri State started an ashram under the leadership of Banamali Das, the Secretary of Nilgiri Prajamandal, along with the other 25 Prajamandal workers of the state. Soon after, the number swelled up to twelve hundred, which could be possible due to the earnest efforts of Udaynath Birbar of Nilgiri, a sympathizer of the Nilgiri movement. From the ashram, a daily leaflet named "*Ranadaka*" (War Cry) started getting published with the help of Gour Chandra Das, Secretary of Balasore District Congress Committee. The idea of publishing the booklet was to rekindle the enthusiasm among the people of Nilgiri and keep the movement alive.

Since the negotiation was on, Kailash Chandra Mohanty, the President of Nilgiri Prajamandal, handed over a demand draft to the Ruling Chief and was given two days to concede the demands. Hare Krushna Mahatab, on the other hand, held a meeting in September 1938 in Nilgiri. The meeting commenced with an opening song specially composed on behalf of Nilgiri tenants detailing the various atrocities committed in the state by the Raja. A Congress flag was hoisted by Hare Krushna Mahatab. Kailash Chandra Mohanty exhorted the tribals and other aboriginals to join the Prajamandal and appealed to the people not to start agitation as the negotiation was on. [22] However, the Raja of Nilgiri turned down the demands of the Prajamandal, and the negotiation failed. The ruling chief, apprehending further trouble in the state, started arresting the Prajamandal leaders. The non-acceptance of the demands and punitive action of the Nilgiri Durbar created a circumstance for fresh trouble in the state. Finding no way out, Nilgiri Prajamandal resumed the non-violent Satyagraha movement in August 1938. Purna Chandra Naik, Kanei Barik, and Domei Charan Naik, proceeded to Ambodia Maidan, shouting slogans '*Nilgiri Raja Dhawansa Hau*' (Down with drunken Raja), '*Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai*', and '*Swadhin Bharat ki Jai*'. The resumption of the Satyagraha movement attracted the attention of a large number of Prajamandal workers. To suppress the popular agitation the Durbar indiscriminately *lathi* charged against

the Prajamandal workers and deposed them in Ajodhya, the Raja's palace. Fifteen of them were seriously injured and taken to Balasore Hospital for treatment. Arjun Jena, a post peon who used to carry the *dak* of Prajamandal, was fatally assaulted by some Muslim recruits of the Raja, resulting to his death. His dead body was first taken inside the palace (Ajodhya) and thereafter buried in a jungle at the base of Nilgiri Hill. The barbaric assaults of the state authority infuriated the people and caused unprecedented enthusiasm on the border of Nilgiri. There was a large gathering of people under the leadership of Kanei Barik and Domei Charan Naik. But the forces of the Nilgiri Durbar assaulted the Prajamandal agitators. Banamali Das, the secretary of the Nilgiri Prajamandal, was arrested, and the Nilgiri Prajamandal was banned. [23]

The Prajamandal demanded the immediate release of Banamali Das, the Secretary and popular leader of Nilgiri Prajamandal. The protest demonstration continued with renewed vigor in the state. The situation became tense. The Raja of Nilgiri requested the Government of Odisha for help to suppress the popular agitation. The Congress Ministry under Biswanath Das refused to provide any help, but the Raja took the help of the police force from neighboring Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, and Dhenkanal, which restored the *lathi* charge and indiscriminate firing on the crowd. [24]

After receiving this news, the British Political Agent, R.I. Bazalgette, the District Magistrate of Balasore, and Hare Krushna Mahatab (a member of the AICC) arrived in Balasore for negotiations. To settle the long-standing demands of the people, negotiations started between the Raja and the Prajamandal leaders. In August 1938, Hare Krushna Mahatab initiated the negotiation process with the *Dewan* of Nilgiri. Subsequently, Kailash Chandra Mohanty, President of Nilgiri Prajamandal, handed over 31 outstanding demands, including the abolition of *bethi* and *begars*. Along with the demand letter, Kailash Chandra Mohanty tendered an apology letter for certain slogans raised during the protest movement, such as '*Down with drunken Raja*' and '*Down with faithless fellow*', done on August 9, 1938. Compelled by the situation on the same day, the Raja conceded 24 out of 31 demands. The apology letter submitted to Durbar was published for general public information. [25] As per the settlement, Nilgiri State *Durbar* released all those who were arrested on political grounds. The civil liberties, including the illegal practices of *bethi* and *magan*, were abolished by the state. But the ruling chief did not concede the demand for the formation of the popularly elected state assembly and control over the state budget. [26]

Concluding Remarks

Thus, the people's movement in the state of Nilgiri was a historic event in India's struggle for independence. Due to the persistent struggle of the people, Nilgiri was the first state in Odisha where the civil liberties of the people were achieved by the Prajamandal. It was a great victory for the people, signifying its phenomenal influence on the other states people movement in Odisha. [27] Sarangadhar Das observed that the 'agitation in Nilgiri was an example for the other states to emulate'. [28] Similarly, the State Inquiry Committee remarked that "by July 18, 1939, the people enjoyed their civil liberties like freedom of speech and association." Banamali Das, the Secretary of the Nilgiri Prajamandal, also observed that "the successful agitation of 1938

strengthened the position of the Prajamandal, which hereafter took an upper hand in the affairs of the state." Furthermore, due to the well-organized and concerted efforts of the Congress and the Prajamandal, the movement in Nilgiri state of Odisha became a great success. [29]

Though an agreement could be reached between the Nilgiri Durbar and the State Prajamandal, the agreement was short-lived, and the state administration did not introduce the reforms in the state. The Nilgiri Durbar on February 5, 1939, declared Prajamandal an illegal organization and banned all political activities in the state. Besides the murder of the political agent in Ranpur and the beginning of World War II in September 1939, the Prajamandal did not resume the agitation. [30] However, the 1938–39 popular movement in the Nilgiri State of Odisha was a tremendous success, which could be narrated in the wider context of the nationalist movement in Odisha.

End Notes

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