

Harekrushna Mahtab and the Integration of the Princely States with Odisha, 1947–1949: Leadership and the Making of Greater Odisha

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Abstract

The emergence of Odisha as a modern and united province was far from being completed with its separation from Bihar on 1 April 1936. For more than ten years after this event, as many as twenty-six Garjat, or feudatory, states were still being ruled by their hereditary chiefs at will, without coming under the administration of British Odisha. This paper discusses the role played by Dr. Harekrushna Mahtab in bringing about the unification of the states with the rest of Odisha in 1947–1949, from the Orissa States Enquiry Committee's investigation in the early 1930s, to his diplomatic failures in 1946, up to his important role at the Cuttack conference in December 1947 alongside Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and V. P. Menon. This paper relies upon secondary scholarship in the field, newspaper accounts of events, as well as Mahtab's own official biography written by the Odisha Government. There are several points of direct contact of this paper with dated archival letters – all referred to at second-hand, via one archivally grounded secondary source only, and the evidential base is detailed in the Method note and in the Data Availability section below. This paper argues that the contribution of Mahtab consisted of a decade-long involvement with the issue of the states, and that it made it possible for him to leverage the authority of the central government in shaping the settlement known as "Greater Odisha". The paper also comments that the merger process, which was completed just thirteen months after independence, was left unfinished due to the fact that Seraikela and Kharsawan had remained part of Bihar.

Keywords: Harekrushna Mahtab; Garjat States; Prajamandal Movement; Merger of Princely States; Greater Odisha; Sardar Patel; V. P. Menon

1. Introduction

Orissa became a separate province, being the first in India to have been created on a linguistic basis, with effect from 1 April 1936.¹ Its territories, on the other hand, were shared by the coastal regions ruled directly by the British and the twenty-six Garjat, or the princely states, which had become subordinate to the

¹ Bichitra Kumar Parida and Manas Kumar Rout, "From Freedom Struggle to State-Building: The Role of Harekrushna Mahatab in Shaping Modern Odisha," *Journal of Historical Studies and Research* 5, no. 3 (2025): 42; Sarat Parida, "The Praja Mandal Movement and the Birth of Greater Orissa," *Orissa Review*, January 2009, 17.

paramount power through treaties while maintaining internal autonomy through their own leaders.² This kind of relationship, which is generally referred to as a patron-client relationship in the history of princely India, meant that the people under these states remained largely excluded from the rights and representative forms of government emerging in British India.³ Political opposition to such an order in the shape of the Prajamandal, or peoples' association, movement, gathered momentum in the latter 1930s and attracted the attention of the emergent generation of Congress politicians in the province.

Of this group, Dr Harekrushna Mahtab had a very distinctive profile. He was the chairman of the Orissa States Enquiry Committee that had studied the situation in the Garjat states in the late 1930s, and ten years later, as the premier of Orissa in 1946, was the key figure amongst the provincial negotiators in the process that resulted in the merger of the states into the province. The following analysis takes up this journey through roughly fifteen years on the basis of Orissa Review articles, scholarly work in journals, provincial press reflections, and the archival study of correspondence between Dr Harekrushna Mahtab and Jawaharlal Nehru in order to examine the nature and limits of his leadership in the formation of Greater Odisha.

Such a case study of Dr Harekrushna Mahtab is also connected to a larger historiographical tradition of princely India. The old institutional histories talked of princely administration as a 'patron-client system', where rulers enjoyed a lot of domestic freedom in exchange for their loyalty to the paramount power,⁴ a framework subsequently elaborated by Copland's studies of paramountcy and princely endgame politics⁵ and by Pati's account of peasant and tribal resistance in princely Orissa.⁶ An analysis of the crowd violence that has occurred in states like Ranpur has been done using Guha's model of peasant insurrection and the theory of the moral economy of the crowd by Thompson, in both cases paying attention to the inherent rationale of the people's action rather than as a mere reaction to oppression.⁷ More recent research that has looked at aspects such as the "print culture in Muslim-ruled states,"⁸ associations in Hyderabad,⁹ locality and identity in princely Rampur,¹⁰ and communal politics in Travancore, Baroda and Hyderabad,¹¹ has taken the field in the direction of more social and affective considerations than the administrative and revenue concerns of the early research, while Bamzai's work on the negotiations between Nehru-Patel-Mountbatten provides context for the Odisha case in terms of its placement within the broader process of

² Jhili Mahanta, "Raghu-Dibakar and the Prajamandal Movement in Ranpur," *ShodhPatra: International Journal of Science and Humanities* 3, no. 8 (2026): 79–80.

