

MODERN ODISHA

The Prajamandal Movement in Odisha

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THE PRAJAMANDAL MOVEMENT IN ODISHA

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The Prajamandal Movement in Odisha: During the era of British rule, the princely states or Garjat Rajyas of Odisha held significant sovereign power. Over time, however, the rulers of these regions began to exercise this power in repressive ways. Exploitation and repression became common features of life in these indigenous states.

The populace endured various forms of exploitation, primarily through burdensome taxation methods. Terms like 'Rasad', 'Magan', 'Bethi', and 'Begari' became synonymous with the heavy financial burdens imposed on the people. These taxes often left the common folk

struggling to make ends meet.

As the weight of this exploitation grew unbearable for the people, a deep-seated desire for revolt began to simmer. The accumulated anger and resentment toward the ruling princes found an outlet in what came to be known as the Prajamandal movement.

The Prajamandal movement was a grassroots uprising fueled by the grievances of the common people. It was a response to years of economic hardship, social injustices, and the oppressive rule of the indigenous state rulers. The movement sought to challenge the exploitative practices of the rulers and demand greater rights and representation for the people.

Through protests, demonstrations, and organized activism, the Prajamandal movement aimed to bring about meaningful change in the socio-political landscape of Odisha's indigenous states. It stood as a testament to the resilience and determination of the people to fight against injustice and oppression, ultimately paving the way for reforms and improvements in their living conditions.

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The emergence of native states

Since the Mughal era, the hilly tracts of Odisha had been home to hereditary feudatory kings who enjoyed internal sovereignty of power. This unique system persisted through various periods of history, including during the Mughal and Maratha rule.

During the Mughal era, the areas under direct Mughal administration were known as the Mughalbandi kingdom. The kings of the mountainous regions, collectively referred to as the 'Garajat' states, paid taxes and homage to the Mughal rulers. This system continued when the Marathas conquered Odisha, with the Garajat princes paying tribute to the Maratha

rulers in exchange for retaining their internal sovereignty.

When the British took control of Odisha, this system was further perpetuated. The Garajat princes became British subjects and paid taxes to the British administration while retaining their internal sovereign powers. This arrangement ensured that these mountainous regions maintained a degree of autonomy within the broader framework of British colonial rule.

In 1936, a new Odisha province was established, and the Eastern States Agency was reorganized into three sections. Within the Odisha State Agency, 23 of the 26 Garajat regions were retained within Odisha's jurisdiction. The remaining three regions, Mayurbhanj, Kalahandi, and Patna, were retained under the Bengal Agency and Chattisgarh Agency, respectively.

These Garajat states were then further categorized into 'A', 'B', and 'C' sections in 1937, based on their significance and administrative needs. The 'A' category included states like Dhenkanal, Keonjhar, Mayurbhanj, Bamanda, Boudh, Gangapur, Patna, Kalahandi, Sonepur, Sareikala, and Nayagarh. The 'B' category encompassed states such as Athagarh, Baramba, Narsinghpur, Athamallik, Hmdol, Daspalla, Khandapara, Kharasuan, Rairakhol, Talcher, Bolangir, and Nilgiri. Lastly, the 'C' category included Pallahara, Ranpur, and Tigiria.

Before the Prajamandal movement, all these Garajat states were considered British subjects who paid taxes to the British administration. In return, they were granted a degree of internal sovereignty, allowing them to govern their territories according to their traditional customs and laws. This system of governance was a unique aspect of Odisha's history, reflecting the intricate balance between local autonomy and colonial authority during the British rule.

Causes of the Prajamandal Rebellion

The following factors contributed to the rebellion in Odisha's Garjat states:

1. **Economic exploitation of the Garajat rulers:** The kings of these Garajat states lived lavishly and pompously. As a result, a sizable sum of money was required to meet their

needs. The king's officers extracted the entire sum from the populace. The people's situation gradually deteriorated. When their economic foundations were shattered and they could no longer bear such atrocities, the populace rose up in revolt.

