KISAN SABHA, PEASANT PROTEST AND AGRARIAN LEGISLATION IN ORISSA: 1936-39

The Civil Disobedience Movement came to an end in May 1934. The Gandhian method of non-violent movement was criticized from various quarters because it failed to achieve ‘Swaraj’ for India. It was out of disappointment that there emerged the Social trend and the realization among the youthful Socialists of the need to have a fighting front for the peasants. The most youthful leaders within the Congress who had a leaning towards Socialism tried to address the socio-economic disabilities of the toiling peasant masses of Orissa. They set up the Utkal Samyabadi Karni Sangh (Orissa Socialist Workers League) in 1933. Finally they established a Congress Socialist Party of Orissa in 1934 after a provincial conference was held at Cuttack. The following were the office bearers:

Nabakrushna Choudhury – General Secretary
Malati Choudhury – Treasurer

Other Office bearers:
Dibakar Patnaik
Gaurisankar Samanta
Nripendu Narayan Sen
Gour Chandra Das
Prananath Patnaik
Gatikrushna Swain.

However, Dibakar Patnaik and Gatikrushna Swain resigned from the membership. Only Nabakrushna Choudhury, a Congressite who was elected as Secretary of Orissa Pradesh Congress Committee in 1937, remained with it till the

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end. The Socialists made earnest efforts to organize peasants of Orissa to save them from the oppressive landlords of British Orissa and rulers of Princely States. Explaining the peasants' consciousness and tyranny of the landlords and rulers, and the position of the colonial state, Surendranath Dwivedy said, 'after visiting a few villages we found it was extremely difficult to organize the peasants. They were scared to death by the zamindars. Moreover, British Government was in league with them. It was impossible to launch any activity from fear'.

In order to arouse the peasant consciousness about their rights, the Congress Socialists published a journal called 'Sarathi' 1933. In 1935, the Congress Socialist Party launched another monthly journal named 'Adunika' and formed a cultural organization called 'Nab Yuga Sahitya Sansad'. The literary initiative in the form of 'Adunika' was dominated by a fair amount of discussion on Marxist ideology, which heavily leaned towards Soviet Union for a distinct Communist orientation. The writings of Bhagabati Panigrahi such as 'Sikar' (Hunt) and 'Hatudi O Daas' (Hammer and sickle), and Sachi Raut Rautray's 'Angutihi' (Finger) and 'Visarjana' (immersion), emphasized class struggle and gave a pro-soviet orientation.

On the political activities of the Socialists at the beginning of 1930s as the veteran Socialist leader Surendranath Dwivedy remarked, "We decided to go from village to village holding meetings getting peasants' signature on a printed appeal to the Government, they (zamindars) might not also oppose our moves as they would also be benefited by a corresponding rebate in revenue. Secondly, we would easily entered the village an organize the peasants by setting up Krushak Sanghas. In the

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2 Dwivedy, Surendranath, Quest for Socialism (Fifty Years of Struggle in India). New Delhi. 1984, p.36.
3 Ibid., p.51.
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Zamindari areas the peasants had no rights over trees in their own fields or over the fish in the ponds near their house. So the Zamindars and the moneylenders found it easy to extract illegal cesses or abwabs from the peasants. In such circumstances, it was unrealistic to conceive of organizing the peasantry on the basis of class struggle. For this, our programme was to work in such a fashion to make peasants fearless and consequently sought the need to be inside congress and preferred to work with the non-Socialists in the peasants’ conferences”.

Around this time, since the Congress became less active, and the Communist Party had not yet been organized, the peasant leadership passed into the hands of the Socialists. The ‘May Day’ was celebrated in Orissa at Cuttack in 1933 and the Socialists started a weekly journal ‘Sarathi’- by the end of the same year. The floods of 1933 had devastated the coastal districts of Cuttack and Puri. The peasants of these areas faced enormous difficulties. This provided enough opportunities to the Socialists to organize the peasants.

Towards the close of 1933 and the beginning of 1934, an attempt towards organizing peasants at district levels was made. Hare Krushna Mahatab was organizing the peasants at Balasore to secure remission of rents towards the end of 1933. On 6th February, 1934, at Bhadrak (Balasore), a peasant meeting was held and was attended by more than two thousand peasants. Hare Krushna Mahatab and Lingaraj Mishra stressed the necessity of forming peasant organizations to compel the authorities to reduce rents. Throughout 1933, the officials apprehended that the followers of Jawaharlal Nehru in Orissa were fostering the possibility of a peasant

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5 Dwivedy Surendranath, op.cit., pp.52-53.
6 Pati, Biswamoy, op.cit., p.65.
7 Nanda, Chandi Prasad, op.cit., p.148.
movement. They were also afraid of the fact that taking advantage of natural calamities like floods, the leaders might persuade the ryots to join in a "no-rent campaign". The apprehension of the possibility of a peasant movement in Balasore due to the activities of Mahatab also remained strong on the official mind in the beginning of 1934. The efforts of Hare Krishna Mahatab to form Krushak Sangh merged with that of the Socialists. Although his attempt of organizing peasantry confined to British Orissa, the peasant unrest did exist in other parts of Orissa as well.

Mahatma Gandhi visited Orissa on 5th May, 1934 for the Harijan Movement. He addressed a huge gathering at Jharsuguda, Sambalpur, Anugul and Puri from 6th May to 8th May 1934. He began his foot march on 9th May at 5.30 a.m. along the Puri – Cuttack road. Many Congress leaders of Orissa joined him. In a mammoth meeting on the riverbed of Kathojori, Gandhiji explained to the people of Orissa the need to promote the social reform and village reconstruction programme of the Congress. He left Cuttack on 16th May, 1934 in order to attend a meeting of All India Congress Committee at Patna. Again he returned to Orissa on 21st May 1934 to resume the second phase of his foot march in Orissa. During his visit to Bhadrak he met Harijan workers and emphasized the need for focusing on flood relief and the spinning wheel. After covering 156 miles in coastal Orissa by foot, Mahatma Gandhi left to Wardha in June 1934. The visit of Mahatma Gandhi for Harijan Welfare and village reconstruction programme had a tremendous impact on national life of Orissa. It

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9 Nanda, Chandi Prasad, op.cit., p.148.
10 Pati, Biswamoy, op.cit., p.65.
ushered a new era of social reform movements in Orissa. Most of the Congress workers by then wholeheartedly committed themselves for Gandhian programmes.\textsuperscript{11}

By 1935, the political activities of the Congress in Orissa slowed down. However, the Congress Socialist Party in Orissa undertook to organize Krushak Sangh in the districts of Puri, Cuttack and Balasore. It was only in 1936 that the Congress in Orissa tried integrating the peasant agitation to remove their grievances and to relieve them from distress.\textsuperscript{12}

Thus, it was with this historical background that the Utkal Pradesh Krushak Sangh (Orissa Provincial Kisan Sabha) was formed in June 1935. The first Utkal Kisan Conference was held at Cuttack Town Hall on the 10\textsuperscript{th} June 1935, under the Presidentship of Mohanlal Gautam of Uttar Pradesh, the Secretary of Uttar Pradesh Provincial Kisan Sabha. Nabakrushna Chaudhury, Godavarish Mishra and other leaders attended the conference. It was reported that, nearly two thousand peasants participated in the conference.

Mohanlal Gautam explained the trouble being faced by the tenants under British Colonialism. The aim of the conference was to make the peasants conscious about their various disabilities, and to ameliorate their condition. Godavarish Mishra, the Secretary, said that unless the peasant grievances are addressed their condition was not going to improve. A number of resolutions were passed including the formation of Kisan Sabha in the districts level, abolition of Zamindari and abolition of illegal ceases, which were imposed upon the peasants.\textsuperscript{13} Finally, the Utkal Provincial

\textsuperscript{12} Mahatab, H.K., op.cit., pp. 22-23.
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Home Political Department (Confidential) File}, Acc.No.467, Orissa State Archives, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.
Krushak Sangh was formed with Hare Krushna Mahatab as President, Smt. Malati Devi Choudhury and Surendranath Dwivedy as Secretaries.14

The new province of Orissa as first linguistic state of India came into existence on 1st April 1936. The people of Orissa celebrated the moment with high enthusiasm.15

In April 1936, the All India Kisan Conference was held at Lucknow under the leadership of Sahajananda Saraswati of Bihar.16 A number of delegates attended the conference. Hare Krushna Mahatab, Nabakrushna Choudhury, Malati Choudhury, Gatikrushna Swain and Dibakar Patnaik were the representative from Orissa and were elected as the members of Working Committee of All India Kisan Sabha.17 In this conference the All India Kisan Sabha prepared an election manifesto for the coming election in the provinces. A peasant's charter of demands was also formulated which had an all India nature. Prof. N.G. Ranga criticized the election manifesto of the Indian National Congress as it fell far short of the peasant demands. He pleaded that Kisans should support those Congress candidates, who support and strengthen the minimum demands of the kisans. He thus pressurized the Congress to accept the charter of peasant demands in the forthcoming provincial elections. In the Lucknow session of the Indian national Congress, an alliance was formed between the Indian National Congress and the All India Kisan Sabha as Jawaharlal Nehru supported the demand made by the Kisan Sabha.18

15 Nabeena (Oriya Weekly Newspaper) 1st April, 1936.
16 Rasul, M.A., A History of All India Kisan Sabha, Calcutta, 1974, p.26
The leaders from Orissa who attended the All India Kisan Sabha, after coming back, convened the Utakal Provincial Kisan conference at Puri in August 1936. They set up a committee consisting of Hare Krushna Mahatab, Malati Choudhury, Lingaraj Mishra and Rajkrushna Bose to enquire into the grievances of the peasants and submit a report to the Utkal Pradesh Congress Committee so that it could take up those demands in the coming elections.  

