

Historical Perspectives on the Boudh Prajamandal: A Struggle for People's Rights and Self-Governance

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Abstract:

The princely state of Boudh, located in central Odisha, was one of the *Garjat* states under British suzerainty, governed by hereditary rulers within the framework of colonial oversight. During the early twentieth century, the state experienced significant social and administrative tensions resulting from arbitrary increases in land revenue, forced labor practices, and maladministration by state officials. This study examines the emergence, development, and suppression of the Boudh *Prajamandal*, a popular movement aimed at challenging the autocratic rule of the Raja and advocating constitutional reforms, protection of peasant rights, and administrative accountability. Drawing exclusively on secondary sources, the research traces the historical background of the state, the socio-political conditions that precipitated the movement, the role of leadership and organizational strategies, and the impact of state repression on popular mobilization.

While the *Prajamandal* failed to achieve immediate political reforms due to harsh suppression, it reveals the growing political consciousness, unity, and aspirations for self-governance among the people. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of resistance movements in princely states, highlighting the interplay between colonial authority, feudal structures, and emergent democratic consciousness, and situates the Boudh *Prajamandal* within the broader historiography of Odisha's popular struggles for rights and reforms.

Keywords: *Garjat* States, *Mughalbandi*, *Prajamandal* Movement, Boudh, Peasant Uprising, Raja Narayan Deb.

Introduction:

Since Akbar's time, Orissa has been divided into two distinct regions by his revenue minister, Raja Todar Mall, for efficient revenue administration: (i) the '*Mughalbandi*', which includes the plain and fertile lands in the coastal region, and (ii) the '*Garjats*,' which includes the hilly region under the Oriya Chiefs who used to pay fixed annual tributes to the emperor in exchange for recognition as Imperial Mughal Feudatories.¹ This arrangement was maintained by the Marathas, and the East India Company, who succeeded them, made no changes to it and continued with the same administrative status till 1947.² Odisha was taken over by the British in 1803.³ After conquering Orissa, the Company continued its traditional policy of separating the *Mughalbandi* areas from the *Garjats*. The *Mughalbandi* region, which included the main coastal towns of Orissa, was placed under the direct control of the British administration. In contrast, the *Garjats*,⁴ ruled by Tributary Chiefs, were bound by treaties and agreements that made the

British their supreme authority in place of the Marathas.⁵ Thus, while the East India Company assumed direct rule over the coastal districts of Balasore, Cuttack, and Puri, it chose to maintain a loyal group of allies among the rulers of the Garjat states. 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.”⁶

The Feudatory States of Orissa consisted of a group of twenty-six dependent territories and comprised: “Athmallik, Athgarh, Angul, Bamara, Baramba Baud, Bonai, Banki, Daspalla, Dhenkanal, Gangpur, Hindol, Kalahandi, Keonjhar, Khandapara, Mayurbhanj, Narsinghpur, Nayagarh, Nilgiri, Pal-Lahara, Patna, Rairakhhol, Ranpur, Sonapur, Talcher and Tigiria”.⁷

In 1936, the British administration organised the Eastern States Agency to improve administrative efficiency and political supervision. It was divided into three separate units known as the Bengal States Agency, the Orissa States Agency and the Chhattisgarh States Agency, all placed under the authority of a single Resident. As a result of this arrangement, the Orissa States Agency came to represent only twenty-three of the original twenty-six princely states. Mayurbhanj was transferred to the Bengal States Agency, while Kalahandi and Patna were brought under the jurisdiction of the Chhattisgarh States Agency.⁸

In 1937, revised *Sanads* were issued to redefine the status of the princely states with the objective of removing inequalities that had arisen from their grouping and regrouping under different administrative units. The states were divided into three classes, A, B and C, based on their status, size and source of income, and a uniform status was accorded to all states within the same class. Class A included eleven states, Mayurbhanj, Saraikella, Patna, Kalahandi, Keonjhar, Gangpur, Dhenkanal, Sonapur, Bamara, Nayagarh and Baud. Class B comprised twelve states, Athgarh, Athmallik, Khandapara, Kharswan, Narsinghpur, Baramba, Bonai, Daspalla, Hindol, Nilgiri, Rairakhhol and Talcher. Class C consisted of three states, Pal-Lahara, Ranpur and Tigiria. This arrangement continued until 1947, when British rule in India came to an end.⁹