2. **The Kings' Oppression:** In addition to regular taxes, the kings extracted money and services from the populace through a variety of dubious methods. Bethi, Begari, Magana, Rasad, Bheti, and Karasamagri were among these taxes. 'Bethi' was used to construct palaces and beautify gardens without paying any wages to the workers. To transport royal officers' personal effects and household goods for free was referred to as 'Begari'. When there was a royal wedding or death, or even when the king purchased a new car, the people were required to pay either in cash or in kind, a practise known as 'Magana.' When the king's officers toured village areas and established camps in various locations, their food and lodgings were to be provided by the 'Prajapati' or the populace, which was referred to as 'Rasad'. 'Bheti' was the gift that the people were obligated to offer the king when he granted them audience. The king was to be supplied with rice, pulses, cereals, and ghee at a price that was half that of the market, a practise known as Karasamagri. The populace was forced to endure the king's tyrannical whims. However, in the future, they became a means of inciting people to revolt, paving the way for the Prajamandal movement.
3. **Frequent tax increases:** The movement was also influenced by frequent tax increases. Even after various forms of exploitation, the kings did not abstain from frequent tax increases. People's lives became burdensome, and they were compelled to revolt against feudatory chiefs.

The Prajamandal Movement's Initial Phase

Between the years 1908 and 1928, the region of Bamanda in Odisha witnessed a series of five peasant rebellions. These uprisings were sparked by the deep-seated anger and frustration among the peasants due to unjust tax hikes imposed upon them. The peasants, burdened by these increased taxes, rose up in protest against the oppressive measures.

However, as with many such movements during that time, the rebellion faced significant challenges. When a few leaders of the rebellion were arrested and imprisoned, the momentum of the movement began to wane. The lack of leadership and the repressive actions taken by the authorities contributed to the eventual decline of the Bamanda rebellion.

In 1922, a significant people's rebellion erupted in Dhenkanal, led by figures such as Maheswar Subahu Singh, Purna Chandra Mohapatra, and Benudhar Panda. This rebellion was a direct response to the injustices faced by the local populace, particularly in terms of taxation and oppressive policies.

The year 1928 saw popular movements stirring in Nilgiri, while 1930 witnessed similar uprisings in Boudh. In 1932, the region of Talcher also became a site of discontent and protest. In each of these instances, the people rose up against the exploitative practices and oppressive conditions they endured.

Despite the fervor and determination of these movements, they were met with severe repression. The colonial authorities, intent on maintaining order and control, brutally suppressed the rebellions. The use of force and violence against the protestors became a common tactic to quell dissent and maintain the status quo.

Conference of the People of Odisha's Garajat States

The Prajamandal movement in Odisha gained significant momentum and direction through the establishment of the 'Orissa Garajat State People's Association'. The first meeting of this association took place in Cuttack on June 20, 1931, with Bhubanananda Das presiding over its inaugural session.

During this crucial meeting, the conference emphasized the need for the subject people to assert their rights and rebel against the oppressive practices they faced. The call for rebellion was a response to the injustices of Begari, Magana, Rasad, and Bheti, which had long burdened the lives of the common people.

Building upon this foundation, the second session of the conference took place on June 23-24, 1937, with a prominent Congress leader, Pattabhi Sitaramayya, presiding over the proceedings. During this session, significant decisions were made to address the grievances of the people.

One of the key outcomes of this conference was the unanimous decision to abolish the oppressive practices of Begari, Magana, Rasad, and Bheti. These were exploitative taxes and practices that had been a source of immense hardship for the local population.

In addition to these decisions, an inquiry committee was established to further investigate and address the grievances of the 'Prajās' or subjects. This committee, chaired by figures such as Satish Chandra Bose, Balwantrai Mehta, Braja Sunder Das, and Sarangadhar Das, was sympathetic to the cause of the 'Prajās' and firmly supported their demands for justice and reform.

Prajamandal Movement in various locations throughout Odisha

Odisha has witnessed a number of Prajamandal movements, which are listed below.