The Faizpur Session of the Indian National Congress was held in September 1936 under the Chairmanship of Jawaharlal Nehru. Sahajananda Saraswati and N.G. Ranga once again pressurized the Indian National Congress to accept the demands of the peasants. Jawaharlal Nehru supported the cause of the peasants and the Indian National Congress adopted the historic agrarian programme on behalf of the kisans. Arguing in favor of the peasantry Nehru was absolutely clear that the Zamindari system was most detrimental to the interest of the peasants. In other words Nehru was not merely engrossed in the problems of reduction of rent and legislation against eviction of tenants from their land but he was also convinced that the socio-economic system, which was based on a feudal structure, had no right to exist. Ideologically therefore, he was determined to sweep off the landlords as a class.

After the Faizpur session in 10th November 1936 Jawaharlal Nehru visited Orissa for the election campaign. He addressed meetings in a number of places like Salepur, Chandol, Kendrapara, Jagatsinghpur, Cuttack, Puri and Berhampur. Everywhere he was enthusiastically received and large number of people, especially peasants, crowded his meetings. Pandit Nehru pointed out that “Swaraj” was nothing

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19 De, Sushil Chandra, op.cit., p.5.
20 Indian Annual Register, op.cit., pp.280-282.
unless all kinds of exploitation ended. He also added that “Swaraj” meant "Swaraj" of the masses, not of the classes. In that connection, he vehemently criticized the Zamindari system and personally he was in favour of its abolition. He also pointed out that when British imperialism would vanish from India Socialism could be established in order to remove the miseries of the masses. This is how Nehru, in his mass meetings in Orissa, outlined the Congress programmes before the people.22

The second session of the Utkal Provincial Kisan Conference was held in November 1936 under the Presidentship of Swami Sahajananda Saraswati. Some Congress leaders like Nilakantha Das however, carried on anti-Kisan Sabha campaign. In this conference provision was made to establish Kisan organizations at different levels besides the state level. Thus, besides Pradeshika Krushk Sangh (state levels), (2) the Zilla Krushk Sangh (district level), (3) Thana Krushak Sangh (Thana level), (4) Grama Krushak Sangh (village level) were set up so that the peasants could actively participate in the movement.16 It was in the year 1937 that the scope of the movement was extended along with its area of operation.23 There were thus four different levels of peasant organizations, which functioned in Orissa. Pease organizations of each level were responsible for organizing and mobilizing the peasants within their jurisdiction of operation. Consequently, the membership of Utkal Provincial Krushak Sangh rose to twenty thousand in Cuttack, Puri and Balasore and to thirty thousand in the princely states of Orissa.24

In 1936, a peasants' conference was held at Bagalpur under the chairmanship of Hare Krushna Mahatab and it was resolved that the peasants should not pay "Salami" to the Zamindars. During 1936, a good number of Kisan meetings particularly in the districts of Cuttack, Puri, Balasore, Sambalpur and Ganjam were held and the kisans were exhorted to resist the unjust exactions by the Zamindars.25

In Orissa from 1935 to 1937, a series of peasant meetings were held. The leaders who championed the peasant cause were Srimati Malati Choudhury (Secretary, Utkal Provincial Kisan Sabha), Nabakrushna Choudhury, Hare Krushna Mahatab, Surendranath Dwivedy (Socialist) Nilakantha Das, Dibakar Patnaik, Gatikrushna Swain and others. They also made regular contact with the All India Kisan Sabha.26

The Utkal Provincial Krushak Sangh prepared an election manifesto, which the Utkal Congress Committee was bound to accept for the 1937 election, by which the kisan support to the Congress was ensured.27

It was in this background that the election campaign in Orissa was officially inaugurated in 13th September, 1936. A meeting was held in Cuttack Town Hall, where election manifesto of All Indian Congress Committee was read and the peasants were persuaded to stand by the Congress. All political parties in Orissa started their election campaign in various parts of Orissa.28

The Congress Election Manifesto issued by the Utkal Provincial Congress Committee, pointed out various issues of All-India nature. It also added a number of

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25 De, Sushil Chandra, op. cit., p.13.
26 Ibid., pp. 1-10.
issues, specially designed for Orissa. The following demands were included (1) abolition of Permanent Settlement affecting Kanika, Paralakhemndi and number of small landlords in Ganjam and Cuttack and the very important Zamindari of Joypur,(2) remission of arrears of rents and land revenue, (3) reduction of all rents and water rents by half percent, (4) graduation of all rents on the line of income tax (families with an income of less than Rs. 250 a year being excused altogether), (5) amendment of Tenancy Act in various respects to the determent of landlords, (6) forest lands to be thrown open to neighboring villages, (7) securing a living wage of labourers, etc.

The Utkal Provincial Kisan Sabha held meetings in various parts of Orissa like; Balasore, Bhadrak, Bramahagiri, Gop, Kakatapur, Nimapada (Puri district) to celebrate the All India Kisan Day on 15th September, 1937. As the meetings were held in district and village levels the peasants protested against the landlords for their rights. Although the Congress was dominating force over the movements, it took more socialistic turn.29

Throughout the year 1936, the Congress Party was busy for preparing for the forthcoming Assembly Election. They took up the cause of the peasants and organized Kisan Sabhas in all parts of the province of Orissa. Through these political meetings they carried on intensive propaganda against the alleged oppressions of the Zamindars and against the system of bethi and begar.30

The Congress in order to get the support of the peasants, held a number of meetings with the peasants. Godavarish Mishra addressed in a meeting at Sambalpur

29 Home Political Department (Confidential) File, Acc. No. 7/12, Government of Orissa, 1937, Orissa, Orissa State Archives, Bhubaneswar.
and asked the peasants to support the Congress. Similarly, a mammoth meeting of Oriya peasants was held in 29th November 1936 at Albert Hall, Calcutta under the presidency of Hare Krushna Mahatab. In this meeting, he appealed the peasants to support the Congress in the Election. By January 1937, there were number of election meetings of the Congress and the other National Parties all over the province of Orissa and the election were held in January 1937. Following was the result of Orissa Provincial Legislative Assembly Elections of Orissa.

**Orissa Provincial Legislative Assembly Election Result: 1937**

- Total Seats - 60
- Congress Party - 35
- United Party - 5
- Nationalist Party - 5
- Independent - 11
- Nominated - 4

Office acceptance was the most important question considered by the Congress. In February 1937, a meeting of the Congress leaders was held at Wardha to decide whether the Congress should take office in the provinces, where they had the majority. Mahatma Gandhi said that, ‘the Congress party may be dishonouring its words to the electorates if it accepted office without receiving any gesture that can be obtained only if the Viceroy agreed to some parleys or make speech hinting that the verdict of the electorate has changed the governments view about Congress’.

Again the matter was debated at a meeting of the Congress Working Committee at Delhi on 15th March, 1937. A resolution was passed unanimously...
favouring the ‘conditional acceptance’ of office as suggested by Mahatma Gandhi, which provided that the Congress can accept the office, but it need assurance from the Governor that he would not exercise his special powers as long as the ministry acts ‘within the constitution.’ On the same day, the Viceroy appealed to the Governors in the provinces to extend their support and cooperation for the formation of ministries. Accordingly, the Government of Orissa issued a communiqué on 28th March, 1937. The Governor invited Mr. Biswanath Das, the Congress leader, to form the ministry. However, Mr. Das made it clear that, he was unable to accept the invitation unless the Governor agreed to give him an assurance that the Governor would not exercise his special power of interference or set aside the advise of the ministries in regards to the constitutional activities. The Governor of Orissa, declined to give such an assurance as was demanded by the Congress Party leaders in terms of the All India Congress committee resolutions. Finally, the negotiations broke down.\footnote{Ibid., pp.238-239.}

In these circumstances the Governor invited the Nationalist Party leader Krushna Chandra Gajapati (Maharaja of Paralrakhemndi) to form the Ministries and he accepted the office on 1st April, 1937. with following office bearers.

Krushna Chandra Gajapati - Chief Minister.

