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## PEASANT UPRISING IN THE PRINCELY STATE OF NILGIR IN EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

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**Abstract:** Nilgir, a ‘B’ class princely state in the close proximity of Balasore district witnessed the peasant movement in 1928 when the autocratic rule of the Raja reached at the zenith of highest water mark. The enhancement of the rents on lands coupled with the imposition of other taxes like fuel cess, religious tax, Bethi, Begari, Rasad and Magana, taxes from beating of drums resented the people. The collection was so vigorous that they were forced to start a movement. Marriage tax of the daughter of the Raja with the prince of Ranapur was the immediate cause, where peasants were determined not to pay other no circumstances and started their movement under the leadership Harekrushna Mahatab and Kailash Chandra Mohanty. The movement was ruthlessly suppressed. But the intervention of C.F.Andrew, the Christian Missionary and J.E.Scott, the Political Agent, the situation was somehow saved. Though it was a mere patch work, it paved the way to start agitation under the spell of Prajamandal.

**Keywords:** Peasant, Enhancement, Paved, Proximity, Suppress.

### Introduction

The non-co-operation movement of the congress of 1920-21 increased the potentialities of the people and Gandhi’s leadership had created a sense of confidence in the minds of Indians. The congress under his leadership had already adopted the War Path, and this had some repatriation on the people leaving under the administration of Indians princes. The people of princely states who had been tolerating their rulers most of whom were often tyrants and oppressive, gradually, under the influence of the political situation in the British Orissa came forward to protest against the outdated feudal exactions and present their demands before their leaders in an organized manner. This was the case in many states all over India. In Orissa, the people of Kanika had been agitating against their ruler since 1921 and Kanika agitation became an all-India event. Such situation even failed to awaken Raja Kishore Chandra to his sense. He followed the traditional policy of defying feudal dues on people. The first reaction of the people of Nilgiri came in 1928 when people demanded abolition of many feudal dues.<sup>1</sup>

Like the other previous uprising, the unrest of 1928 through launched in a novel way, was a spontaneous outburst of the people against feudal exaction coupled with agrarian distress. The courage and heroism with which **ryots** raised their voice of protest when political consciousness was at the rudimentary stage in the state testifies to the reality and enormity of their grievances. The state was in close proximity to Balasore directly British administered the district where congress organisation was very active; people were naturally associated with the congress activities there. The oppression of people, enhancement of rents and imposition of various **abwabs** prepared the ground for revolt. The last settlement operations in the state which was completed in 1922 caused great irritation to the ryots, without introducing any change either in the states or in the privileges of the ryots.<sup>2</sup> It raised the rate of rent on each category of cultivable land to a considerable extent. The existing rates were already high. Only a few years before the commencement of the settlement in 1917 the political Agent of Orissa feudatory stated had observed in his letter to Government “..... The rents for cultivated lands here are higher than in most states ..... There is no likely to be much room for any considerable enhancement.<sup>3</sup> Yet the new rates revealed an increase of more than 29 percent for the Royoti holdings and 35 percent in case of Thakur Mahala. Among with the enhancement of the rates of rent on land there was also increase in the **Parbani kar** or the religious cess and the **Katha kar** or the fuel cess, which was much heavier. Every holder of land was required to pay these cesses at the increased rates.<sup>4</sup> These additional burdens were bitterly resented by the **ryots** as well as the Lakhrajdars, particularly during the late 1920’s. The years following World War-I were a period of great hardship for the poor peasants who suffered greatly as a consequence of the effects of the war. While the people were groaning under scarcity and rising costs of living, policies and practices of the Raja only added to their meseries. Raja Krushna Chandra’s fondness for luxury marry-making and other earlier virtues of life manifested in the form of **kheda**, **shikar**, theater and band party etc. **Kheda**, **shikar** were sports for the Raja but to the ryots they brought suffering and pain. Kheda was a special operation of catching wild elephants, particularly during the winter which was the harvesting season. Doves of elephants used to come from the forest in search of grazing at that time. Their favourite food was the standing ripe paddy crops. The people did not have the right to kill elephants even if they ravaged their crops.<sup>5</sup> The Raja on the other hand utilized this opportunity for catching these animals by organizing kheda. One such **kheda** operation was organized in the year 1927-28 when hundreds of people were forced under pain of severe punishment to accompany the Raja’s party into the jungles in connection with the Kheda.<sup>6</sup>



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They had to do different duties like beating drums to chase the elephants into the trap, carrying provisions and water to the jungles camp which was laid at great height to enable the Raja and his party to have a perfect view of the operation. People had to work on Bethi that is without wages during kheda operation. They had to brave the cold weather in the dense forests under the open sky, in hospitable terrain at the cost of their own comfort and life for weeks together for no benefit of them. Some people lost their lives being trampled by elephants and many were seriously wounded.<sup>7</sup> The most pathetic part of the people had to work on **Bethi** at a time when their ripe paddy crop was left standing in the field and could not be collected in due time.<sup>8</sup> This was the last thing that a cultivator could tolerate. No wonder, they defied the authority of Raja after this defame of **Kheda** operation.