Nilgiri's Prajamandal movement

The 1938 Prajamandal movement in Nilgiri marks a significant turning point in the history of Odisha, highlighting the resilience and determination of the people against oppressive rule. This pivotal moment was initiated with the formation of a 'Prajamandal' at Gariamal, spurred by the efforts of leaders such as Harakrushna Mahtab and Sarangdhar Das.

Under the leadership of Kailash Chandra Mohanty as president and Banamali Das as secretary, the Prajamandal addressed a large gathering on July 11, 1938, coinciding with the auspicious day of the Rath Yatra or the car festival. During this gathering, they boldly criticized the misrule of the king and presented a series of demands aimed at improving the lives of the people.

Among the key demands put forth by the Prajamandal were the formulation of a new agricultural policy to benefit the farmers, the cessation of unjustified taxes that burdened the populace, and the establishment of a more equitable and welfare-oriented administrative system.

Importantly, despite the passionate calls for change, the Prajamandal leaders emphasized a commitment to peaceful means of achieving their objectives. They urged the people to pursue their goals through non-violent methods, in the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi's principles of satyagraha or passive resistance.

However, the response from the ruling authorities was swift and harsh. The king of Nilgiri ordered the arrest of 120 individuals associated with the Prajamandal. Out of these, 50 were fined Rs. 50 each, while the rest were imprisoned for their participation in the movement.

Undeterred by these actions, Banamali Das, along with a gathering of 5000 people, marched towards Machhuapatna with the intention of initiating a peaceful satyagraha or protest. Faced with this escalating situation, the king sought the assistance of the Odisha police to suppress the movement.

Ultimately, it was the intervention of key figures such as Political Agent Major Bezelgate, Harekrushna Mahatab, and Balasore magistrate Sulaiman that helped quell the rebellion. Through their efforts, a resolution was reached, and the king agreed to concede to many of the demands put forth by the Prajamandal.

The 1938 Prajamandal movement in Nilgiri stands as a testament to the courage and determination of the people of Odisha in their struggle for justice and reform. It showcased the power of peaceful resistance in the face of oppression and contributed significantly to the advancement of the rights and welfare of the populace in the region.

Dhenkanal Prajamandal movement

The Prajamandal movement in Dhenkanal sparked a rebellion against oppressive practices such as the payment of Bethi, Magana, Rasad, and Sunia Bheti. The objectives of the Prajamandal were clearly outlined and disseminated among the populace through

pamphlets, rallying the people for change.

On September 13, 1938, amidst warnings from the police, a massive rally was held with prominent leaders like Harekrushna Mahatab, Naba Krushna Chowdhury, and Sarangdhar Das addressing a gathering of over 50,000 individuals. Despite the peaceful nature of the assembly, the state police, along with British forces, resorted to lathi charges against the crowd, attempting to quell the growing dissent.

In the face of such violent suppression, the Congress leadership urged the people to remain steadfast and peaceful in their resistance against these atrocities. However, the authorities responded with further crackdowns, leading to the arrest of leaders like Harmohan Patnaik, who was sent to Cuttack jail.

Adding to the turmoil, the homes of many Prajamandal leaders were set on fire, a stark reminder of the risks they faced for challenging the status quo. Tragically, the violence escalated when 12-year-old Baji Rout lost his life in police firing, becoming a poignant symbol of the movement's sacrifices.

Despite these challenges and the loss of innocent lives, the Prajamandal movement persisted, fueled by the hope of achieving justice and reform. October 29, 1938, was designated as 'Garajat Day', commemorating the spirit of resistance and unity among the people.

Finally, in 1939, the British government took decisive action by withdrawing all powers from the king of Dhenkanal. A report from the Central Police Bureau indicated that the king's authority was transferred to Khan Bahadur A. K. Khan. This marked a significant victory for the Prajamandal movement.

As a result of their persistent efforts, the oppressive term 'Bethi' was repealed, offering relief to the people burdened by this tax. Additionally, the land tax was reduced to two annas, providing much-needed respite to the agricultural community. Furthermore, all leaders who had been unjustly arrested were released, signaling a triumph for the Prajamandal's struggle for justice and dignity.