Mandhata Gorachand Patnaik – Revenue minister

Maulvi Muhammad Latifur Rahman – Education Minister.\footnote{Mahapatra, Jadunath, op. cit., p.11.}

Although most of the District Congress Committees were in favour of acceptance of office, the Provincial Congress Committees, according to the All India Congress Committee resolutions, decided to take up organizational, constructive and propaganda work. Besides, the Congress devoted itself to organizing peasant
conferences in various parts of Orissa. By March 1937, the activity of the Congress placed kisan movement on a firm basis so that it could successfully stand against the oppression and high handedness of the Zamindars.\textsuperscript{37}

The formation of the Ministry invited many criticisms from various quarters. In Cuttack, Puri, Balasore and Sambalpur districts number of peasant meetings were organized by the Orissa Kisan Sabha. It vehemently condemned the formation of the ministry by a party that was a in a minority.\textsuperscript{38}

The Ministry was thus in an anomalous position. It had no majority in the legislature and was faced with certainty of defeat as soon as the Legislature met. Thus Congress Working Committee at that time decided to accept the office in the provinces where the Congress Party had a majority early in July 1937. In Orissa the Maharaja of Paralakhemndi thereupon tendered the resignation and the Governor again invited the Congress Party to form the ministry. The Ministry which newly constituted were as follows:-

Biswa Nath Das – Chief Minister  
Nityanada Kanugo – Revenue Minister  
Bodhram Dube – Education Minister.\textsuperscript{39}

After assuming office, in the first budget session on 30\textsuperscript{th} August, 1937, Biswanath Das announced, ‘the Congress Party has accepted office neither for emoluments nor for power. Its single desire is to work ob its constructive programme to uplift the economic conditions of the masses. The well being of the masses is our immediate objective. Council entry and office acceptance was a only additional means to win the fight for freedom.’ Besides announcing the Congress Governments policy

\textsuperscript{37} De, Sushil Chandra, op.cit., p.8.  
\textsuperscript{38} Mahapatra, Jadunath, op. cit., p.11.  
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., p.11.
towards the peasantry he said, 'while recurrence of floods and famines shape the vitality of the masses, absentee landlordism and rack-renting combined with the usurious rate of interest of the moneylenders have brought about the ruination of the peasants. To remove the appalling poverty of the masses and their utter helplessness is an uphill task for any government. We have decided to face the difficulties by legislation and by reconstruction.'

In 1937, the Kisan movement continued to expand widely and many Kisan Sabhas' were held in all districts. The tenants in certain Zamindaries, trespassed upon the lands of the landed class by which great difficult was experienced in the collection of land revenue and other illegal cesses.

In Paralakhemndi the tenants had given stiff resistance for couple of years, when the Raja enhanced land revenue by 300 percent of the prevailing rate of Rs/- 7 per acre. After a prolonged fight towards the close of 1936, that the Revenue Board lowered it down to 36 percent. Even then the hike was pretty high and expectedly the tenants appealed to the Congress Government against the unfair decision.

Smt. Malati Devi Choudhury, the Secretary of the Utkal Kisan Sabha arranged a huge Kisan protest demonstration at Cuttack town, numbering eight to ten thousands on the All India Kisan Sabha Day 15 September 1937. The Kisans paraded through the streets with placards shouting slogans such as “rent to be refused,” “Zamindari system to be abolished” and “down with Zamindari system.” They presented their

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41 Mohapatra, Jadunath, op.cit., p. 11.
43 Home Political Department (Confidential) File, Acc/No – 7/12, 1937, Orissa State Archives, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.
demands to the Chief Minister and pressurized the congress Ministry to bring out agrarian reforms in Orissa. The Chief Minister advised them to be patient. 

On the other hand Socialist leader, Surendranath Dwivedy, upheld the cause of peasants through his journal ‘Krushak’. The Congress activists inspired the peasants for “no-tax campaign”. The year 1938 witnessed peasant unrest in vigorous proportion in many parts of Orissa against the non-payment of unauthorized taxes to the Zamindards and abolition of forced labor.

As the peasant movement in Orissa was becoming more and were alarming, the Zamindars with the support of the police force let loose a reign of terror upon the peasantry. The police prosecuted many of them under section 107 Cr. P.C. In Jenapur (Cuttack) to defame the Kisan Sabha number of false cases were registered against the activists.

In 1937, Enquiry Committees were set up by both Cuttack and Balasore Districts Congress Committees to look into the complaints lodged against the landlords and the police force. The Congress leaders also undertook individual enquiries. Radhakrushna Biswasray personally conducted an enquiry into the alleged grievances of tenants in the Joypure estate of Koraput. Raj Krushna Bose, the Congress leader, advised the peasants at Cuttack to stop payment of illegal tax to the zamindars and to continue to agitate for the remission of rent. The Congress Party of Orissa also organized kisan conferences in the interior areas to agitate for the remission of rent at several places. On 11th October, 1937 kisan conference was

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46 Home Political Department (Confidential) File, Criminal Investigation, Government of Orissa, 1938, Orissa State Archives, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.
organized at Padmapur (Sambalpur), under the leadership of veteran Socialist S. M. Joshi. Presiding over the conference he stated that, zamindars would be powerless if the tenants adopted the attitude of the people of Bardoli and took to satyagraha in the form of non-payment of rents, another meeting was held at Jaleswar (Balasore) on 5th December, 1937 under the leadership of Raj Krushna Bose. In this meeting he stressed the necessity of organized and collective resistance to the oppressive zamindars and moneylenders. He also explained to the peasants to adopt peaceful and constitutional means, while resisting the zamindars and moneylenders.47

In these circumstances, in 1937 the Congress Socialist Party of Orissa chalked out an agrarian programme for the Congress Ministry. It included the following demands (1) fifty percent reduction of rent and revenue (2) abolition of landlordism with compensation (3) stoppage of payment of illegal taxes such as ‘salami’ to the Zamindars (4) amendment of tenancy laws and withdrawal of British army from the Princely States of Orissa, etc.48

Finally. The congress Ministry in Orissa followed the resolution of the National Convention, held on 19th and 20th March, 1937 by the Indian National Congress. In this convention it was instructed to the Congress members in the legislature that to carry out the Congress programme as enunciated in election manifesto and the Congress agrarian resolutions. In particular, it was instructed that they should work for;

1. A substantial reduction in rent and revenue
2. Fixity of tenures

47 Nanda, Chandi Prasad, op.cit., p 149.
48 Ibid., p. 149.
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3. Relief from burden on rural debt and arrears of rent and revenue

4. Restoration of lands and property confiscated or sold by the government during Civil Disobedience movement, etc. 49

The popular Congress Ministry during its tenures brought out the following agrarian legislative measures to ameliorate the condition of peasants in Orissa.

**Madras Estate Land Bill**

The Madras Estate Land (Orissa Amendment) Bill 1937 was applicable to the area which was joined in Orissa in 1936 from the Madras Presidency especially Ganjam and Koraput districts. The rent collected in this area was very high since it was calculated on the basis of half of the gross produce of the land. This was much higher than the adjoining areas of the province. Consequently, the Bill aimed at rationalizing the rent structure by reducing it to the rent prevailing in the nearest Roytwari areas in the province with similar conditions. It was referred to the Select Committee and before was brought back to the House the Provincial Congress Committee made an abortive attempt for a compromise with the landlords of South Orissa by offering some concessions. 50 The Bill became highly controversial and the opposition vehemently protested against it by which the passage of the Bill was delayed as long as 5th February 1938. The Raja of Khalikote termed it as “a revolutionary measure unknown in the history of the legislation in India”. Mandhata Gorachand Patnaik called it “a hasty piece of legislation”. 51 The Bill was referred to a Select Committee, which discussed almost every clause and every section of the Bill. Steps were also taken for a compromise between the Congress and the opposition for a postponement of the discussion on the Bill. The attempt was failed,

as Zamindars of South Orissa headed by the Raja of Khallikote and Mandhata Gorachand Patnaik, did not agree to reduce the rent. The Bill thus, again was brought before House on 26th January 1938 and was passed on 5th February 1938 by the Congress Ministry. In spite of repeated appeals by the Congress to give his assent, the Governor General kept silent for three years and vetoed the Bill in February 1941, stating that there had been no general investigation prior to the promotion of the Bill and that no negotiations had been conducted between the representatives of both the interests.\textsuperscript{52} Thus, the first Tenancy legislation by the Congress Ministry with an aim of ameliorating the condition of peasants of South Orissa ended in failure. Earlier, the Krushak Sangh demanded that the Ministry should resign in case the Bill was not passed by June 1938.\textsuperscript{53}

The Socialists held meetings at various parts of Orissa and planned to stage a protest demonstration showing black flag and boycott of the proposed visit of Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, if he does not give his assent to the Bill. They appealed to the Congress and to Kisan Sabha workers to organize protest demonstrations with complete hartal on the arrival of the Viceroy.\textsuperscript{54}

Jagannath Mishra, President, Ganjam District Congress Committee, and Banamali Maharana another Congress leader, advised to the Ganjam District Ryot Association to offer Satyagraha or no-rent campaign. In Kodala and Athagarh (Ganjam), secret meetings attended by the tenants were held. Dr. Rajendra Prasad visited Orissa and a meeting was held between the zamindars and the Congress leaders, namely Biswanath Das and Nilakantha Das. They tried to have a

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Indian Annual Register}, Vol.I, 1941, p.37.
\textsuperscript{53} Pati, Biswamoy, \textit{op.cit.}, p.67.
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Home Political Department (Confidential)} Special Section File, No. 257/39, Orissa State Archives, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.
compromise between the zamindars and the tenants. It was believed that Nilakantha Das (Congress) played into the hands of the zamindars.\textsuperscript{55}

**Orissa Tenancy (Amendment) Bill**

In the province of Orissa, by 1938, there were 11,328 temporarily settled estates and the lot of the tenants in these estates was miserable.\textsuperscript{56} The Orissa Tenancy Act, which was passed by the Bihar and Orissa Legislative Council in 1913, had not been amended to suit the changed situation of the tenants of Orissa. Nityananda Kanungo, the Revenue Minister, therefore, introduced the Orissa Tenancy (Amendment) Bill of 1937 in the assembly on 25\textsuperscript{th} September 1937.\textsuperscript{57} The contents of the Orissa Amendment Bill were as follows:-

1. Full right of transfer of holdings to the tenants and abolitions of mutation fee
2. Reduction of arrear rent interest from 12.5\% to 6\%.
3. Ownership right to the tenants on all trees in their raiyoti holdings.
4. Severe penalty was provided for the landlord or his agents for illegal exactions.\textsuperscript{58}

The landed sections responded to it with serious panic. Outside the legislature the landlords got together and expressed their anger at the Bill and prayed to the Government not to pass it.\textsuperscript{59}

In November 1937, the zamindars of Orissa met in a meeting at cuttack under the Presidentship of the Raja of Dharakot and condemned the proposed

\textsuperscript{55} Home Political Department (Confidential) Special Section, File No 196/39, Orissa State Archives, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.

