INTRODUCTION
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The six decades between the formation of the Indian National Congress in 1885 and the achievement of independence in 1947, witnessed the greatest transition in our long history. The decade preceding the transfer of power witnessed the climactic phase of this anti-colonial straggle. Although, the anti-colonial movement assumed an apparently stable and co-ordinated form towards the beginning of the first decade of the Twentieth century, yet it acquired immense strength and wider mass base only after Gandhiji took over the reins of the Congress.

The Colonial administration operated through an ideology of seemingly paternalistic benevolence, which often talked of trusteeship and training towards self-government. But in reality, the colonial set up was uncompromisingly despotic and hegemonic. The anti-colonial movement in India was to a larger extent aimed at the erosion of this colonial hegemony over the Indians.

There were many strands in India’s struggle for freedom. While the Indian National Congress was the broad organization, which spearheaded this anti-colonial movement, it was at the same time supplemented with more or less parallel or associated movements at various stages which championed the cause of a varied section of the society. Though many of them remained outside the organizational framework of the Indian National Congress. At no stage did they become alternatives to the mainstream of national movement, nor were they ever quantitatively or qualitatively in the same class. The Congress being not just a party but a movement, incorporated within itself different political and ideological trends.1

Peasant movements, agrarian agitations, the states peoples movements were significant features of the anti-colonial movement. They often brought out popular resentment against exploitation by the British rulers, their Indian agents, the landlords and the princes. But at times, it is extremely difficult to distinguish between the middle class-led mainstream nationalist movement and these popular movements. The title of the thesis “popular movements and mainstream nationalistic politics” may sound a little misleading or vague in the sense that the term ‘popular’ has often been misused. ‘Popular’ has been used for tribal, peasant, artisan and labour protests ignoring the very fact that Gandhian led mainstream nationalist movement was more popular than all these so-called popular movements. And, moreover, in a predominantly pre-industrial society, it is extremely difficult to make a class analysis. In an agrarian society, every one was a ‘peasant’, whether rich, poor or middle. So, it always becomes difficult to draw a thin line separating the two strands of the nationalist movements.

National emancipation, regional self assertion, Caste, or Communal gains or formulating class demands were some of the main objectives of these popular movements. The very same objectives were high up in the agenda of the Congress as well, probably not with the same kind of commitment and degree or intensity of involvement. What is more significant is the fact that almost all these popular movements were given the lead by either the orthodox Congress leaders (totally Gandhian) or leaders who advocated radical views but nevertheless were part of the Congress, and were willing to accept Gandhi’s leadership.

The grievances of the peasants all over India were related to high rent, arbitrary enhancement of rent, unlawful eviction from land, lack of security of tenure and oppressive exactions of the landlords. All these issues involving the peasant exploitation were taken up by the Indian National Congress. But since national emancipation was the most significant or crucial issue overshadowing
other important demands, Congress was naturally not very keen to radically alter class equations. Moreover, since the dominant leadership in the Congress advocated a bourgeoisie or capitalist developmental perspective, it opted for a re-adjustment of class interests rather than a thorough transformation in the basic social structure. That is why organizations like Kisan Sabhas or Kisan sanghas espousing radical views were able to garner wider support base than the Congress in many provinces.

The Congress has often been criticized for being an organization of the ‘bourgeoisie’ or a party of ‘collaborators, which repeatedly betrayed the masses. These may contain some truth, but it would be totally unfair to dismiss the organization as an organization of the propertied class. Gandhian movements had their share of limitations and inadequacies which were internal to mass movements as such. But then also, one has to take into account the strength and greatness of Gandhi as a person and his ideology. Otherwise, how can one explain for the fact that Gandhian leadership retained more mass popularity than his radical critics?

From a party of agitation, the Congress gradually became a party of Government in 1937 and 1946. By coming to power in majority of provinces in 1937, it established its claim to being the successor government and to that extent its perception at the popular level underwent a change from that year. But the magic of the Congress name was to a significant extent connected with the Gandhian myth.