Talcher's Prajamandal movement

The Prajamandal movement in Talcher reached a critical juncture as the oppressive actions of the royal authorities intensified to appalling levels of cruelty and inhumanity. Reports emerged of extreme punishments meted out, including severe caning, spitting, and even urinating in the mouths of the people.

In response to such egregious treatment, the people of Talcher, under the leadership of Prajamandal President Pabitra Mohan Pradhan, united in a demand for an end to these barbaric practices. The movement also called for the abolition of oppressive measures such as Magana, Rasad, and other exploitative taxes.

Leading figures like Krutibas Rath, Maguni Pradhan, Dasarathi Pani, and others played pivotal roles in rallying the 'Prajas' or people of Talcher against the tyranny they faced.

In 1939, as the movement gained momentum, the people presented a petition to the king outlining their demands for justice and reform. The courageous actions of the Prajamandal leaders and the unwavering support of the people forced the authorities to reckon with their demands.

As the situation in Talcher grew increasingly volatile, many 'Prajas' sought refuge in the nearby British-ruled Anugul region, fleeing the oppressive rule of the Talcher king.

Recognizing the gravity of the situation, numerous Congress leaders arrived in Anugul in 1939 to lend their support to the cause. It was during this time that a significant development took place—the signing of the Hessene-Mahatab Accord.

This accord, brokered by the political agent Mr. Hessene and Congress leader Harekrushna Mahatab, marked a turning point in the struggle of the people of Talcher. The agreement, which Gandhiji himself expressed satisfaction with, outlined a series of demands and reforms that the king was required to accept.

The Hessene-Mahatab Accord not only brought an end to the atrocities and oppressive measures in Talcher but also paved the way for peace and reconciliation. As a result of the agreement, those who had fled Talcher in fear were able to return home, heralding a new era of hope and dignity for the people of the region.

Gangapur's Prajamandal Movement

The Prajamandal movement in Gangapur unfolded in a climate of fear and oppression, marked by the ruthless actions of the royal administration. The situation grew more dire following the death of the king, as the queen assumed control over the administration.

In Gangapur, a significant portion of the 'Praja' consisted of the Munda tribe, led by the steadfast Nirmal Munda. When he attempted to protest against the unjust tax increases imposed by the queen's administration, his appeals fell on deaf ears.

Faced with the indifference of the authorities, Nirmal Munda took it upon himself to galvanize the people into resisting the oppressive taxes. He urged the populace to unite and refuse to pay these burdensome levies.

In response to Nirmal Munda's defiance, the queen, acting through Lt. Megar, the assistant political agent, ordered his arrest. However, the situation quickly escalated as tensions rose between the people and the authorities.

Tragically, a grave misunderstanding occurred during a conversation between the police and the public. Misinterpreting the language and gestures of the crowd, the British forces opened fire unprovoked, resulting in the deaths and injuries of many innocent civilians.

The brutal and indiscriminate violence unleashed by the British forces shocked and appalled the populace. The senseless loss of lives at the hands of those meant to uphold law and order incited widespread condemnation against the British authorities.

Despite the outcry and public outrage over these barbaric acts, the Queen of Gangapur remained unmoved and showed no mercy or empathy towards the suffering of her people. This tragic episode in the Gangapur Prajamandal movement stands as a stark reminder of

the brutal realities faced by those who dared to stand against oppressive rule.

At Ranpur, the Prajamandal Movement

The Ranpur Prajamandal movement stands as a poignant chapter reflecting the deep-seated discontent of the Odisha people, or 'Praja,' against their oppressive rulers. On December 27, 1939, the populace united in a powerful demand for an end to misrule, tyranny, and the establishment of a new era of just and benevolent administration.

In response to this groundswell of resistance, the king, fearful of the growing unrest, resorted to imprisoning the rebels. However, far from quelling the movement, this action only served to rally more support for their cause. The outcry for the release of the imprisoned rebels grew louder, striking fear into the heart of the king.

Seeking refuge and protection, the king sought shelter under the political agent Major Bezelgate, hoping for safety within his presence. However, tensions reached a boiling point on January 5, 1939, when a massive crowd gathered in front of the palace, demanding justice and reform.