\textsuperscript{56} Indian Annual Register, Vol.I, 1938, p.263.

\textsuperscript{57} Indian Annual Register, Vol.II, 1937, p. 271.

\textsuperscript{58} Mahapatra, Jadunath, Government of Orissa at Work: Work of the Congress Ministry from 19\textsuperscript{th} July 1938 to 31\textsuperscript{st} March, 1939, Cuttack, 1939, p.14.

\textsuperscript{59} Pati, Biswamoy, op.cit., p.74.
amendments in the Orissa Tenancy Act, 1913, and to bring about a reasonable settlement between the zamindars and their tenants.\textsuperscript{60}

The leaders of the Orissa Zamindari Association Brajasundar Das, Banabihari Palit met Gopabandhu Chaudhury to discuss about the Orissa Tenancy Amendment Bill and to bring out a compromise between the Congress and the Zamindars. Gopabandhu Choudhury however kept quite and did not reply anything the demand made by the Zamindari Association.\textsuperscript{61}

By this time the Bill was passed but a retreat was already visible. Thus, the Congress Ministry agreed to an amendment which stated that if the right of the landlords over trees were recorded in the settlement or had been established in Civil Courts then the peasants had to pay a compensation to the landlords to secure this right. The Congress also backed out from its position regarding the mutation fees by agreeing to abolish it in degrees. Besides, as pointed out by the Krushak Sangh, 'the Bill had nothing to offer regarding the rights of thousands of non-occupancy tenants'.\textsuperscript{62} After a prolonged debate on the Bill, it was finally passed on 3\textsuperscript{rd} May 1938 with a little modification.\textsuperscript{63} The final Act provided for (1) abolition of mutation fees by giving free rights of transfer to agricultural holdings to the tenants, (2) rights on trees to the tenants except existing rights in trees if they are specially registered in the name of the zamindars, (3) reduction of rate of interest on arrear rent from 12 percent to 6 percent, and (4) penalty for the exaction of illegal cesses by the landlords.\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{60} Nabeena (Oriya Weekly Newspaper), 8\textsuperscript{th} February, 1938.
\textsuperscript{61} Pati, Biswamoy, op.cit., p.74.
\textsuperscript{62} Indian Annual Register, Vol.I, 1938, pp. 262-264.
\textsuperscript{63} Indian Annual Register, Vol.II, 1938, p. 218.
\textsuperscript{64} Pati, Biswamoy, op.cit., p.74.
Orissa Moneylenders Bill

The Congress Ministry introduced the Orissa Moneylenders Bill on 25th July 1938. It laid down the provision that the moneylenders had to register in order to carry on their profession. It sought to prevent moneylenders from realizing interests amending to more than the amount that had been advanced, with a right to open up old accounts from 1st April 1936 for the purpose of calculations. The Bill introduced the principle of simple interest rate not exceeding nine percent in case of a secured loan and twelve percent in case of an unsecured loan. Finally, it provided for some penalty for illegal extortions like cancellation of registration of certificates given to them. It may be noted here that the Krushak Sangh had demanded six percent interest on secured loans and nine percent interest for unsecured loans. The Governor gave his assent on this Bill on 30th June 1939.65

Orissa Co-operative Land Mortgage Bank Bill, 1938

The Congress Ministry introduced the Orissa Cooperative Land Mortgage Bank Bill on 24th January 1938. The Bill provided loans to the ryots at a low rate interest from the Mortgage Bank for development of land and other agricultural purposes.66

The Inams Bill, 1939

The Congress Ministry passed the Orissa Inams Bill in March 1939. It proposed to confer occupancy rights on tenants of all Inam villages except

66 Mahapatra, Jadunath, op.cit., p.15.
Agraharams. The Act extended the protection of the tenants of the whole Inam villages up to 1st April, 1940.

The Sambalpur Tenancy Regulation, 1938

Another Tenancy law was the Central Provinces Tenancy Act, which was applicable to Sambalpur area. It had become stale without any change for last fifty-four years. The Government appointed the Sambalpur Land Laws Committee consisted of some members of the Legislative Assembly and a few others to enquire into the question. The Committee drew up an elaborate questionnaire and took evidences. The Congress Ministry proposed to take up legislation soon after the report of the Committee was received.67

Orissa Small Land Holders Relief Act, 1938

Besides these, the Congress Ministry also took steps to provide relief to small peasants proprietors holding not more than six acres of irrigated land or twelve acres of land and who were cultivating the land themselves or through the farm servants. The Orissa Small Land Holders Relief Act, aimed at the prevention of eviction of small holders and sale of their movable property. According to this Act, the proceedings in Civil Courts for the sale of land of small holders for the recovery of any debt under a decree would be stayed on the application of the small holder unless the court for reasons to be recorded in writing would decide that this would cause substantial loss to the decree holders.68

Rent Remissions and Relief Measures

67 Ibid., p.16.
68 Ibid., pp.16-18.
Besides, the Congress Ministry also took few steps for ameliorating the condition of the tenants such as to bring uniformity in the remission of rent and other relief measures. These measures were taken as South Orissa (Ganjam district) was very often subjected to drought while North Orissa (Balasore, Cuttack) was victim to floods. For Ganjam district a special provision was made to grant seasonal remission of rent because in the year 1938-39, it was hit by severe cyclone. The Congress Ministry undertook the relief measures in Ganjam and Puri districts as they suffered the ravage of floods. Apart from that, the Congress Government had undertaken few steps such as, payment of rents on installment basis (Ganjam) and some irrigation and tank repairing works in Ganjam, Sambalpur and Cuttack districts. However, these measures were still not enough to solve the problems of all sections of the peasants in all parts of Orissa.69

Abolition of Bethi and Begary

The Congress Ministry also took steps to abolish bethi and begar, as these were prevalent in many zamindari and princely states of Orissa. The Congress Ministry decided that labour in any manner or form without full payment, should not be used either by the officials or by the zamindars or by their officials. A decision was taken to take serious steps if it was violated.70

Thus the most notable benefits that the peasants got during the tenure of the Congress Ministry were; (1) Orissa Tenancy Act (Amendment), (2) Madras Estates Land Amendment Bill, (3) Reduction of water cess by 50% in North Orissa, (4) Reduction of grazing cess by 50% in government forests, (5) Abolition of bethi and beggary and (6) Orissa Moneylenders Act.71 Although the Congress Ministry took a

70 Indian Annual Register, Vol.I, 1940, p.284.
number of steps to ameliorate the poor condition of peasant masses however, it did not initiate to abolish the Zamindari system in Orissa.\textsuperscript{72}

Malati Devi, the member of the Congress Socialist Party had been elected to the All India Central Kisan Committee in March 1939. The All India Kisan Conference deputed Jay Prakash Narayan and Sahajananda Saraswati to visit Cuttack and hold an enquiry to review the activities of the Utkal Provincial Kisan Sangh. In their report they held that, though the Kisan Sabha had carried on its work till the middle of 1938, its work had remarkably slowed down due to a kind of most "deplorable political factionalism" that confronted the Ministry and to the "pre-occupation of the Kisan leaders with State People's activities". The report pointed out that in Puri there was eighteen Kisan Sabhas' functioning in a total twenty-three thanas. This pointed to an ever-expanding base of Kisan Organization. As per the suggestion of the report to strengthen the Kisan Sabha activities, Prana Nath Patnaik was elected as the Secretary of the Utkal Provincial Kisan Sabha. The agrarian discontent manifested throughout Orissa. Being a flood-prone province, the demand for remission of rents and taxes was a long-standing one.\textsuperscript{73}

The second session of the Sambalpur Kisan Conference was held at Baltikar, P.S., Bargarh in December 1938 under the Presidentship of Pandit Laxmi Narayan Mishra, attended by 2000 to 3000 peasants. The president stated that the peasants should unite against the oppression of the zamindars by forming district committees. Referring to the agrarian reforms of the Congress Ministry he stated that unless there was a majority of the peasants' representatives in the Congress, the Government would not be so attentive to the peasants. The important resolutions passed were