Gandhi had a fascinating array of vocations attributed to him. Not many seemed to know quite who or what he was. He was a Mahatma, a Pundit, a Sadhu, a Bahmin, even a devata. The most intelligent said, he was a man who was working for the good of the country. But there were curious instances of the power of his name.3

The power of his name was such that even simple rural Indians who might not have understood the concept of satyagraha, would still join the nationalist movement. The power of his name worked wonders in the lives of ordinary Indians. Sushila Devi, a close aide of Rama Devi presents a peculiar example: One night, she dreamt of Gandhi and woke up to pack her ornaments and leave for the nearest Congress workers house.5

To most rural masses, Gandhi meant Congress and vice versa. Every one interpreted and appropriated Gandhian messages and his name according to his political and moral vision. In a meeting at Cuttack in March 1921, Gopabandhu Das introduced Gandhi thus:

Three hundred years ago on the same day, Chaitanya came to preach ‘Prema Dharma’ (doctrine of love) in Orissa, Today, after three hundred years, another

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4. S. Sarkar, op.cit., p.43
5. When her relatives went to bring her back, she hid in a bush and only after the sunset, she left for the Congress worker’s house which was three miles away. Rama Devi Choudhury, Jiban Pathe, Grantha Mandir, Cuttack, 1984, p.102.
‘Mahapurusa’ had come to preach ‘rajanaitika premadharma’ (political doctrine of love) to us. Our Utkal has always been famous as the land of ‘Dharma’. Today because of this Mahatma, politics, once again, is based on ‘Dharma’.

The experiences of the famous Oriya educationist and freedom fighter, Chitta Ranjan Das of Bagalpur also makes an interesting reading. He mentions in Mitrasya Chakshusa that after the outbreak of the Quit India Movement in August 1942, he felt restless for two to three days. Then he confided to his elder brother that he wanted to plunge into the Gandian movement so that he could do something for his country. His brother did not dissuade him. He only said that since he (his elder brother) was the eldest child in the family, he had to fulfill his responsibilities towards the family, so he could not join, even if he had the inclination to. But if he (Chitta Ranjan Das) wanted to join Gandhian movement, he could do so and from his brother’s side there was no opposition. There might have been a thousand more such instances of ordinary young men and women joining the Gandian movement.

These incidents also speak volumes about how ordinary young boys and housewives, who had no formal exposure to active agitational politics, were drawn into the vortex of the national movement and what kind of magic or spell Gandhi’s name or the image of the Congress organization exercised over the common men all over India. Another significant aspect of this episode is also the fact that some family members were liberal and supportive of the decision to join Gandhian movement which probably provided the agitators with much more emotional strength.

Orissa has always been a stronghold of the Indian National Congress. Since the days of Gopabandhu Das, who brought and popularized the congress creed in Orissa in 1920, Congress has always been the most dominant political force in the province. More than the opposition to the congress from left or non-Congress parties, the divisiveness in the party ranks from its' own members and factional squabbles among them has led to weaken the party and discredit it in the public eyes.

From the days of Gopabandhu Das and the Satyabadi group in the Congress, there was always a strong under current of opposition to the leadership in the Congress. The twenties witnessed the emergence of a young band of political leaders like H. K. Mahatab, N. K. Choudhury, Nityananda Kanungo, Dibakar Patanayak, Gopabandhu Choudhury, Govinda Mishra who believed that national emancipation did not in any way scuttle the Oriya regional aspirations. And they aggressively pursued their ideology in the Congress, thus marginalizing the hold of the veterans Madhusudan Das and the likes of Gajapati Krusna Chandra Narayan Deo, or Rajendra Narayan Bhanjadeo, the Raja of Kanika, who had so painstakingly nurtured the concept of a united and greater Orissa and who had left no stone unturned in convincing the colonial rulers about the genuineness of their cause.

So from the very beginning of the inception of the Congress in the provincial politics till the achievement of independence in 1947 many pressure groups operated within the congress. And the tussle for power, more than their ideological leanings, shaped the course of the provincial politics in these three decades,

The thirties marked a perceptible change in the congress ideology. The left or more particularly, the socialists started welding more authority in the congress
not only in Orissa, but all over India. A revamping of the congress organization and massive mobilization of the peasantry and the people in the princely states or gadjats was witnessed during the thirties. The notion of Congress as a broad front encompassing a wide array of political opinion was largely valid. Extreme left to extreme right, a Sanatanist Hindu, Swarajist, Pure Gandhian and opportunists, almost every one could be a part of the Congress and operate within the organization.

While this provided flexibility to the Congress it also succeeded partly in sustaining the agitationist image of the Congress even when it was in the office and expected to do the policeman's job. The acceptance of office in 1937, and the subsequent formation of ministries in Orissa and many other states brought about a dramatic change in the popular perception. The Congress came to be increasingly viewed as the successor to the British Government or as a "Government-in-waiting".