As Bezelgate, accompanied by the police, made his way towards the palace amidst the throngs of people, he attempted to urge the crowd to disperse and clear the path. Despite his warnings, the populace remained steadfast, refusing to back down.

In a tragic turn of events, Bezelgate, feeling threatened and cornered, made the fateful decision to open fire, resulting in the death of one of the 'Prajas.' The violent act of the British official further incited the already charged crowd, unleashing a wave of fury and retaliation.

Amidst the chaos and violence that ensued, Bezelgate found himself mercilessly attacked and beaten by the enraged populace. Desperately seeking refuge, he attempted to hide beneath a bullock cart near the house of a 'praja,' but his efforts were in vain.

Raghunath Mohanty and Dibakar Parida, among others, confronted Bezelgate, dragging him out from his hiding place. They subjected him to a brutal and fatal beating, marking a tragic end to the life of the British official.

Following Bezelgate's death, the British police responded with a ruthless crackdown, aiming to quell the uprising and restore order. In the aftermath, 26 individuals were put on trial for their roles in the events.

Raghunath Mohanty paid the ultimate price, facing the gallows for his actions, while Dibakar Parida was deported to the remote Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The brutal suppression effectively brought an end to the Ranpur Prajamandal movement.

The memory of the martyrs Raghu and Dibakar, who sacrificed their lives for the cause of justice and liberation, remains etched in the collective consciousness of Odias. Their courage and sacrifice serve as a testament to the indomitable spirit of the people in their quest for freedom and dignity.

In Nayagarh, the Prajamandal Movement

In June 1938, the Prajamandala emerged in Nayagarh under the dynamic leadership of Narayan Nanda. The movement swiftly gained momentum as the people united behind a charter of demands presented to the ruling chief.

The demands encapsulated the fervent aspirations of the populace, calling for fundamental civil liberties, the abolition of oppressive feudal dues, and the inclusion of the people in a responsible and participatory government.

Determined to see their demands realized, the Prajamandals resolved to launch a peaceful agitation, steadfast in their commitment to continue until justice prevailed.

However, the ruling chief, apprehensive of the growing dissent, moved to suppress the movement by arresting its leaders. Undeterred, the people of Nayagarh rallied together on December 30, 1938, converging in front of the palace gates to demand the release of their imprisoned leaders.

Faced with the resolute determination of the gathered masses, the chief had no choice but to accede to their demands. The leaders were freed, and the chief, recognizing the strength of the people's unity, pledged to honor their demands for reform.

Yet, sensing the shifting tides of dissent, the chief sought assistance from Major Bazelgette, the Political Agent. Bazelgette, recognizing the gravity of the situation, arrived to lend his support to the beleaguered chief.

However, the unrest in Nayagarh persisted, and the chief, feeling increasingly besieged, made the decision to flee to Ranapur, where the situation was perceived to be less volatile.

The events in Nayagarh serve as a poignant reminder of the power of collective action and the unwavering resolve of the people in their pursuit of justice and freedom from oppressive rule.

Bonai Prajamandal Movement

In 1938, the Prajamandal movement took root in Bonaigarh, marking a significant turning point in the region's history. Fueled by the grievances against oppressive taxes like Bethi and other unjust levies, the 'praja' united under the banner of Prajamandal.

Presenting their demands to the ruling king, the 'praja' passionately advocated for the abolition of Bethi and similar burdensome taxes. Responding to their pleas, the king, after careful consideration, took the step of withdrawing the dreaded Bethi tax.

However, in a move to finance the construction of much-needed infrastructure such as roads and government buildings, the king imposed smaller taxes on the populace. This decision did not sit well with the 'praja,' who viewed it as another form of unjust imposition on their already burdened lives.

In a display of unity and defiance, the 'praja' gathered for a crucial meeting, where they collectively resolved to disobey the king's new tax orders. This bold act of civil disobedience was a testament to their unwavering determination to stand against unjust practices and assert their rights and dignity.

