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## Prajamandal And Political Awakening in Patna Garjat State

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### Abstract:

The *Prajamandal* movement in the princely state of Patna constituted an important chapter in the political awakening of the *Garjat* states of Odisha during the late colonial period. This article examines the historical background, socio-economic conditions, and political developments that led to the rise of popular resistance against princely autocracy in Patna State. Under British paramountcy, the *Garjat* states enjoyed considerable administrative autonomy, which often resulted in arbitrary governance, economic exploitation, excessive taxation, forced labour, and denial of civil rights. Although the nationalist movement initially had limited impact on the feudatory states, the spread of political consciousness during the 1930s gradually inspired the people of Patna to organise themselves against oppressive rule.

The study analyses the role of the Orissa States Peoples' Conference, the *Prajamandal* movement, and the *Krushak* organisations in mobilising peasants, workers, and educated youth for responsible government and democratic reforms. It also highlights the findings of the Orissa States Enquiry Committee, which exposed the exploitative administrative practices prevailing in the state. The article further examines the influence of the Indian national movement, the response of the princely rulers through repression and political manoeuvring, and the significance of the Eastern States Union in the final phase of princely politics.

The article argues that the *Prajamandal* movement in Patna State was not merely a regional protest against feudal oppression but an integral part of the wider democratic and nationalist struggle in India. The movement ultimately contributed to the political integration of the princely states with independent India and the establishment of democratic governance in Odisha following the merger of Patna State in 1948.

Keywords: *Prajamandal* Movement, Patna *Garjat* State, Political Awakening, Princely States, British Paramountcy, Orissa States Peoples' Conference, Integration of Princely States.

## Introduction:

Since the reign of Akbar, Orissa was administratively divided by his revenue minister, Raja Todar Mal, into two distinct regions to facilitate efficient revenue administration: (I) the *Mughalbandi*, comprising the fertile coastal plains, and (II) the *Garjats*, consisting of the hilly tracts governed by Oriya chiefs who paid fixed annual tributes to the Mughal emperor in return for recognition as imperial feudatories.<sup>1</sup> This administrative arrangement was subsequently retained by the Maratha Empire, and later, the East India Company, which largely preserved the existing structure without substantial modification. The system thus continued in the same form until 1947.<sup>2</sup> The territory of Odisha was brought under British control in 1803, following its occupation by the East India Company.<sup>3</sup> After the conquest of Orissa, the East India Company maintained the established administrative distinction between the *Mughalbandi* and *Garjat* regions. The *Mughalbandi* tract, comprising the principal coastal towns of Orissa, was brought under direct British administrative control. In contrast, the *Garjat* region<sup>4</sup>, governed by tributary chiefs, was regulated through treaties and agreements that transferred their allegiance to the British, who thereby replaced the Marathas as the paramount authority.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the East India Company established direct administrative control over the coastal districts of Balasore, Cuttack, and Puri, while simultaneously retaining a network of allied rulers among the *Garjat* states to serve as subordinate but cooperative political partners. John Malcolm aptly remarked,

“If we made all India into Zillas (British districts) it was not in the nature of things that our empire should last fifty years but then if we could keep a number of native States without political power but as loyal instruments we should exist in India as long as our naval supremacy was maintained.”<sup>6</sup>

The rulers of the feudatory states governed their territories in accordance with the provisions stipulated in the *sanads* periodically granted by the Paramount Power. The British generally adhered to a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of these states, although this principle was occasionally violated. Consequently, the chiefs enjoyed considerable autonomy in administering their territories according to their own discretion. As the British were primarily concerned with the receipt of tribute and remained satisfied with its regular payment, they generally refrained from intervening in the administrative affairs of the feudatory states.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, owing to their geographically inaccessible locations, these states continued to adhere to their own customs and traditions. As the British were unwilling to increase their administrative burden by interfering in the affairs of the feudatory states, the chiefs of these territories enjoyed almost complete freedom in conducting administration according to their own wishes. Consequently, autocratic rule prevailed in most of the feudatory states, resulting in widespread suffering and hardships for the people.<sup>8</sup>