\textsuperscript{72} Pati, Biswamoy, op.cit., pp. 75-77.  
\textsuperscript{73} Nanda, Chandi Prasad, op.cit., p.154.
Chapter IV

regarding the abolition of zamindari and *gountia* systems, formation of a District Praja Samiti with Pandit Laxmi Narayan Mishra as President, and Bhagirathi Patnaik, Fakir Behera and Hazaru Patel as members.\(^74\)

In Jenapur (Cuttack) towards the close of 1938, due to oppression of the Chausathipada Zamindar, the President, Secretary and other members of Kisan Sabha were convicted.\(^75\)

The Kisan Sabha movement in British Orissa had tremendous impact on the permanently settled estates of Sukinda, Madhupur and Korai. In Sukinda the aboriginal *Kolas* and *Munda* tenants started agitation against the estates oppression in 1938. In January 1939, Phanindranath Pal, a staunch Communist, and his associates Dourjadhan Rai, Laxmidhar Jena, Sachi Rautroy and Bhagirathi Panigrahi started mobilizing the peasants by holding peasant meetings at various parts of Sukinda estates. They guided the aboriginal Kolas' and Munda tenants to cut down the timber trees and forcibly reclaimed the estates lands. The agitation reached a boiling point in the beginning of January 1939. In order to suppress the movement, the authorities with the help of the colonial police force targeted the leaders and tried to stop all political activity in the estates. Phanindranath Pal and his two associates Dourjadhana Rai and Laxmidhar Jena were served notice under section 144 of Cr. P. C. not to hold any political meetings within the jurisdiction of Sukinda, Korai and Dharmasala P.S. for two months. They were also forbidden for entering the Sukinda estate for two months. However, Phanindranath Pal disobeyed the order as he attended a peasant meeting at Gobardhanpur hat in Sukinda as fixed to be held on 9th

\(^74\) *Home Political (Confidential)* Special Section File, No.292, 1938, Orissa State Archives, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.
\(^75\) *Home Political Department (Confidential)* Special Section File, No.298, 1938, Orissa State Archives, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.
January, 1939. After Nabakrushna Choudhury finished his speech, Phanindranath Pal rose to speak in direct violation of the order, for which he was arrested and was prosecuted under section 188, I.P.C. He was then imprisoned for one month and fined Rs/- 30.

After his release on May 1939, Phanindranath Pal visited Budapanka refugee camp of Dhenkanal and Anugul refugee camp of Talcher state. He distributed pamphlets in Kol language in Oriya script in Sukinda, Keonjhar, Dhenkanal and Mayurbhanj state and formed 'melis' against the British Government.76

A peasant meeting was held at Sahada Thakurani mango tope, P. S. Korai (Cuttack) on 14th January 1939 under the leadership of Madanmohan Patnaik. Four hundred peasants attended it. A good number of peasants attended from Keonjhar and Dhenkanal states. In this meeting, British imperialism, and the exploitative nature of feudatory chiefs, zamindars and moneylenders were vehemently criticized. Sachi Rautray passed a resolution condemning the notice served against Phanindranath Pal and kisan workers. The leaders appealed to the peasants to unite against the exploitation and adopt non-violent means of struggle in the princely states of Orissa. In order to stop the participation of the peasant masses, police force and chaukidars were posted on the border. Notice was served against Sachi Rautray and Madanmohan Patnaik for seditious speeches to stop their political activities.77

In May 1939 the third session of the Puri District Peasants’ Conference was held at Astaranga, P.S. Kakatpur, Puri district, under the Chairmanship of Bhagabati Panigrahi. The other leaders were Prananath Patnaik, Gangadhar Mishra and others.

76*Home Political Department (Confidential) Special Section File, No.15/38, Orissa State Archives. Bhubaneswar, Orissa.
77*Home Political Department (Confidential) Special Section File, No.34/1939, Orissa State Archives. Bhubaneswar, Orissa.
Thousands of peasants attended the conference. A number of resolutions were passed asking the peasants to unite against the oppressions of the zamindars and moneylenders. To start the agitation, the leaders appealed the peasants to enroll as members of Congress as well as Krushak Sangh and to subscribe 'Krushak' magazine and defy the false cases instituted against the Kisan Sangh by the Zamindars, and to take recourse to Satyagraha.78

Another peasants meeting was held at Chhangiri hat, P.S. Khurda (Puri), on 29th August, 1939, under the chairmanship of Mohan Das. It was well attended by the peasants. The leaders condemned the Zamindar of Khurda and local Sabarkars for their oppressions against the peasants. A number of resolutions were passed.

1. Not to help the British Government in its war efforts

2. Condemned the Government of Orissa in connection with the Khurda Forest Act and a Satyagraha Committee was formed to launch a movement.

3. Condemned the delay in Viceroy's assent to the Madras Estate Land (Amendment) Bill.79

In the various parts of Khallikote and Athagarh estates, the tenants uprising was surfaced in August 1939, due to failure of crops. There was breach of law and order when the estate authorities forcibly tried to collect the revenue. The Ganjam District Congress Committee held meetings with the ryots of Rambha, Mathura and other places who demanded the resignation of oppressive state officials. To terrorise the tenants and to collect the rent the landlords sought

78Home Political Department (Confidential) Special Section File, No.189/39, Orissa State Archives, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.
79Home Political Department (Confidential) Special Section File, No.189/39, Orissa State Archives, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.
the help of colonial police force. Biswanath Das, the premier of Orissa strongly condemned the landlords for launching prosecutions against the ryots. He requested Mr. Ward, the Collector of Ganjam, not to prosecute the ryots till the enquiry was made.\textsuperscript{80}

Another peasant meeting was held at Patrapur (Ganjam), on 2\textsuperscript{nd} October, 1939, which was attended by two thousand peasants. The prominent leaders who joined the meeting were Jagannath Mishra, Lingaraj Dhar, Banamali Maharana, and Jugal Kishore Pani. In this meeting, the leaders urged that the government should take steps to ameliorate the condition of the peasants of Surangi, Jorada, and Chikiti area, which were affected by the failure of crops.\textsuperscript{81}

In general, peasants' conferences were held in Cuttack, Puri, Balasore, Sambalpur, and Ganjam districts where resolutions advocating pro-peasant laws and abolition of bethi and rasad were passed. Besides these, resolutions of demanding remission of revenue, compulsory education for children and facilities for the Harijans were also passed.\textsuperscript{82}

The State Peoples' movement remained a major issue for the leadership in Orissa during late 1930s and it provided a great deal of radical thrust for the national movement. The mass movement that developed in the Orissa States was primarily due to the terribly backward political and socio-economic conditions, prevalent in the states. The mass nature of the movement was obtained due to the fact that ninety

\textsuperscript{80}Home Political Department (Confidential) Special Section File, No. 25/1940, Orissa State Archives, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.
\textsuperscript{81}Home Political Department (Confidential) Special Section File, No.189/1939, Orissa State Archives, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.
\textsuperscript{82}Home Political Department (Confidential) Special Section File, No. 189/1939. Orissa State Archives, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.
five percent of Orissa states population was peasantry, whether higher castes or Harijans. 83

The first Orissa State Peoples Conference was organized in 1931 at Cuttack with the active co-operation of the All India State Peoples’ Conference under the leadership of Bhubanananda Das. The other leaders were Radhanath Rath, Balukeswar Acharya, Madhusudan Patnaik and Govinda Chandra Mishra. In this conference an appeal was made to the rulers for the abolition of the obnoxious bethi and beggar system from the states. When the election of Orissa Legislative Assembly took place, Congress and Krushak Sangh workers organized a number of mass meetings in the Princely States of Orissa. Although the Congress was sympathetic towards the Orissa State Peoples movement, it did not allow itself to be actively involved in their movement. 84

The second session of the Orissa State Peoples Conference was held at Cuttack in June 1937. Dr. Pattabhi Sitaramaya, the President of the All India States Peoples Conference (AISPC), presided over it. Only about hundred people from eight states attended the conference. Many people failed to attend the conference because of the preventive measures taken by the States administration. A number of resolutions were passed on the condition of the peasants. The most important among them were (i) the right of occupancy on their holdings (ii) the fundamental right of citizenship (iii) a strong plea was made for the abolition of the evil practice of extracting rasad, magan, bethi and bheti, and to set up states people associations in each state of Orissa. 85 In this conference a decision was also taken to set up a Enquiry Committee for investigating the illegalities, excesses and acts of repression

83 Nanda, Chandi Prasad, op.cit., p.150.
84 Ibid., p.150
in most of the Princely States of Orissa. The president finally appealed to the masses of the states to come in line with their fellow countrymen in British India and to organize themselves.86

The Working Committee of the Conference consisted of President, Secretary, Treasurer and eight other members elected by the conference. The following were elected to the working committee.