The rulers of these above mention *Garjat* states had accepted the suzerainty of the British authority. To put a check on the activity of these feudatory states, a political agent was appointed at Sambalpur by the British officials. It was the period of the freedom struggle led by the Indian National Congress. At the same time, “*Prajamandal* Movement” was continued in the above *Garjat* States. Being fed up of the tyrannical rule of their kings, the subject or “*Prajas*” of those 26 feudatory states started the “*Prajamandal* Movement”.¹⁰

Prajamandal Movement in Boudh:

Historical background:

The district of Boudh is situated in the middle of Odisha's terrain. It is located between 83° 35' and 84° 48' East and 20° 13' and 20° 53' North Latitude. Its administrative headquarters are at Boudh town. The districts of Bolangir, Angul, Phulbani, and Nayagarh, among others, enclose Boudh on all four sides. Its borders are from Phulbani district in the south to Sonapur and Angul district in the north, to Bolangir and Sonapur district in the west, and to Nayagarh district in the east.¹¹ As recorded in the 1931 census, the population of Boudh district stood at 135,248.¹² The district had an annual income of ₹3,30,991, of which ₹800 was paid as tribute to the British Government. The total area of the district was 1,264 square miles.¹³

The British conquest of Boudh occurred through the rule of Raja Chandra Sekher Deb, who visited Sambalpur to submit to British authority and entered into a treaty regarding his tribute.¹⁴ His son, Raja Pitambar Deb, ascended the throne after him, under whose rule the British formally recognized his title of “*Raja*” and granted him a Sanad in 1875. Raja Pitambar Deb allied with the British government to put an end to human sacrifices and suppress revolts in *Ghumusar* and *Khondmals*.¹⁵ When he died, his son Jogendra Deb assumed the throne. In the year 1894, under the reign of Raja Jogendra Deb, a Sanad was issued to him, and his annual tribute was permanently fixed at ₹800. He ruled until March 1913, leaving the state in a stable financial condition.¹⁶ His son, Narayan Deb, being a minor at the time, led to the state coming under British administration from 1913 to 1925. Narayan Deb was formally installed on the *Gadi* on 31st March 1935 and it was during his reign that the Prajamandal movement took place in Boudh. During his reign, Boudh was merged with the province of Orissa on 1 January 1948, and Narayan Deb passed away in 1956.¹⁷

Peasant Uprising:

Narayan Deb succeeded his father, Jogendra Deb, and became ruler, he had to accept several circumstances concerning the appointment of his Dewan and the management of the forest, education, and public works departments. He was also required to submit a duplicate of the annual inexpensive to the political agent and the Official. These constraints greatly limited his authority, effectively bringing the state under the considerable control of the political agent¹⁸

In 1930, a new Settlement in Baud led to a sharp and arbitrary rise in land rents, which were increased by 100 to 400 percent in different parts of the state. About two thousand people tried to approach the Raja to express their grievances, but the officials stopped them from meeting him.¹⁹ Later, twenty-seven Kondhs went to Sambalpur to seek help from the Political Agent. When they returned, they were severely beaten, fined, and imprisoned.²⁰ This incident showed the complete lack of harmony between the rulers and the people. The subjects were not allowed to meet their ruler, and even submitting a petition of grievances was treated as an act of rebellion. There was no cordial relationship between the government and the governed. Although the various uprisings in the princely states during the early decades of the twentieth century were quickly suppressed through harsh measures, they were not without significance. The people of the *Garjats* learned from these failed and unorganized revolts that their oppressive rulers could maintain their power only with the support of the British Paramount Power, and that their movements failed mainly because they lacked unity and capable leadership.