The *Garjat* states of Odisha comprised a confederation of twenty-six subordinate polities, including Athamallik, Athagarh, Angul, Bamanda, Baramba, Baud, Bonai, Banki, Daspalla, Dhenkanal, Gangpur, Hindol, Kalahandi, Keonjhar, Khandapara, Mayurbhanja, Narasinghpur, Nayagarh, Nilagiri, Pal-Lahara, Patna, Rairakhol, Ranapur, Sonepur, Talcher, and Tigiria.<sup>9</sup> Among these twenty-six *Garjat* states of Odisha, seven were located in western Odisha and were collectively known as the Sambalpur group of states. Within this subgroup, Bamanda, Kalahandi, Patna, Rairakhol, and Sonepur were administratively attached to the Chhattisgarh Division of the Central Provinces, whereas Bonai and Gangpur were placed under the Chotanagpur Division until 1905.<sup>10</sup>

### **Historical Background of Patna Garjat:**

Patna State, also referred to as Patna Estate, was one of the leading princely states under the administration of the Eastern States Agency during the colonial era. Geographically, it was situated in the Mahanadi Valley of the Sambalpur region and covered parts of the present-day Balangir District in Odisha.<sup>11</sup> Patna State extended between 20°9' and 22°4' North latitude and 82°41' and 83°40' East longitude. Its northern boundary was marked by the Sambalpur District and Sonepur State, while to the east it was bordered by Sonepur State, Boudh State, and Kalahandi State. On the western side, the state shared its boundary with the Sambalpur District.<sup>12</sup> The State covered a total geographical area of approximately 2,399 square miles.<sup>13</sup> But, according to the 1931 Census, the territorial extent of Patna State was recorded as having increased to 2,511 square miles.<sup>14</sup> However, according to the 1941 Census, the area of Patna State was recorded at 2,530 square miles.<sup>15</sup> According to the 1931 Census, Patna State had a population of 566,943,<sup>16</sup> which increased to 632,220 as recorded in the 1941 Census.<sup>17</sup> Balangir served as the administrative headquarters of Patna State.

After the British defeated the Marathas in 1803, the region came under British influence through the Treaty of Deogaon. In 1806, it was temporarily restored to Raghuji Bhonsle,<sup>18</sup> but after the Third Anglo-Maratha War, it was finally brought under British control in 1818.<sup>19</sup>

In the nineteenth century, Patna passed through different administrative arrangements such as Chhotanagpur Division, Tributary Mahals, and later the Central Provinces. From 1867, the British issued *Sanads* to the *Garjat* rulers, including Patna, allowing internal administration in return for tribute and loyalty.<sup>20</sup>

During the reign of Surpratap Deo, internal disturbances and Kondh uprisings led to administrative instability, and the state remained under the Court of Wards from 1871 to 1893,<sup>21</sup> with the capital shifted to Balangir.<sup>22</sup> Later rulers such as Ramchandra Deo and Dalganjan Singh saw political changes, modernization efforts, and increased British control.<sup>23</sup>

Under Prithviraj Singh Deo, the state witnessed development in education and infrastructure, including schools, bridges, and palaces, though real authority remained limited under British supervision. After his death, Rajendra Narayan Singh Deo succeeded him and ruled under the Court of Wards until 1933, after

which he governed independently until the merger of Patna State into the Union of India on 1 January 1948.<sup>24</sup>

## Development of Prajamandal Movement and Political Awakening in Patna State:

Following the establishment of the Indian National Congress in 1885, a wave of resistance movements spread across India, primarily affecting British-administered regions, while also exerting some influence on the people of the feudatory states.<sup>25</sup>

During the mass movements of the Indian freedom struggle in 1921–22 and 1930–31, the people of the feudatory states showed limited response; however, political awakening among them gradually and steadily increased over time.<sup>26</sup> In 1931, the Orissa States Peoples Conference was convened at Cuttack under the guidance of Radhanath Rath, Balunkeswar Acharya, Radhusudan Patnaik, and Govind Chandra Mishra. The conference was presided over by Bhubanananda Das. However, the organisation soon lapsed into inactivity. It was held with the active cooperation of the All India States Peoples' Conference. Even though the conference later became inactive<sup>27</sup>, it helped foster a sense of confidence among the people of the states and laid the foundation for future resistance in the feudatory states.