President : Dr. Pattabhi Sitaramaya
Secretary : Sarangadhar Das (Dhenkanal)
Treasurer : Dr. Biswanath Das (Nayagarh)
Members : Lalmohan Patnaik (Mayurbhanj)
          Balukeswar Acharya (Hindol)
          Radhanath Rath (Athagarh)
          Harmohan Patnaik (Dhenkanal)
          Govinda Chandra Mishra (Dasapalla)
          Madhusudan Mohanty (Athagarh)
          Madhusudan Patnaik (Tigiria)
          Gangadhar Mishra (Ranpur)

The permanent office of the Working Committee was set up at Cuttack. The secretary remained in entire charge of the conference and was responsible to the working committee. The conference had also resolved to affiliate itself to the All India States People Conference.87

87 Rath, Bijay Chandra, op.cit., pp.119-120.
States Enquiry Committee

The constitutional changes in the provinces and the inauguration of Provincial Autonomy and the advent of Congress Ministry brought about a great psychological change in the outlook of the oppressed people of the Orissa States. Coming at such a time, the Orissa States People Enquiry Committee, with Hare Krishna Mahatab as President Balavanta Rai Mehta and Lalmohan Patnaik as members met with a good response and the peasantry came forward in hundreds to lay their grievances before them. Many of the rulers tried to prevent such evidence being recorded.\(^88\)

Nilgiri

Around the time in 1938, in the Princely state of Nilgiri, the people of the state celebrated a social function and an inter-dinning was organized on the occasion. The Nilgiri Durbar served a notice prohibiting such inter-dinning in Ayodhya. This was considered by the state as an 'offence', and heavy fines was imposed upon the peasants. This sparked off a movement of a popular protest against the state\(^89\) by the people under the banner of Yubak Sangh, set up in 1931. The Yubak Sangh used to make regular contact with Congress office at Balasore. It demanded several reforms in the state including the civil liberties of the people. In May 1938, the Yubak Sangh took out a procession from Patapura village to Nilgiri Durbar against the ill treatment of political prisoners in the state. The state police asked the large gathering to disperse but they declined to do so and eleven of them were arrested.\(^90\)

\(^{89}\) AISPC Papers, Nilgiri, File No.124, (1938-40), Nehru Memorial Library and Museum, New Delhi.
\(^{90}\) Home Political Department (Confidential) Special Section, File No.155/1938, Orissa State archives, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.
The working Committee of the Orissa State Peoples Conference was held at Cuttack and passed a resolution condemning the oppressiveness of the Nilgiri Durbar.\(^1\) It also stirred unprecedented enthusiasm in Congress circles in Balasore. The Congress held secret meetings at Balasore in the house of Mukunda Prasad Das, and a Congress center was established at Alsuan (Nilgiri border). The Congress held the states people in their agitation against Nilgiri Durbar’s mal-administration and oppression.\(^2\)

In June 1938, the Nilgiri state Prajamandal was formed under the leadership of Kailash Chandra Mohanty. The other Prajamandal leaders were; Sadhu Prasad, Bidyadhar Mohapatra, Banamali Das, Pranabandhu Agasti, Rama Chandra and others. The Prajamandal laid the grievances of the tenants before the Orissa States Enquiry Committee in 1938. The Raja of Nilgiri forced the tenants to desist from giving evidence to the Committee but they turned up in large numbers and prayed to the Committee to redress their grievances. The most important demands were; (1) change of forest laws, (2) reduction of land rent by 50%, (3) abolition of bethi, beggar and salami, (4) abolition of sabarkari system, (5) restriction on rate of interest even if tenants failed to pay land rent in time, (6) abolition of forest rent in the state, (7) right to hold meeting and processions, etc.\(^3\)

The Raja of Nilgiri at that time did not recognize the Prajamandal and forbidden it to hold any political meetings in the state.\(^4\) The Orissa State Peoples’ Conference was held at Balasore in June 1938. Sarangadhar Das, the Secretary of

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\(^1\) *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, 8th June, 1938.

\(^2\) *Home Political Department (Confidential)*, Fortnightly Report, File No. 257/1938, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

\(^3\) Ibid.

\(^4\) *Home Political Department (Confidential)* File, No.257/1938, National Archives of India, New Delhi.
Orissa State Peoples’ Conference exhorted the people of the state to disobey the ordinances of Nilgiri Durbar and demand the restoration of civil liberties and establishment of responsible government in the state. The state police force harassed the agitators in various ways. Two young boys of 12 or 13 years, Giridhari Singh and Dukhi Dalai were beaten mercilessly with brass badge on the policeman’s belt and left in the forest. They returned to the Congress Ashram in the morning. Although the state authorities with the help of the colonial police force acted in a barbaric manner to dampen the enthusiasm of the people, the popular agitation did not stop. Within eleven days of the movement a total of 116 persons were arrested and many of them were heavily fined. However, large number of people came and joined the movement. The most notable feature of the popular movement was the participation of Santals and other tribal tenants in the Nilgiri state.95

In July 1938, a negotiation for a settlement was started between the Raja and the Nilgiri Prajamandal.96 However, in Gariamala village, the tenants of Nilgiri started an Ashram. Banamali Das, the Secretary of the Nilgiri Prajamandal with other Prajamandal workers used to stay there and soon the number swelled to twelve hundred. Udaynath Birbar of Nilgiri helped them. They published a daily news-sheet named ‘Ranadaka’ (war-cry) with the help of Gour Chandra Das, Secretary of Balasore District Congress Committee. Kailash Chandra Mohanty, the President of Nilgiri Prajamandal handed over a draft containing demands to the Ruling Chief on behalf of the Prajamandal and gave two days time to concede the demands. Hare Krishna Mahatab and Sarangadhar Das visited Gariamala and held a meeting in September 1938. The meeting commenced with an opening song specially

95 AISPC Papers, Nilgiri, File No.127, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.
96 Home Political Department (Confidential) Special Section, File No.155, July, 1938, Orissa State Archives of India, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.
composed on behalf of Nilgiri tenants, which described various atrocities committed in the state. A Congress flag was hoisted by Hare Krushna Mahatab and Kailash Chandra Mohanty exorted the Santals and other tribal tenants to join the Prajamandal, and appealed to the not to start an agitation as negotiation were being going on.  

The Raja of Nilgiri turned down the demands of the prajamandal, went back on the settlement and started arresting the leaders. The Nilgiri Prajamandal resumed the non-violent movement in August 1938. A large number of Prajamandal workers headed by Purna Chandra Naik marched to Ambodia Maidan, shouting the slogans, ‘Nilgiri Atyachar Dhwansa Hau’ (Down with Nilgiri Raja), ‘Matali Raja Dhwansa Hau’ (Down with Drunken Raja), ‘Mahatma Gandhi Ki Jai’, ‘Swadhin Bharat Ki Jai.’ The Durbar indiscriminately lathi charged and dispersed the processionists in Ayodhya. Many of them were seriously injured and taken to Balasore Hospital for treatment. Arjun Jena who used to carry the dak of Prajamandal was fatally assaulted. His dead body was first taken inside the palace (Ayodhya) and thereafter buried in the jungle at the Nilgiri hill. This caused unprecedented agitation on the borders of Nilgiri state. Kanei Barik and Domei Charan Naik of Ambodia proceeded to Nilgiri hat and staged protest demonstration. The Raja’s men assaulted them, Banamali Das was arrested and the Prajamandal was banned.  

The Prajamandal demanded the immediate release of Banamali Das. The situation became tense. The Raja sought the help of the police force from

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97 Home Political Department (Confidential) Special Section, File No.155/1938, Orissa State Archives, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.
98 Home Political Department (Confidential), Fortnightly Report, File No.400/1938, National Archives of India, New Delhi.
neighbouring Mayurbhanj and other states and restored to lathi charge and firing. After receiving this news the Political Agent and hare Krushna Mahatab arrived at Balasore and negotiations for a settlement were started between the raja and the Prajamandal. In August 1938, Hare Krushna Mahatab started negotiations with the Dewan of Nilgiri. Kailash Chandra Mohanty, President of Nilgiri Prajamandal handed over 31 outstanding demands, including abolition of bethi and beggar. He also tendered an apology letter for certain slogans such as, ‘Down with drunken Raja’, ‘Down with faithless fellow’, raised during the movement. On 9th August 1938, the Raja conceded 24 out of 31 demands and published the apology letter in a proclamation.

