CHAPTER-VII
CONCLUSION

The Peasant Movement in Orissa c. 1921- c. 1950 was an important part of the Indian struggle for freedom. In the present research work an attempt has been made to understand the ways in which peasants (tribals and non-tribals) were associated with the national movement in Orissa. The most important conclusion that has emerged out of this study is that the peasant movement was explicitly and implicitly anti-landlord, anti-ruler and anti-imperialist in character. Besides, the peasantry of Orissa did not simply agitate against the enhanced land revenue, but also against the various illegal cesses or abwabs which were levied on them by the superordinate classes such as the landlords, the rulers of the princely state and the colonial state.

The cesses or abwabs were collected either in form of labour i.e., bethi, begar, etc., or in kind like fish, bidi, etc. The tribal peasants, during the anti-imperialist mass movements particularly in the Princely States, defied the forest laws, which enabled them to re-assert their lost rights over their forest land. The concept of ‘Swaraj’ and ‘National Movement’ in the peasants’ consciousness in Orissa was visualized as the end of the oppressive taxes and exploitation of the superordinate classes.

In the 1920s, particularly during the Non-Cooperation Movement, it was the Utkal Provincial Congress Committee, which mainly provided the leadership to the peasants in struggle for the redressal of their grievances. In a few instances, they also got leadership from holy men or saints. Interestingly, Rama Das Babaji, a holy man from Uttar Pradesh, came to Kanika and mobilized the peasants against the Raja of Kanika during Non-Cooperation Movement.
In many ways, the year 1930 was the most memorable in the anti-imperialist mass movement. The peasantry of Orissa, following the instructions of Mahatma Gandhi participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement. They readily broke the salt law, as they saw it as means of taxing a daily necessity of life. Besides, for the peasants in the coastal areas, salt was major source of income, next to agriculture. It was during the Civil Disobedience Movement that the peasants started a no-rent campaign in Srijang (Balasore), Koraput and a few other pockets of Orissa.

In the Princely States of Orissa, particularly in Talcher, the peasants started an agitation against bethi, begar and other miscellaneous cesses during the Civil Disobedience movement. Dhobei Chhual Singh and Brundaban Pradhan took the lead and put forth the demands before the Political Agents, Mr. Bruton, but it yield nothing substantial. Similarly, in the Boud State, the tribal tenants protested against the arbitrary enhancement of land rent under a new settlement, but it was dealt with an iron hand. The peasant agitation during this period could not achieve much success because the Salt Satyagraha came to an end by the year 1932.

After the end of the mass Civil Disobedience Movement, there emerged the socialist trend within the Congress Party. It facilitated the birth of the Congress Socialist Party of Orissa in 1934. Surendranath Dwivedy, Malati Devi Choudhury, Nabakrushna Choudhury and Dibakar Patnaik were the most prominent leaders of the Congress Socialist Party. With the emergence of the Congress Socialists, the peasant movement became more vigorous. They made untiring efforts for the redressal of peasant grievances in the coastal areas of British Orissa as well as in the Princely States of Orissa.

The Utkal Krushak Sangha, which emerged in 1935 under the presidentship of Hare Krishna Mahatab, played a significant role in the organisation and
mobilisation of the peasantry, although its activities used to be regulated by the Congress. In the Princely States of Orissa, the Prajamandals in the respective States from 1934 played a very significant role in the effort to mobilise the peasants for multifarious agrarian as well as forest related issues. They worked under general guidance of the Orissa States’ Peoples’ Conference. The Utkal Krushak Sangha in coastal Orissa and the Prajamandals in the Princely States broadened the mass base of the peasant movement, by demanding security of tenure, debt relief, cheap credit, etc.

The Congress Ministry, after coming to power, brought about a major change in the agrarian conditions in Orissa by initiating reforms on the lines demanded by the Congress Socialists and the Krushak Sangha. The prominent reform measures undertaken by the Congress Ministry were the Madras Estate Land (Orissa Amendment) Bill, 1937, Orissa Tenancy (Amendment) Bill, 1937, Orissa Co-Operative Land Mortgage Bank Bill, 1938, and Orissa Moneylenders Bill, 1939. But the two amendments made by Congress Ministry i.e., the Orissa Tenancy (Amendment) Bill, 1937, and the Madras Estates Land (Orissa Amendment) Bill, 1937, were more significant than the others. These amendments conferred full rights on occupancy- tenants to the trees standing in their land and permission to transfer their land without payment of fees to landlords. Necessary provisions for carrying out the mutation in the landlord’s papers were also made. The right to sublet or mortgage the occupancy rights was also stipulated as a necessary concomitant to these rights. These agrarian reform measures, which were introduced by the Congress Ministry, indicates the success achieved by the peasant movement during this period under the leadership of the Utkal Pradesh Congress Committee, the Krushak Sangha and the Prajamandal.
The Congress Ministry had to resign in November 1939, in accordance with the decision taken by the Indian National Congress to protest against India being made a party to the World War II without her consent. The resignation of the Congress Ministry led to the formation of a Coalition Ministry with Maharaja Krushna Chandra Gajapati as Premier.

The Coalition Ministry faced various problems from different quarters as World War II progressed. In order to win over the support of the Indian leaders, the Cripps Mission came to India. But the Cripps Mission ended in failure and the Indian National Congress under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi started the historic Quit India Movement in 1942. In this final phase of struggle against British imperialism, the peasantry proved to be the strength of the movement. The Congress nationalists of Orissa organised the masses and waged non-violent fight against British imperialism. The left wing Socialists and Communists of Orissa also extend their support to the Congress led movement.