The people of the states were already subjected to exploitation and bore the consequences of the rulers' mismanagement. The *Garjat* treasury had become bankrupt due to widespread corruption and financial mismanagement within the administrative system. The condition of the peasants was also precarious, as they lacked secure land rights despite long-term possession and cultivation. The taxation system was not based on sound economic principles, and people were heavily taxed without regard to their paying capacity. Meanwhile, the rulers of the states continued to enjoy the privy purse, which constituted a significant portion of the states' total revenue.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, the emergence of an organisation to mobilise resistance against the rulers' exploitation led to a natural and growing political awakening among the people of the states.

The Orissa States Peoples Conference was revitalised and held its second session on 23 June 1937 at Cuttack after a gap of nearly six years. The session was presided over by B. Pattabhi Sitaramayya. He stressed the importance of awakening the people of the Orissa states and urged them to join the national mainstream.<sup>29</sup>

The conference passed several resolutions intended to improve the condition of the people in the states. It also adopted a constitution declaring responsible government as its goal and allowing all bonafide residents above 18 years of age to become members. The most important resolution was the proposal to establish a State Enquiry Committee to examine the conditions of the people in the states.<sup>30</sup>

On 29 October 1938, an All-Orissa *Garjat* Day was observed across several states, wherein the policies of the rulers were strongly criticised and a demand was raised for the adoption of a People's Charter guaranteeing the rights and privileges of the people of the states. The rulers of the states resorted to repressive measures to suppress the movement. In contrast, the Congress ministry in the province attempted to support the leaders of the *Prajamandal* Movement and encouraged their peaceful resistance.<sup>31</sup>

The Orissa States Enquiry Committee was established in 1938 to investigate the conditions prevailing in the states. It was headed by Harekrushna Mahatab as Chairman, with Balwantraji Mehta and Lalmohan Pattnaik as members, while Sarangadhar Das served as its Secretary. The committee collected reports from around two thousand people between June 1938 and July 1939.<sup>32</sup>

After conducting a detailed enquiry, the committee highlighted the numerous hardships faced by the people of the states. It found that they were subjected to several illegal taxes and forced labour (*bethi*). They were also required to provide *rasad* (supplies) to the ruler and his entourage during official tours. Furthermore, the states generally did not grant tenancy rights over landed property, and the people were deprived of basic socio-political and civil rights within the states.

The committee recommended the termination of the *sanads* granted to the rulers and proposed that they be treated as *zamindars* of their respective estates. It further suggested that the provincial government should exercise supervision over the rulers' activities, that civil rights should be granted to the people, and that a permanent and impartial judiciary should be established to safeguard their rights.<sup>33</sup>

Instead of improving the condition of the people, the rulers of the states attempted to suppress the movement, which further deteriorated the situation, particularly in Dhenkanal and Talcher. This led to open confrontation between the people and *Prajamandal* leaders on one side and the rulers on the other. The situation in Rampur reached its peak when a political activist was killed. Ultimately, a compromise was reached, and reforms were introduced in states such as Dhenkanal, Hindol, and Athgarh by the rulers.<sup>34</sup>

The people of the state of Patna State had resisted the ruler's misrule as early as 1869. In protest against the mismanagement of the state, they refused to pay taxes. This compelled the British to intervene in the affairs of the state, resulting in the administration being taken over by them.<sup>35</sup>

Afterwards, for a considerable period, there was little or no resistance from the people against the ruler. During the Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience movements, the state largely remained peaceful, with minimal political agitation. No significant freedom movement emerged in the state until the formation of the Congress provincial government in 1937.<sup>36</sup>

However, over time, the impact of political developments and the freedom movement in other parts of Odisha gradually began to influence the situation in Patna State as well.

The committee appointed to investigate the conditions of the people of the princely states encountered several initial obstacles during the course of its inquiry. Access to the state was particularly difficult from any of the districts of Orissa. In addition, the committee was provided only with a copy of the Administration Report by the Darbar of Patna, which constituted a limited source of official information for its assessment.<sup>37</sup>

During the course of the committee's investigation, the local population became increasingly influenced by the prevailing spirit of the movement. This led to the organisation of public meetings where grievances were openly discussed. On 28 September 1939, approximately 2,000 people assembled at the palace to submit a petition addressing a range of their concerns. As the ruler was absent at the time, the gathering waited for two days and formally presented the petition upon his return. The ruler received their representation with patience and assured them that the matter would be duly considered.<sup>38</sup>

The petition submitted by the people to the ruler provides a significant insight into the condition of the state's populace under his administration. As described in the report,<sup>39</sup> it reflects the socio-political and economic circumstances prevailing among the people during that period.