Thus, Nilgiri was the first princely state of Orissa where the Prajamnadal achieved the civil liberties of the people. It was a great victory for the people of the state and it tremendously influenced the other states people’s movement in Orissa.100

Dhenkanal

Around the same time the popular movement started in Dhenkanal, a small state in the Sambalpur Political Agency in Eastern Agency. The Prajamandal was formed on 27th June, 1938 under the auspices of the Orissa State People’s Conference. Harmohan Patnaik and Sarangadhar Das mobilized the people against the state, demanding the abolition of obnoxious cesses such as bethi, beggar and magan, enactment of tenancy laws as per clauses of Orissa Tenancy Act, 1913, management of state forests, monopoly of betel leaves, protection of crops from the ravage of wild animals, appointment of a committee to enquire onto the oppression


100 Amrit Bazar Patrika, 16th August, 1938.
of the state for the last twelve years, etc. The Prajamandal held meetings within the state and organized the people against the oppressive rule of the raja. Sarangadhar Das distributed 'Krushak' (an Oriya organ of the Socialist Party) in the state and persuaded the people to agitate against the state.\footnote{Home Political Department (Confidential), Fortnightly Report, File No.400/1938, National Archives of India, New Delhi.}

Although the Raja declared certain concessions, it did not satisfy the Prajamandal. In July, 1938 a number of meetings were held in various parts of Dhenkanal state, particularly in Parjang Bisos and Palasuni and it was decided to give up the chewing of pan. It caught the imagination of the people of the state and the daily import betel leaves reduce by 95% within a month. The Prajamandal took out Kirtan Parties from village to village singing songs about pan boycott. The Durbar desist the people from holding political meetings but it had a no effect and the popular movement took visible shape by July 1938. Again the Prajamandal conference was held at Jenapur (Cuttack) and it was attended by twelve thousand people of the state consisted of Harijan and tribal-tenants. Many resolutions were passed including the establishment of responsible government. They expressed their willingness to face all sufferings and privations, but to carry on struggle to the end in a peaceful and non-violent means. A meeting was held at Parjang Bisos, in August 1938. When the president rose to speak to the large gathering he was served with section 144, which he did not defy. However, on his return to Dhenkanal town, he was called by the Raja, who wanted to hear about the grievances of the people, but the talk failed. Later on, Maheswar Subahu Singh, who was considered to e the natural leader of the whole state, was called by the Raja for a negotiation. At that time thousands of people gathered in the Dhenkanal Town. In spite of threat and
persuasion, the people refused to return home; they shouted slogans and hoisted the Congress tri-colour flag. Harmohan Patnaik, Laxmidhar Sahu and many Prajamandal leaders were arrested. Thousand of people gathered and demanded the immediate release of their leaders. The Durbar ordered the crowd to disperse, and they refused, firing was opened in which hundred were wounded and taken to Cuttack Hospital. Nabakrushna Choudhury and Hare Krishna Mahatab arrived at Dhenkanal railway station. The people came out with their traditional weapons to save Maheswar Subahu Singh and others who were being tortured in the jail. The repression did not stop. The Raja imported two hundred armed police from neighbouring states and Eastern States Agency. Besides, the European soldiers, about 230, were kept in Dhenkanal Garh, When the Raja approached the Government of Orissa, and it refused to send any force on the ground that the people were fighting in a constitutional way to get their rights.

The Raja from 21st September, 1938, raided village after village, looted the houses, and men, women and children indiscriminately assaulted. There was vandalism in Parjang Biso. When the news reached Bhuban about the oppression at Pargang Biso and presence of colonial police force, hundred of men and women locked up their houses and left Bhuban for the neighbouring village of Sukinda estate as a mark of protest. As the women were not safe, the Prajamandal declared a 'Hizarat' in the state. However, in Bhuban police force let loose a reign of terror and violated the sanctity of the women. The police force restored to firing in Bhuban and one person was died on the spot and another died in Jenapur on the way to Cuttack. Six wounded were admitted to the Cuttack Hospital. At Nilakanthapur Ghat on the Brahamani River, while the police were crossing the river, Baji Rout, a 12 year old boy tried to stop them and was shot dead by the police with another two. At
Gadidini village looting and molestation of women was very common and they were forced to say 'Raja Ki Jai'. At Katamunda Harijan village there were six incidents of firing in two months and lathi charge in November 1938, and one person received fatal injuries. Many of them were injured.

In October 1938, the Prajamandal offered Satyagraha in the state. They held meetings and processions in defiance of the Durbar's order. Batches of Congress volunteers marched into Dhenkanal town and offered satyagrah but they were cruelly beaten and their clothes and little money, which they had with them, were taken away. Many of the satyagrahis including the President and Secretary were arrested.

In the Dhenkanal movement the total number of dead was 15 and wounded was 133. Besides many hundreds were seriously injured during the course of the movement.

Efforts for settlement were started and Hare Krushna Mahata met the Joint Political Secretary at Puri on 19th October, 1938, and handed over the charter of demands made by the Prajamandal, but nothing materialized. The Satyagraha movement continued. Many of the satyagrahis were arrested and false cases lodged against them. The Home Political Department, Government of Orissa, (Congress) at that time issued 'extradition warrants'. The Congress Socialists who were fighting the extradition cases criticized this. At that time Nabakrushna Choudhury resigned from the Secretarieship of Orissa Provincial Congress Committee and led the first batch of volunteers to offer Satyagraha in the state.\textsuperscript{102}

\textsuperscript{102}All India Congress Committee Papers, File No. 135, (1938), Part-1, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.
On 2nd December 1938, a meeting on the situation in Dhenkanal was held at Town Hall, Cuttack under the leadership of Prananath Patnaik, attended by five hundred people. Prananath Patnaik vehemently condemned the Dhenkanal state. He held British imperialism responsible for mishaps in the state. He appealed to the people to start a non-violent Satyagraha on the day after the meeting. Another meeting was held under the Chairmanship of Girija Bhusan Dutta at Budapanka Camp (Anugul). He exhorted the people of Dhenkanal to accompany Nabakrushna Choudhury in thousands for the satyagraha movement. Rabi Ghose, referring to the oppression in Dhenkanal against the leaders, exhorted the people to fight bravely. He accused the British Government of siding with the Dhenkanal Durbar, for not holding an impartial enquiry into all the allegations, and killing of 18 people by firing. In December 1938, batches of satyagrahis started coming from Cuttack, Khurda, Sambalpur and other parts of Orissa to offer Satyagraha as a mark of solidarity with the people of Dhenkanal.

On 3rd December 1938, Bhagirathi Panigrahi, Nabakrushna Choudhury and Ananta Patnaik offered Satyagraha in Parjang side of Dhenkanal state. However, in order to suppress the Satyagraha Movement, the authority came down heavily. The leaders were arrested and subjected to severe torture. Ananta Patnaik and Baidyanath Rath, who visited Bhuban to distribute Rs/- 500 that had been received from the Bombay Socialists, were tortured. While returning, Ananta Patnaik was kidnapped and handed over to the state police. Baidyanath Patnaik, however, managed to escape and returned to Cuttack. As the state authorities dealt with the movement in a highhanded manner, the movement appeared to be collapsing. Therefore, the Socialists in order to revive the agitation invited Prof. N. G. Ranga,
who promised to come to Cuttack towards the close of December 1938 to personally lead the movement in the Dhenkanal state.

Mr. S. P. Sharma, a local representative for The Hindu of Madras, was employed as an advisor to the Dhenkanal Durbar to draft a scheme of constitutional reform for the state. He advised the Raja of Dhenkanal to look into the grievances of the people against the alleged oppression of the police force in order to pacify their anger.\textsuperscript{103}

Towards the close of 1938 that compelled by the situation the Raja declared certain constitutional rights to the people. The All India Congress Committee passed a resolution drafted by Mahatma Gandhi, asserting the right of the Congress to protect the people against an unwarranted use of military or police force by the British authorities. The premier of Orissa, Biswanath Das and Hare Krushna Mahatab opened negotiations with the Resident, Eastern States Agency to bring about a settlement in Dhenkanal state. By that time normalcy prevailed in Dhenkanal.\textsuperscript{104}

**Talcher**

In September 1938 the Prajamandal was set up under the leadership of Pabitra Mohan Pradhan. It started agitation the state for certain reforms.\textsuperscript{105} The Ruler of the state expelled a number of Prajamandal workers for carrying out agitation against the state. So they took refuge in Anugul, where they started a Volunteers Training Camp to carry on agitation against the oppression and misrule with the support of

\textsuperscript{103} *Home Political Department (Confidential)* Special Section, File No.286, Orissa State Archives, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.

\textsuperscript{104} *AISPC Papers, Nilgiri*, File No, 127, Nehru Memorial Library and Museum, New Delhi.

\textsuperscript{105} *Sunday Statesman*, 11th September, 1938.
the local Congress. In September 1938, Laxmi Narayan Mishra, a Congress worker of Sambalpur held a kisan meeting at Anugul attended by people from Talcher. In this meeting discussion was held on the oppression and illegal exaction prevailing in the state. Pabitra Mohan Pradhan, and Maguni, returning from Cuttack to Panigala started mobilizing the people not to pay ‘hat-tax’ in various parts of Talcher state. In order to avoid a crisis the state authority arrested 230 Prajamandal workers.  

However this led to further trouble in the state, with thousands of people gathering and demanding the immediate release of arrested persons. The Prajamandal demanded to the Raja, the rights to organize popular associations and meetings, the abolition of rasad, magan and bethi, modifications of the state tenancy regulations and forest laws and establishment of responsible government.

**Ranpur**

The murder of Political Agent, Major Bazelegette in Ranpur State caused mixed reaction among the leaders. They came to the conclusion that, it was the necessary outcome of the oppressive rule of the state and a fitting response of the people to the injustice suffered by them. On the other hand the important leaders started questioning themselves, that how the Congress policy of non-violence could be maintained if the party’s platform allowed to be used by violent and responsible elements in politics, whose ideas were based on revolution rather than evolution. F.G. Bailey remarked, “The movement seems to have lost sight of its non-violent intentions and became a form of guerilla warfare”.