³ Mahanta, "Raghu-Dibakar," 79.

⁴ Barbara N. Ramusack, *The Princes of India in the Twilight of Empire: Dissolution of a Patron-Client System, 1914–1939* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1978), 3–5, as cited in Mahanta, "Raghu-Dibakar," 79.

⁵ Ian Copland, *The British Raj and the Indian Princes: Paramountcy in Western India, 1857–1930* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1982); Ian Copland, *The Princes of India in the Endgame of Empire, 1917–1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), as cited in Mahanta, "Raghu-Dibakar," 80.

⁶ Biswamoy Pati, *Resisting Domination: Peasants, Tribals and the National Movement in Orissa, 1920–1950* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1993), 22–28, as cited in Mahanta, "Raghu-Dibakar," 77.

⁷ Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 1–17; E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past & Present*, no. 50 (1971): 76–136, as cited in Mahanta, "Raghu-Dibakar," 78.

⁸ Amanda Lanzillo, "Printing Princely Modernity: Lithographic Design in Muslim-Ruled Princely States," *South Asian Popular Culture* 16, no. 2–3 (2019): 245–252, as cited in Mahanta, "Raghu-Dibakar," 80.

⁹ Benjamin B. Cohen, "Social Clubs in a Princely State: The Case from Hyderabad, Deccan," *Indian Historical Review* 48, no. 2 (2021): 187–201, as cited in Mahanta, "Raghu-Dibakar," 80–81.

¹⁰ Razak Khan, *Minority Pasts: Locality, Emotions, and Belonging in Princely Rampur* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2022), as cited in Mahanta, "Raghu-Dibakar," 81.

¹¹ Dick Kooiman, *Communalism and Indian Princely States: Travancore, Baroda and Hyderabad* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2022), as cited in Mahanta, "Raghu-Dibakar," 81.

integration in India,¹² and McLeod's study of princely Western India will provide a comparative context for understanding the All India States' Peoples' Conference in which Odisha's Prajamandals played an important role.¹³

1.1 A Note on Sources and Method

This paper is a synthesis and not an archival research project. The evidence upon which it is based consists entirely of secondary literature — namely, the archivally-based work by Ankit on Mahtab's correspondence with Nehru¹⁴ and the official biography by Das & Nanda¹⁵ — along with provincial press narratives¹⁶ and the essays from the Orissa Review that form the informal record of the event.¹⁷ In cases where the sources are in contradiction, or the claim relies upon a single non-archival source, this is clearly stated rather than resolved silently (for example, see §§4 and §6 below). Direct quotation of NMML Mahtab Papers is done only where the work by Ankit himself cites or dates a specific letter in §§5–6; this work does not make any use of the Mahtab Papers or the Orissa State Archives independent of the source cited above. This limitation, along with a full disclosure of the relation between this work and the author's own research on the Ranpur Prajamandal,¹⁸ is provided in the Data Availability section at the end of this paper.

2. The Garjat States and the Roots of Discontent

Garjat states of Orissa were highly varied in terms of size and administrative importance. The states were categorized, based on the reorganization of the Eastern States Agency in 1936, into eleven A-class, twelve B-class and three C-class states, with the biggest of the lot being Mayurbhanj State, spanning some four thousand square miles and having more than ten lakhs of people according to the 1941 census, as opposed to the tiniest state being the Tigiria State, spanning only forty-six square miles and housing just twenty thousand people.¹⁹

These subjects in the Garjat states were subjected to various feudal practices which no longer existed in the British ruled areas anymore: Bethi, where the subjects had to render forced and free labor; Magan, where subjects had to offer gifts to the ruler during festivals; Rasad, whereby traveling officials would have to be provisioned by the subjects; and many other begars apart from these. Restrictions in some of the Garjat states also covered matters related to basic issues of status and dignity; for example, subjects of Ranpur state needed the permission of the Darbar to put up double doors on their houses, use palanquin in wedding ceremonies, and wearing particular headgear.²⁰ It was because of this accumulated resentment that led to the resistance movements being organized in the Garjat region during the 1930s.