Sonepur Prajamandal Movement

In December 1938, the Sonepur State Prajamandal was established with Bhimsen Bhoi serving as its president. Their demands echoed those of other states, focusing on the abolishment of feudal dues, the establishment of a responsible government, and the enactment of agrarian reforms.

During the presentation of their demands, the State Government reacted by arresting two leaders, Loknath Satpathy and Mohan Mishra. In response, Bhimsen Bhoi and several others were also arrested while staging a Satyagraha to demand the release of these leaders.

The Prajamandal faced further challenges as it was prohibited, and Dolamani Das was expelled from the state with his property confiscated. In another incident, leaders like Sri Mohan Mishra, Laxman Satpathy, and Pitambar Bhoi attempted to meet with the visiting Resident in March 1939 but were apprehended en route.

These arrests sparked widespread demonstrations against the State Government's actions. Many individuals were detained, leading to trials where sentences of imprisonment and fines were imposed.

During World War II, the activities of the Prajamandal significantly slowed down. However, notable figures such as Rama Chandra Satpathy, Laxman Satpathy, Mohan Mishra, Chaturbhuja Mishra, Satyananda Hota, Dhanabanta Mallik, Nandalal Sethi, Damodar Rath, and Dasrathi Rath were detained for more than two years during the Quit India Movement.

A remarkable aspect of this period was the involvement of students in the Prajamandal's activities. Notably, Narasingha Prasad Nanda from Ravenshaw College, along with students from Sonepur High School such as Duryodhan Satpathy, Suresh Mishra, and Satyanarayan Mishra, formed a Students' Congress. Under the presidency of Sri Laxman Satpathy, they convened a meeting which brought together a significant number of participants, marking a significant moment in the Prajamandal movement.

Mayurbhanj's Prajamandal Movement

The Mayurbhanj Prajamandal was established in 1940 with Sarat Chandra Das serving as its president. In an attempt to undermine the Prajamandal's credibility among the people, the king created a parallel government organization called the Prajamangal and started providing assistance to the populace.

Despite these efforts, the Prajamandal continued its movement in a peaceful and non-violent manner. On 16 September 1947, it presented a charter of demands to Maharaja Pratap Chandra Bhanjadeo. The charter emphasized the need for administrative reforms to benefit the people.

Under pressure from the Prajamandal, the king was compelled to form a three-man cabinet, with Sarat Chandra Das as one of its members. This marked a significant shift towards a constitutional monarchy, where the king's role was to ensure the welfare of the people.

Although it came later than desired, the Mayurbhanj Prajamandal achieved considerable success in its endeavors, paving the way for positive changes in the region.

Other locations

The Prajamandal movement left its mark on various parts of Odisha, including the cities of Khandapara, Patna, and Kalahandi. In these areas, the populace had grown increasingly aware of their rights and took active steps to voice their concerns through the Prajamandal.

With the support of numerous Congress leaders, the 'prajas' were able to articulate their grievances and present their demands to their respective kings. This collective effort significantly contributed to the success of the Prajamandal movement across Odisha, showcasing the unity and determination of the people to achieve better governance and social justice.

The Prajamandal movement's consequences

The Prajamandal movement in Odisha had far-reaching consequences.

1. It was successful in putting the people's demands forward in a very forceful manner. The assassination of Bezelgate made this fact abundantly clear. As a result, kings developed a measure of tolerance for the populace.
2. In 1939, the Odisha government established a State Enquiry Committee to ascertain the motivations for the movement. It was obvious that the movement was sparked by the kings' excessive oppression.
3. The people recognised that nonviolence was their most effective weapon and were adamant that their demands could be met only through it. Finally, the Prajamandal movement accelerated the process of fusion of the 'garajat,' or indigenous princely states.
4. The Prajamandal movement ushered in a new era in Odisha's history. After generations of tyranny at the hands of the kings, the people finally raised their voices against the institution of monarchy as a whole and were successful in achieving their goals to a large extent.
5. Congress, too, aided the populace in this democratic campaign. The Prajamandal movement effectively ended monarchy in Odisha.

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