The peasantry of Orissa, following the instructions of the All India Congress Committee implemented the no-tax, no-rent and no-grain campaign in every part of Orissa. To put down the mass movement the colonial authority adopted repressive methods in all parts of Orissa, and arrested almost all the frontline leaders.

As most of the Congress leaders were put behind the bars during the Quit India Movement, the Congress socialist leader Surendranath Dwivedy became the main organiser of the movement, while remaining underground. The most ghastly incidents, which took place in Orissa during the Quit India Movement, were ‘Nimapara Firing’ (Puri), ‘Eram Firing’ (Balasore), ‘Maithili Firing’ (Koraput), and the ‘Papadahandi Firing’ (Koraput) in which many innocent peasants lost their lives.
In the Princely States of Orissa, there was an unprecedented popular upsurge against the State authorities. In some of the States like Talcher and Dhenkanal, the movement assumed to such proportions that the authorities resorted to aerial bombing and machine gunning.

By the middle of 1943, the Quit India Movement had declined but now Orissa was faced with a severe famine, which created an unprecedented food crisis, and the Congress had to devote itself to constructive programmes. The Coalition Ministry, which was in power at that time earned a lot of criticism from all the political parties for the food crisis. This resulted in the resignation of the Coalition Ministry headed by the Maharaja of Paralakhemdi.

Political developments moved faster after the end of World War II. The elections to the Provincial Legislature in Orissa were held in March 1946. The Congress got a thumping victory. Hare Krushna Mahatab formed the Ministry on 23rd April 1946. The Congress, after assuming office released political prisoners and took steps to solve the food crisis in Orissa. Besides, the Congress Ministry also initiated legislative measures in response to demands for abolition of Zamindari system made by the peasant movement in various parts of coastal Orissa. A Zamindari Abolition Committee was also constituted but the Congress faced a difficult situation as the Zamindars of Orissa had extended their support to the Congress during the elections.

On 15th August 1947, India got her Independence. It was celebrated with great joy and enthusiasm throughout the province. The popular enthusiasm on the occasion was naturally spontaneous and very high. Although it brought the end of colonialism, the conflict that existed between the landlords and the peasants still continued since Zamindari system was yet to be abolished. The Krushak Sangha in
1947 started a sharecroppers' movement in the districts of Puri, Cuttack, Ganjam and Balasore districts. Responding to the situation the Congress Ministry enacted the Share-croppers Act.

In 1948, the Communists intensified their activities in the districts of Cuttack, Puri, Ganjam and Sambalpur for the abolition of Zamindari system. Finally, the Zamindari system was abolished by the enactment of Orissa Estate Abolition Act, 1952.

After independence, India immediately faced the challenge of integrating the Princely States into the Union, as many of them wished to remain independent. In such a situation, popular movements favouring integration started in the Princely States of Orissa. The tribal tenants fought vehemently against the Ruling Chiefs for their civil liberties, better administration and integration of the states. In some states, like Nilgiri, the popular movement reached such a height that it posed a threat to law and order. Hare Krushna Mahatab, the Chief Minister of Orissa, made serious attempts for the integration of the Princely States. On 13th December, 1947, Sardar Patel and V. P. Menon reached Cuttack and held a meeting with the rulers of the Princely States. After a great deal of pressure and persuasion, the Rulers at last agreed to accept the 'Merger Plan' and the document was signed by the morning of 15th December, 1947, with effect from 1st January, 1948. However, Mayurbhanj kept aloof from the merger agreement. But the popular movement in the states by the tribal-tenants was so powerful that the Ruler was forced to sign the Instrument of Accession on 17th October, 1948. The state was taken over by the Government of India on 9th November, 1948. Thus ended the story of the freedom struggle in Orissa.
Although, Zamindari tenures in coastal Orissa were abolished and the middle and small peasant economy became predominant, a few large land holdings remained. In inland Orissa, the phenomenon of large land holdings under gauntias persisted. The land reforms in Orissa had limited results. The abolition of intermediaries was carried out between 1952 and 1970 and 418,227 estates out of 421,556 were abolished. But tenancy regulation proved to be illusory. Attempt to put a ceiling on large holdings were made from time to time. The Land Reform Act of 1960 was first major step towards this direction.

Popular protest movements continued against the Hirakund Dam and the Machkund projects. Bodhram Dube led the movement against Hirakund Dam project. The protest movement in Sambalpur remained unabated even after independence, and tool up the question of rehabilitation of and proper compensation to the peasantry. Radhanath Rath organised the people against the Machkund Project and demanded unconditional withdrawal of the agreement signed between the Governments of Orissa and Madras. The Socialists and the Communists remained active on both the occasions. The displaced peasants of Sambalpur had to wait for a long time for their rehabilitation and compensation.

Although, more than fifty years have passed after independence, problems in Orissa continue. In the contemporary times, in the national and local media, we see several stories of starvation deaths in Kalahandi, Bolangir and Koraput (KBK) districts of Orissa. The worst sufferers are the tribal peasants. The persistent poverty, malnutrition, disease, and frequent natural calamities like flood, drought, and cyclone are the major problems before us today. Therefore, in many ways the legacy of the freedom struggle is yet to be fully realized by the peasants.