¹² Sandeep Bamzai, *Princestan: How Nehru, Patel and Mountbatten Made India* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2020), chaps. 4–6, as cited in Mahanta, "Raghu-Dibakar," 81.

¹³ John McLeod, *Sovereignty, Power, Control: Politics in the States of Western India, 1916–1947* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 118–122, 210–212, as cited in Mahanta, "Raghu-Dibakar," 81, 87.

¹⁴ Rakesh Ankit, "Letters from a Province: Harekrushna Mahtab to Jawaharlal Nehru, 1947–1949," *Studies in Indian Politics* 9, no. 2 (2021): 208–220.

¹⁵ M. N. Das and C. P. Nanda, *Harekrushna Mahtab*, Builders of Modern India (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 2001), 87–93.

¹⁶ Ashok Pradhan, "From Pages of History, Shades of New Odisha," *The Times of India*, 16 August 2022; *The Print*, "Harekrushna Mahatab: The Man Who Started the Merger of Princely States with India," 2018.

¹⁷ Sarat Parida, "The Praja Mandal Movement," 17–19; Balabhadra Ghadai, "Integration of Princely States Under Dr. Harekrushna Mahtab," *Orissa Review*, April–May 2009, 8–10; H. K. Mohapatra, "Mahtab, a Patron of Odishan Historical Research," *Odisha Review* 71, no. 9 (2015): 37–41, as cited in Ankit, "Letters from a Province," 216.

¹⁸ Mahanta, "Raghu-Dibakar," 76–93.

¹⁹ Ankit, "Letters from a Province," 209; Mahanta, "Raghu-Dibakar," 77.

²⁰ Mahanta, "Raghu-Dibakar," 77–78.

3. The Prajamandal Movement and Mahtab's Early Involvement

Political awakening in the feudatory states is said to have begun with the setting up of the States' People's Conference by Sarangadhar Das in 1931 and its revival in 1937 as a body founded by the "Garjat Gandhi."²¹ Its second meeting, convened at Cuttack in June 1937, set the movement the objective of responsible government in the states and facilitated the growth of Prajamandals in almost all the Garjat areas.

The agitation resulted in violence in four states between 1938 and 1939. In Nilgiri, violence started in May 1938 under the leadership of Kailash Chandra Mohanty and Banamali Das, and was sorted out after the intervention of H. K. Mahtab. However, the settlement was short-lived.²² In Dhenkanal, firing on villagers by the police at Bhuban and Nilakanthapur in October 1938 killed six people, one of them a fourteen-year-old boy named Baji Rout, who became one of the most memorable martyrs of the movement. In Talcher, repressive policies led to the flight of an estimated sixty to sixty-five thousand people, which constituted the majority of the state's population, to the neighbouring British territory of Angul for about eight months.²³ And in Ranpur, the gherao of the palace on 5 January 1939 ended in the death of the Political Agent, Major R. L. Bazalgette, and the subsequent trial and hanging of two leaders from the state, Raghunath Mohanty and Dibakar Parida, both referred to as "Raghu-Dibakar" together.²⁴ All these incidents are recorded in great detail in the Oriya language commemorative histories of the movement, which are the main source material²⁵ regarding the chronology of the events, despite the nationalist outlook of such histories requiring to be handled with care. None of these books written in the Oriya language has been checked separately for this essay; they have been cited second-hand, and the chronology that they provide has to be treated as such until verification is done directly.