Restrictions on the sale of agricultural produce during the agricultural season further aggravated the hardships faced by the people. The high rate of rent added to their difficulties, while the customary rights of cultivators over their own land were significantly curtailed. The transfer or sale of land required prior permission, along with the payment of a prescribed fee, making such transactions both cumbersome and restrictive.

Owing to the precarious economic condition of the peasantry, even minor arrears of rent often resulted in the auction of valuable lands, with little consideration for the welfare of the tenants or their families. Furthermore, even in cases where arrears were subsequently cleared, the affected individuals were still liable to pay heavy interest charges along with the costs incurred in the sale proceedings.

If a *Gauntia* (rent collector) failed to remit revenue on time, his movable property was first seized and, in severe cases, he was dispossessed of his cultivated land. This was a new practice introduced under the revised settlement, which significantly reduced the traditional rights of *Gauntias*.

Although forced labour had been officially abolished, *bethi* continued in practice, compelling villagers to repair roads and disrupting their agricultural work. The earlier system of *rasad* also persisted, though it had been transformed into a compulsory cess collected with land revenue.

Custom duties on essential goods such as salt, kerosene, and cloth raised their prices within the state compared to neighbouring areas. Additionally, the land revenue system functioned as a form of export duty on agricultural produce, placing a heavier burden on peasants.

The agriculturists were required to pay a tax for bringing their produce to market, even if the goods remained unsold. The state also imposed grazing fees on livestock. Access to forest resources was restricted, and cultivators were not permitted to obtain sufficient timber even for essential agricultural implements. In addition, villagers were prohibited from killing wild animals that damaged their crops.

There was also an emerging demand among the people for greater participation in the administration of the state. Overall, the condition of the populace was far from satisfactory, with several systemic deficiencies requiring reform and rectification.<sup>40</sup>

However, the Committee praised the ruler. It stated:<sup>41</sup>

“The personal virtues of the ruler are responsible for many nation-building works in the state, such as hospitals, leprosy asylums, cattle development, etc.”

But the Committee continued:<sup>42</sup>

“However one may be inclined to praise the ruler for his benevolent activities, the fact remains that there is always the attempt to increase the income of the state, no matter what happens to the peasantry. It is for this reason that the Committee is against the whole system as it is.”

During the Second World War, wartime restrictions led to the suppression of *Prajamandal* activities, as both the British Government and the princely rulers tightened control. Consequently, political expression within the states was considerably limited. After the war, however, the people once again sought to reassert themselves and revive their movements.

The movement of the people in the princely states for the establishment of a democratic government continued vigorously in 1947. The attempt of the rulers to perpetuate dynastic authority in their territories was strongly condemned by the Secretary of the States Sub-Committee, and the people were encouraged to initiate a firm struggle for their legitimate rights. It further urged them to strive for the establishment of a responsible government in the state.<sup>43</sup>

The first session of the Orissa and Central Provinces Regional Council of the All-India States' People Conference was held at Cuttack on 1 March 1947, with the participation of 50 duly elected delegates. These representatives were drawn from 15 affiliated organisations, including the *Prajamandals* of Mayurbhanj, Patna, Khairagarh, Nandgaon, Dhenkanal, Talcher, Sonapur, Nilgiri, and others. Several distinguished invitees were also present at the session. The delegates unanimously advocated the establishment of democratic governance in the princely states and expressed support for cooperation with the neighbouring provinces.<sup>44</sup>

Several delegates were chosen to represent the States of Orissa and the Central Provinces in the General Council of the All-India States' People Conference. Shri Yudhisthir Mishra of Patna was among those elected as a representative.

To conduct the agitation, represent the viewpoints of the people of the states in the Constituent Assembly, and guide the *Prajamandal* movement, a Working Committee was constituted. This committee included

Kapileswar Prasad Nanda as Vice-President and Dibakar Bohidar as a member, both of whom belonged to Patna.

The *Krusak* Party, which was leading the *Prajamandal* movement in the Patna state, sought permission from the Orissa and Central Provinces Regional Council to initiate civil disobedience for the protection of people's rights. It also complained to the Council regarding the violation of popular rights within the state.