Like kheda, Shikar was deeply rented as it caused no less suffering to the people. Raja, Krushna Chandra had a hobby of organizing frequent **Sikar** parties. As in the Kheda, the people were compelled to render **Bethi** or forced labour wherever shikar was organised,<sup>9</sup> This not only caused inconvenience to the ryots but also seriously hampered their harvest work.

The greatest single irritant that incited the fire of discontent in 1928 was Magana. This invidious feudal exaction had also been the root cause of uprising. In 1904, there was an uprising mainly to the imposition of Magan by the then ruler Shyama Chandra Harichandan, on the occasion of his marriage. The state was then saved from an impending catastrophe by the timely intervention of the superintendent, K. G. Gupta. In the year 1928, **Magan** became so excessive and arbitrary that the endurance of the people was exhausted and they decided to act.<sup>10</sup>

On 6<sup>th</sup> February 1928, the people of the state were motivated by the leaders like Kailash Chandra Mohanty of Iswarpur the strong supported H.K.Mohatab and Hadibandhu Raj to agitate against the new assessment of the new marriage tax. On the eve of the marriage of "**Jama**" (daughter of the Raja) Basanta Manjari with the Prince of Ranpur a newly marriage tax was imposed at the rate of fifty percent of the land revenue, with the strong warning that anyone objecting to it would be forced to pay at the rate of one hundred percent of his rent of land. **Magan** was usually paid along with land revenue and often in instalments, but it was categorically declared in 1928 that it had to be paid in full before the payment of rent and no arrears would be tolerated. While collecting it, the Raja's official let loose a reign of terror. **Magan** was exacted with an exemplary strictness and excessive oppression. Along with the **Magan**, **Puncha** and **Rasad** were literally plundered from the people. The collection of Magan, Rasad fell into the hands of the state.

The collection was so vigorous that in many cases the people lost their domestic pets (milched cow goat, buffalows) to entertain the royal guests in that auspicious marriage.<sup>11</sup> Throughout the state there was suffering and discontent. Though the king considered himself as the champion of Hindu religion, but used to interfere in the social matters, yet in spite of all caste differences the **Brahmins** and **Karanas** were ordered to butch the goats with the Pans for the wedding kitchen.<sup>108</sup> Even the high caste oriyas were compelled to carry **sabaries** of the bride and bridegroom with the lower caste.<sup>12</sup>

Wedding ceremony was conducted with much pump and grandeur at the expenses of the public money. But these festive days were prelude to an uprising by the people against the Raja. For the First time Kailash Chandra Mohanty asked the Raja to cut down the **Magan** and peasants of village Khair put forth the grievances on the behalf of his villagers against **Magan** and **Rasad**. But it was turned down the Dewan Hare Krushna Das.<sup>13</sup>

At this juncture British India was witnessing a unique phase in her struggle for freedom from British rule. Mahatma Gandhi's strategy of **Satyagrah** and non-cooperation as technique of struggle infused confidence in the common people including peasants. They felt courageous enough to defy the authority to achieve their goal. As the state of Nilgiri was close to the British district of Balasore, some inhabitants were influenced by Gandhian ideas and national consciousness crept with the state. Some of them had associated themselves with the congress activities and joined non-cooperation movement. Karuna Prasad Dey of Athakunta was influenced by his brother Golakanath Da who was practicing law at Balasore. Kailash Chandra Mohanty took the leadership of the movement and under his leadership the agitation in 1928 assumed a new dimension.<sup>14</sup>

The agitation spread to different parts of the state. The ruler became vindictive and tried to suppress the movement. Handi Bandhu Raj of Ayodhya took leadership of the uprising. Raja surrounded the village Ayodhya and he managed to escape and took shelter the congress office located at Balasore. Kailash Chandra Mahanty's 54 acres of land was auctioned at a throw with the help of elephants and bethi labourers.<sup>15</sup> The people's resentment against the Raja's oppress and explanation took the shape of non-violent movement. They refused to pay the new impositions and started leaving the state in large number. There was an exodus of the people as symbol of protest, left the state for Balasore town and which in a few were more than a thousand people camped at Balasore railway station for nearly about two months. The agitators were assisted by the leaders like Hare Krushna Mahtab, Priynath Sarkar, Gaura Chandra Sarkar and others. They approached Hare Karushna Mahtab, the most prominent Congress leader of the Balasore