Since the Khond uprising was suppressed, the former State of Boudh had experienced almost no political unrest up until 1930.²¹ In 1930-31, the situation in the State of Baud was frequently reported in the Oriya newspapers, particularly in *Deshakatha*, which drew attention to its autocratic rule and the steep land rents introduced during the 1930 Settlement.²² Around that time, a secret organization was formed to launch a movement in Boudh against the Raja’s unfair rule, the misconduct of his administrators, the increase in land revenue after the 1930 Settlement, and the imposition of compulsory employment.²³ The associates of this secret organization included Rai Sibakumar Deo, a close relative of Raja, Prahallad Bisi, a teacher at the High English School; Prema Sankar Patnaik, a Congress activist and social worker; Krupasindhu Meher, Muhammad Azim Khan, Chakradhar Misra, Basa Karana, Gaurisankar Rajguru, Sashisekhar Misra, Chintamani Tripathy, and several others.²⁴ They circulated reports exposing the Raja’s unfair administration and misconduct of his bureaucrats. They also voiced strong criticism against the steep increase in property income and continuation of compulsory labour practices.²⁵ When Raja learned about

development of this undisclosed organization, he took strict actions to crush the movement and overpower the campaigners.²⁶ Rai Deo was put further down house custody, and all his properties were seized. “Prahallad Bisi, Premasankar Patnaik, Chintamani Tripathy, and Balaram Misra” were subjected to severe beatings and public humiliation. Fabricated cases were lodged against them, resulting in the imprisonment of Premasankar Patnaik, Chintamani Tripathy, and Sashisekhar Misra. The authorities also seized and sold both the portable and fixed assets owned by Azim Khan and Rai Sibakumar Deo.²⁷ The repression carried out by the administration was harsh, systematic, and far-reaching. Due to the repressive measures taken by the Raja, the association was unable to continue its activities. This event signified the conclusion of an initial effort to initiate a widespread movement in Boudh against the Raja’s maladministration. After the destruction of organization, the state remained politically inactive for a considerable period. Even in 1938, when the *Prajamandal* movement spread across several princely states of Orissa such as Nilgiri, Dhenkanal, Talcher, and Ranapur, no similar movement emerged in former state of Boudh.²⁸

***Prajamandal* Movement:**

The Boudh *Prajamandal* was established in the year 1945 with Damodar Danduasi as its president. Its main aim was to unite the people against the Raja’s misrule and to press for constitutional reforms.²⁹ Sarangadhar Das was guiding spirit of the *Prajamandal*. A succession of minor yet continuous unrests arose in the national, prompting Raja to enforce harsh events to curb the programme. When Das, the *Prajamandal*, was requested to speak at a *Prajamandal* meeting in Boudh, the state police attacked the gathering with lathis, dispersing the crowd and injuring many.³⁰ The Raja subsequently arrested the Prominent leaders of the movement and imprisoned them. As a result, the organised popular movement in Boudh once again went into dormancy. However, the people’s spirit of protest, once awakened, could not be entirely suppressed. There were irregular agitations in contradiction of the *Forest Laws*, forced labor for elephant-catching, and similar grievances.³¹ Under the leadership of the late Dambarudhar Meher from Banapalli village in Boudh, some individuals felled trees in the reserved forests, leading to their arrest and the filing of cases against them.³² Students of the state also protested against increased school fees and certain hostel-related grievances, resulting in six students being rusticated by the administration. With no further student organization to sustain the movement, their agitation came to an end.³³ Overall, no popular movement could withstand the strict repressive measures imposed by the Raja. Despite their efforts, these movements brought little political change for the people and did not leave a lasting mark on the Raja or his governance.³⁴

Conclusion:

The Boudh *Prajamandal* exemplifies the persistent struggle of the people of Boudh against autocratic rule and oppressive policies of the princely state. Despite repeated efforts, including the formation of secret organizations and later the formal *Prajamandal* in 1945, the movement faced severe repression, leaving little immediate impact on the Raja’s administration. Nevertheless, these efforts reflected the rising political consciousness, unity, and aspiration for self-governance among the populace. The movement, though largely suppressed, constitutes an important chapter in the broader history of people’s struggles for rights and democratic reforms in Odisha.

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