The Council endorsed the resolutions adopted in various public meetings and forwarded by the *Krusak* Party. These resolutions demanded the declaration of a responsible government by 1 July 1947 and the formation of an interim government composed of popular representatives from 1 April 1947. The Council further urged the Darbar to accept these demands and cautioned it about the consequences of disregarding the popular will.<sup>45</sup>

To counter the rising popular agitation in the states, the rulers of the Eastern and Chhattisgarh states met at Puri in May 1947 to consider a draft constitution for the states and to plan the takeover of the offices of the Residents and Political Agents. In response, the Orissa and Chhattisgarh Regional Council, meeting at Cuttack in the same month, resolved to boycott the elections to the States' Council unless the rulers revised their policy of selecting candidates through nominated bodies. The people were likewise called upon to boycott the elections.<sup>46</sup>

The rulers, for their part, adopted several measures to consolidate their authority and expand their control. The state police force was strengthened through the recruitment of Gorkhas and Pakistanis. Additionally, a secret code system was introduced for confidential communication. The rulers also established *Praja Samities* composed of Sarbarakars, government officials, and individuals dependent on the royal administration. Furthermore, at the initiative of the rulers, aboriginal communities were mobilized to counteract the growing influence of the *Prajamandals*.<sup>47</sup>

Following the announcement of the Cabinet Mission Plan, the rulers of several princely states in Orissa and Chhattisgarh began to contemplate the formation of a political union. Consequently, they established the Eastern States Union, which came into operation on 1 August 1947. Patna State was also incorporated into this Union, and its ruler played an active role in its formation and functioning.

The Raja of Korea served as the head of the Union, which was administered through a Premier and a Secretary. A joint police organisation, headed by an Inspector General of Police, along with an appellate court for all member states, was also established. However, the Union lacked a legislative body and was financially supported by the constituent states. The police force, which included a considerable number of Pathans and Punjabi Muslims, was primarily intended to suppress the popular movements led by the *Prajamandals*.

The annual conference of the States *Krusak Sangh* convened at Bolangir on 29 and 30 October 1947, with the participation of *Prajamandal* representatives from different princely states. The delegates collectively criticised the repressive measures adopted by the rulers and opposed the celebration of Dussehra under such circumstances. They further condemned the Darbar Declaration of the Maharaja of Patna and expressed strong disapproval of the establishment of the Eastern States Union.<sup>48</sup>

With the establishment of a popular government in the province, the inhabitants of the feudatory states developed a strong desire for integration with the Province, believing that such a merger would enable them to enjoy rights and privileges comparable to those available to the people of British Orissa. Therefore, the merger of the princely states with the Province emerged as their principal political objective.

In the state of Nilgiri, the tribals, reportedly instigated by the ruler, rose in revolt against the non-tribal population. The situation soon became highly volatile, compelling the Provincial Government to intervene

and assume control of the administration. This development in the feudatory state of Nilgiri further accelerated the process of merger.

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel visited Odisha in December 1947 and convened a conference with the rulers of various princely states, persuading them to sign the Instrument of Accession. As a consequence, on 1 January 1948, all the feudatory states, with the exception of Mayurbhanj, were integrated into modern Odisha, bringing the popular movements in these states to a successful conclusion.<sup>49</sup>

## Conclusion:

The *Prajamandal* movement in Patna *Garjat* State marked a significant phase in the political awakening of the people of Odisha's princely states. It emerged as a strong response against autocratic rule, economic exploitation, forced labour, and the denial of civil and political rights under the princely administration. Inspired by the broader nationalist movement in India, the people of Patna State gradually organised themselves through the *Prajamandal* and *Krushak* movements, demanding responsible government and social justice.

Despite initial repression by the rulers, the movement gained momentum in the 1930s and 1940s and successfully mobilised peasants, workers, and educated youth. The findings of enquiry committees further exposed the hardships faced by the people, strengthening the demand for reform. Ultimately, the efforts of *Prajamandal* activists, along with the national integration policy led by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, resulted in the merger of Patna State with the Indian Union in 1948.

Thus, the *Prajamandal* movement not only ended feudal oppression in the *Garjat* states but also paved the way for democratic governance and the integration of these regions into modern Odisha and independent India.

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