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district. He collected facts from the headquarters about the Raja's oppressive activities and published an anonymous brochure, entitled "Nilgiri Atyachara" printed at Prajatantra Press and circulated widely,<sup>16</sup> which acted as a vehicle of revolutionary ideas within the state.<sup>17</sup> Some thousands of ryots of Nilgiri were guided by the advice of Mahtab and deserted their residences and came away to Balasore town with stories of relentless cruelty and oppression prepared on them.<sup>18</sup> Handi Bandhu Raj, the leader of the peasants open a office at Sahadevkhunta ( Balasore) in a rented house and became the centre of revolutionary activities.<sup>19</sup> The tenants camped at Cristian Pada (Balasore) for month together with endless patience. They were firm that they would not return home until and unless their grievances were not remedied. The congress workers of Balasore came to the rescue of these refugees by distributing rice.<sup>20</sup>

The congress leaders dispatched letter and telegram to the press and to the leaders of the national stature narrating the atrocities and tyranny of the Raja of Nilgiri. The event drew the attention of J.E.Scott, the political agent and the Collector of Balasore. J.E.Scott came to Balasore and convened meeting to reach a solution. Meanwhile Mahtab wired to Rev. C.F. Andrews, the Christian Missionary and philanthropist to intervene in order to bring about a solution. C.F. Andrews came to Balasore in February 1928 and attended the meeting. Besides Andrews, J.E.Scott and Collector of Balasore, the meeting was attended by Utkalmani Gopabandhu Das, the president of Orissa Pradesh Congress Committee, Harekrushna Mahtab, congress leader of Orissa and the Raja of Nilgiri.<sup>21</sup> Andrews was shocked to know about the Raja's misrule and he was moved by the people's patience and peaceful protest. In his book "India and Simon Commission" C.F.Andrews has given the following description of the sufferings of the people of Nilgiri. "Shortly after the departure of Mahatma Gandhi from Orissa for the madras Congress about a thousand residents of neighbouring Garjats ran away to Balasore with the stories of relentless cruelty and oppression perpetrated on them. Their allegation was that the Raja was squandering away everything in luxury, that there were no accounts maintained of the rents realised, that people's suffering had exceeded all limits and many of them had left the state in search of justice. They were waiting at the Balasore for months together with endless patience which could be compared with the patience of John in the Bible."<sup>22</sup>

Andrew's sympathetic visit gave the tenants relief and solace. They got a chance to ventilate their grievance before him against the Raja.<sup>23</sup> The allegation against the Raja were as follows:  
That the Raja was not maintaining any revenue record of the state.  
It helped him to squander away money for his personal luxury.  
People were devoid of justice.

The system of taxation became so burdensome that most of the people preferred to stay outside than to live in their own native place where all sorts of justice were denied.

The rest of the people of Nilgiri who did not think it proper to leave their homeland had tried in all possible ways to mark their protest against the royal absolutism. To safeguard their interest, a petition filed by Sri Sarat Chandra Mohanty against the ruler of political Agent, Cuttack, conveying their grievances against **Bethi, Bethi Begari, Rasad, Hathikheda, sikar, magan** and oppression of the state employees.<sup>121</sup> As a result of the intervention of C.F.Andrews that settlement was negotiated in a meeting attended by the political Agent, Dewan of the state, Collector of Balasore, Harekrushna Samanta, Hadibandhu Raj and Bhagaban Mohapatra.

At the same time the appeal of the tenants was decided at the court of the political Agents at Cuttack on 23 September 1928, J.E. Scott directed the chief to assess the total produce of Jagir land. After deducting the expenditure for cultivation, the production should be distributed in between the tenants and the king at a ratio of 2:1. The tenants were instructed by the verdict that one third demand of the produce should be paid to the king by **Bethi** at the rate of two anna wages per days.<sup>24</sup>

Through the tenants resented imposition of **Magan**, yet the political Agent was convinced by the instructions of Garjat commissioners of 1878, where it was mentioned that Magan should be collected from the people at the time of death or marriage of king's family members. Hence two anna instead of eight anna per rupee **Magan**, was directed to be collected by the chief.

A settlement was finally arrived at through the arbitration of Andrews and the intervention of the political Agent. The people then withdraw the agitation and returned home. The Raja agreed to pay proper remuneration for services obtained from the people, to withdraw the marriage Magan to restrict the number of **shikar** parties and to arrange them so as not to interface. With the harvest and to cause minimum inconvenience to the ryots to suspend **Kheda** for five years to pay compensation to those who had been wounded during Kheda and Shikar.



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The political Agent advised the Raja not to persist without dated the **sunia** and **Abhisek bheti, Sabarkari** fees and other salamis from the people, the Raja was required to look into and report to the political Agent on the alleged oppression of the people by his officers.<sup>25</sup>

The arbitration of Andrew saved a major crisis, but the solution that was affected in 1928 was simply a patch work. It not only treated a new symptom while the root of all problems, that was, the archaic system, continued unaffected, several long standing grievances of the people still remained unresolved for which they had to take resort to methods of agitation under the aggies of the Prajamandal in future.<sup>26</sup>

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