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106*Home Political Department (Confidential) Special Section, File No.211, Orissa State Archives, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.*
107*Sunday Statesman, 11th September, 1938.*
108*Mishra, Bichitra Nanda, op.cit., pp.142-143.*
Though the leaders professed non-violent means of agitation because of the strained relationship tension mounted and it took a serious turn towards the last part of 1938 and in the beginning of 1939. The Police Administration Report mentions “agitation in the Orissa States had been working towards climax and this was related in the first week of January when Major Bazelegette, the Political Agent was put to death by a large mob in the capital of Ranpur State in 1939”. The agitation of Ranpur State took violent turn during the later part of December and especially from 2\textsuperscript{nd} January 1939, following the declaration of the Ranpur Prajamandal as unlawful organization and the arrest of the leaders. As the agitation took violent turn it claimed the life of two tenants.\textsuperscript{109}

Nayagarh

The movement in Nayagarh also started during this period. The peasants had no property right over their land and the rate of rent was higher in comparison to the district of Ganjam and Puri. The forest rules were very strict and the privileges enjoyed by the peasants were drastically curtailed. Punishment for violating forest law was very heavy. Realization of fees for offering worship in the temples of ‘Raghunath’ and ‘Ladubaba’ was special feature in the state of Nayagarh. There were a number of occasions in the past where the peasants expressed their resentment against the operation and misrule in the state resulting in inhuman police atrocities.\textsuperscript{110}

In 1936-37, some tenants had surrendered their holdings as the wild animals damaged the crops and the cultivation was not profitable. They demanded the state for the protection of crops by changing the forest rules. The Orissa State Peoples’

\textsuperscript{109} Rath, Bijay Chandra, op.cit. p.130.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., p.130.
Conference carried on propaganda against the state to change the forest rules. The tenants of the state consulted Sarangadhar Das and Biswambar Rath and formulated their grievances and represented to the Political Agent. In March 1938, they gathered at the Gandhi Seva Sangha at Delang in Puri district. The tenants of the state joined in the meeting in large numbers. In April 1938, extensive fires occurred in the state forests. The Raja accused the tenants held them responsible for the incident and false cases were registered against the tenants. The tenants Orgaon after their return from Delang meeting started agitation against the state monopoly of sale of betel leaves in the state as the rights was given to certain men with specified size and specified rates of betel leaves. The rate was very high in comparison to bordering market of Puri district. The tenants carried on propaganda not to use betel leaves an distributed placards and posters and posted those in temple and other prominent places which were frequently visited by public (Raghunath Jiu Thakur temple). It created unbounded enthusiasm among the tenants of Nayagarh. In April 1938, a man named Jumma Malik who was returning home after purchasing some betel leave was assaulted by the tenants. Five of them were charged sentenced to one month’s imprisonment each. The arrest of the tenants’ caused dissatisfaction among the people of Nayagarh state. A number of people belonging Orgaon and other few neighbouring village gathered together near the court and started a protest demonstration, shouted Congress slogans and demanded the release of the tenants. The village of Orgaon became the center of agitation, as it is a place pilgrimage throughout the year for the people coming to see Raghunath Jiu Thakur. Therefore, it was easier for the tenants to get outside help and sympathy. The tenants were advised to agitate under the guidance of Orissa State Peoples’ Conference and the Congress to get their grievances redressed. The Raja was advised by the Political
Agent to grant concessions as demanded by the tenants and issue notices similar to those recently issued by Nilgiri Durbar, as it was necessary to keep the movement under control.\textsuperscript{111}

The Raja, however did not concede the demands and in Khurda around ten thousand mostly Kondhas, and other tribal tenants of Nayagarh state surrounded the Rajas’ palace in October 1938, demanded reforms inn the state. The Congress Socialist leader Gangadhar Mishra of Digiri in the border of Nayagarh state incited the tenants to cut down trees from the forests and launched no-rent campaign. The Ruling Chief of Nayagarh persuaded the tenants not to join hands with the agitators. Gangadhar Mishra and other Congress Socialists told the tenants that all India leaders were soon to arrive to lead the Satyagraha in Nayagarh state.\textsuperscript{112}

Keonjhar

In Keonjhar state Prajamandal was formed in 1938 and it held a meeting at Balabhadrapur, where they formulated their grievances to present them to the Raja. Along with their various demands the Prajamandal urged for establishment of full responsible government. The conveners of the meeting immediately on their arrival at Keonjhar Garh, the head quarters of the state, were arrested and charged under section 124. Those who attended the meeting were threatened with fine and imprisonment, if they did not testify against the accused. A similar meeting was held at Anandapur, but the state authority arrested five persons and tried them under section 420, and three of them were sentenced to two years imprisonment.\textsuperscript{113}

\textsuperscript{111}Home Political Department (Confidential). Fortnightly Report, File, No.257/1938, National Archives of India, New Delhi.
\textsuperscript{112}Home Political Department (Confidential) Special Section File, No.15/39, Orissa State Archives, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.
\textsuperscript{113}Amrit Bazar Patrika. 12th November, 1939.
Pallahara

In 1938, the Prajamandal was formed in the Pallahara state. The Prajamandal held a meeting at Tiribi village to protest against excessive *bethi*, and formulate their grievances to present them to the Raja. After the arrest of Karunakar Behera Pradhan, the leader of Prajamandal, five thousand people congregated and protested against it. The demand of the Prajamandal was among other things, restoration of civil liberties and the establishment of full responsible government. After along protest or the thousands of the Prajamandal workers from all over the state Karunakar Behera Pradhan and 17 others were released. The Raja alleged that persons coming from Dhenkanal started the agitation.

In Gangpur State, the peasant under the Prajamandal had organized a no-rent campaign against what they to the considered rightly arbitrary assessment of rent. The Gangpur administration wanted to suppress the campaign, and for that purpose, requisitioned military assistance apprehending violence from the peasants. On the 25th April, 1939, a police force was sent to arrest Nirmal Munda. But, they were confronted with a crowd of five hundred armed Mundas (tribal-peasants.) The military assistance was sought for and firing had to be restored to, when the defiant Mundas did not disperse after repeated warnings. As a result of which, thirty Mundas were brutally killed and twenty-one were severely wounded.

Peaceful civil resistance also started in states like Athagarh, Tigiria, Baramba and Narasinghpur under the guidance of the respective Prajamandal leadership. The rulers of these states more or less followed the repressive policy of their fellow rulers of Dhenkanal and Talcher and they also had their share of firing and lathi

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114 *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, 10th September, 1939.
115 *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, 12th September, 1939.
charges on innocent and peaceful crowds. They also declared of the Prajamandals in their States as unlawful and went back on assurance given in response to the agitation and demand of the Prajamandals. Here was great agitation in almost all the Orissa States on account of the widespread activities of the Prajamandals.\textsuperscript{117}

Seeing this peasant unrest in the States the prominent Congress leaders of Orissa and some notable Indian leaders tried to intervene in order to bring about a settlement between the rulers and the ruled. Babu Rajendra Prasad, Rev. C.F. Andrews, Miss Agatha Harrison (Secretary of Indian Conciliation Group, London), Dr. H.K. Mahatab and Professor N.G. Ranga – the prominent Kisan leaders and few others played important roles in bringing about such a settlement. The situation however changed when the Congress Ministry resigned from Orissa. The Political Department tightened its grip over the States. All the Prajamandals organized throughout the Princely States of Orissa were banned.\textsuperscript{118}

Besides, after the outbreak of the Second World War the Defence of India Rules strengthened the hands of the Rulers. Almost all leaders of Prajamandals in the Princely States were arrested and sent to prison. This resulted in a temporary lull in the movement. The workers of the Prajamandal devoted themselves to silent constructive work until 1942, when again mass movement was started.\textsuperscript{119}

The imperial power was rather hesitant to press the Zamindars and the Rulers for taking drastic remedial measures. Invariably, everywhere the colonial power intervened to curb the popular movements when the Zamindars and the Rulers could

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., p. 118.
\textsuperscript{119} Sahu N. K. & Sushil Chandra De, eds., \textit{Who's Who Freedom Workers in Orissa: Dhenkanal District}, Cuttack, 1967, p. IX.
not contain it. The British colonialism was condemned everywhere as the root cause of trouble in the States.\textsuperscript{120} A series of legislative steps were taken by the Congress Ministry under the pressure of Krushak Sangh and Prajamandal to ameliorate the condition of the peasants of Orissa. Legislation was introduced for the provision of credit through Co-operative Land Mortgage Banks, for preventing the eviction of small landholder from their land and the attachment and sale of their moveable property. The Orissa Act-III of 1938 was important legislative measure taken in this direction. Besides this Orissa Tenancy Law of 1913 was amended to confer better rights on the cultivators. Two significant amendments made by it were the conferment of full rights of occupancy tenants on the tree standing on the land and also permission to transfer their land without payment of fees to the landlords. Necessary provisions to carry out the mutation of landlord’s papers were made. The right to sublet or mortgage the occupancy right was also stipulated as a necessary concomitant to these facilities. These legislative measures were indication of the success achieved by the agitation. In fact, both the Prajamandal and Krushak Sangh gained enormously through the movement.\textsuperscript{121} While, many problems remained, and the situation in the Princely States was still very difficult. The short period of the Congress Ministry did many positive legislative measures for agrarian reform.

\textsuperscript{120} Mishra, Bichitra Nanda, op. cit., p. 145.  
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., pp.144-145.