Power politics and its accompanying vices became acute once Congress started to be identified as the next probable Government. Struggle for power and leadership inside the Congress organization bred political factionalism and desertion which became a permanent feature in future provincial politics. Principles and ideologies were thrown into the background for petty personal gains. Even the leaders did not abstain from personal mudslinging. The Congress leaders, on the whole, became more and more power hungry.

The struggle for power in the non-Congress camp was also an equally important feature in the provincial politics of the period. After the outbreak of the war, the non-Congress leaders along with the Congress deserters made desperate attempts at forming a ministry. The leaders of the constituent groups, tried to outwit the other. Pundit Godabarish Mishra and Rama Chandra Mardaraj Deb of
Khalikote each wanted to be the prime minister, which ultimately ended in Krishna Chandra Gajapati Narayana Deb becoming the Prime Minister. The Raja of Khalikote was again outwitted when pundit Nilakantha Das became the Chief of the National war front. This converted Ramachandra Mardaraj Deb to a strong critic of the Coalition Government. Thus, the game of politics for power kept the leaders busy throughout the period. All these resulted in groupism, factionalism, desertion and frequent changing of political allegiance in the province.

However, attention needs to be focused on the Congress ability to rejuvenate its image from time to time through mass agitation. There is no doubt that the stint in office followed by a long period of agitational inactivity had adversely affected the Congress image. 1942 and the mass violence resurrected it to a significant extent. In the final analysis it did not matter how people interpreted the call to agitation in 1942: the point was that it was conducted under the Congress’s leadership and formal break with the congress was politically suicidal for the radical leaders. The failure of the left to realize this is a clear case in point.

In office, the Congress Ministries did perform well in spite of the limited framework in which they had to function. The first ministry in 1937 showed much promise and initiated many progressive schemes. But an abrupt end in way of the outbreak of the second world war dashed all such hopes. Moreover, it could not devote more time to reform bills like the tenancy reforms which were revolutionary and at the same time controversial.

The second Congress ministry can be said to have been fairly successful because by then the British withdrawal was only a matter of time and the Congress could initiate measures with long-term perspectives. Many projects initiated during this period showed signs of promise and future progress. Creation of the Orissa High Court, Construction of the new Capital at Bhubaneswar and starting
of the multi-purpose Hirakud dam were some of the important works undertaken by the ministry.

The biggest challenge posed to the mainstream nationalist movement was by the state people’s agitation. Because of peculiar situation prevailing in the states, the Gandhian leadership showed exceptional hesitation in extending support to the movement in the states. It also received flak for its undue reluctance.

The problem of the states emerged on the political horizon in 1938, soon after the formation of the Congress Ministries in British Orissa. Massive mobilisation drives by the various outfits from outside created situations where the Congress could not ignore the possibility of active involvement in the states politics. All India Congress Committee also accordingly changed its attitude towards the states problem.

However, because of wider nationalistic compulsions, the Congress in Orissa preferred to trod a moderate path, at times disappointing its cadre who had participated whole heartedly in the movements in the states. From the initial hesitation in the early thirties to the total involvement and merger of the states with British province, the relationship between the Congress and the states people agitation went through many trials and tribulations.

However, the issue which had brought the Oriyas together, generated a powerful language agitation and was instrumental in formation of Orissa as a separate province, became the biggest casualty once the Gandhian agitation picked up in the province. The desire for a “Greater Utkal” was partially fulfilled when powerful movements rocked the princely states and immediately after independence the Gadjat states were merged with the Orissa province. But the union of the left out Oriya-speaking territories with the Oriya mainland has been a
very delicate and emotional issue close to every Oriya’s heart. The Congress ministries in the pre-independence and post-independence periods, unfortunately belied the expectations of the people by making no sincere attempt to amalgamate these left-out Oriya-speaking tracts. Occasional voices are raised for the merger of these abandoned areas. But in the larger interest of Indian nationalism, such demands have received scant attention from the people at large.

The decision of the AICC in 1937 to include Singabhum area in Bengal and the lack of protests by the Oriya delegates present in the meeting were strongly condemned by the Congress members of Singhbhum as well as some members in Orissa. The same act was virtually repeated during the reorganization of the states in 1956-57 when the non-Congress parties as well as many in the Congress cadre in Orissa alleged that the Congress leadership had failed to protect the interests of the Oriyas. Thus the persistence of the articulation of regional aspirations have revealed its potential as a mobilizing force which no political faction in Orissa can ignore.