Mahtab's involvement in the question of states occurred at this point of time. As the chairman of the Orissa States Enquiry Committee formed in 1937 to look into the conditions prevailing in the Garjat states, he supervised an inquiry whose 1939 report highlighted the oppression in almost all the states and suggested cancellation of the Sanads of the rulers and merger of their territories in the province. The report was submitted to the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, but without any further result. Nonetheless, the inquiry made Mahtab, even before assuming the post of the minister of the province, as the person more than anyone else who had been documenting the case of merger. The 1939 report of the Committee was clear about this – that "in view of the inherent inability of the Orissa States to support popular enlightened administration within their area" the Sanads of the rulers should be cancelled and the states should be looked upon as "landlords of permanently settled estates such as Aul, Kujanga and Kanika."²⁶

4. Premier Mahtab's Diplomacy with the Rulers, 1946

Mahtab became the premier of Orissa in 1946, after winning the provincial elections of the year.²⁷ He soon sought to advance the states' case at the national level by presenting a memorandum to the Cabinet Mission

²¹ Sarat Parida, "The Praja Mandal Movement," 18.

²² Sarat Parida, "The Praja Mandal Movement," 18.

²³ Sarat Parida, "The Praja Mandal Movement," 18–19; Ankit, "Letters from a Province," 209.

²⁴ Mahanta, "Raghu-Dibakar," 83–86.

²⁵ Bijay Chandra Rath, *History of the Prajamandal Movement in Odisha* [in Oriya] (Cuttack, n.d.); Satyabadi Baliarsingh, *Ranpur Bidroha* [in Oriya] (Cuttack, 1985); S. K. Ram, *Ranpur Prajamandal Andolan* [in Oriya] (Cuttack, n.d.), all as cited in Mahanta, "Raghu-Dibakar," 83, 96 nn. 8–9, 31. None of these Oriya-language works has been independently consulted for this paper.

²⁶ Das and Nanda, *Harekrushna Mahtab*, 87.

²⁷ Ankit, "Letters from a Province," 209.

in April 1946 which called for the integration of Garjat states with the province. This went unheeded. Over the next few months, Mahtab wrote to the feudatories himself, asking them about the feasibility of integration and emphasizing the advantages that could be gained from it, but the feudatory rulers were unwilling to respond in similar vein. While pursuing this line of action, Mahtab also pointed out the recommendations of Attlee Committee of the Cabinet Mission which had suggested that the Orissa Feudatory States should come under any administrative arrangement that might be worked out for the province; this was re-emphasized in two circulars issued to the Orissa rulers as soon as Mahtab assumed premiership on 23 April 1946.²⁸

Rather than approach the province, some of the rulers considered another alternative, namely, an arrangement with the Chhattisgarh states. At Sambalpur on 16 October 1946, Mahtab addressed the rulers of the states stating that geographical, linguistic and ethnological connection between Orissa and the states made it desirable to have “one administration for both”, warning that failure to do so would make them “weak in comparison with the other provinces of India.”²⁹ But rather than accept the suggestion, the rulers launched an Eastern States Federation with the Maharaja of Patna, R. N. Singh Deo on 1 August 1947 – with its constitution, funds contributed by the federating states, and with Eastern States Joint Police Force, to create a much stronger federation than just merging the states with the province.³⁰ He strengthened his proposition by historical claim that Sambalpur and the neighbouring states never belonged to Orissa but rather belonged to an older Koshala, and he and his fellow rulers conducted a prolonged campaign with songs, dances and money distribution to gain popularity for his idea of division of Orissa, founding a political party, Kosalatkala Praja Parishad, aimed at creating the Eastern States Federation through division of Orissa – a campaign which also tried to capitalize on the sub-regional resentment over the Hirakud Dam project, as a grievance of western Orissa against the coastal tract.³¹ It is noteworthy that the two secondary sources cited above give a different text of Mahtab’s Sambalpur address in its final clause – “other provinces of India” as opposed to “other states of India” – but neither provides an original to confirm the exact wording; the one adopted in this essay is from the more referenced work by Das and Nanda.³²

But the reaction of the rulers was not left unchallenged in the formal governmental sphere either. The demise of the Paramountcy of the British Government in India under the Indian Independence Act of 1947 made it necessary to establish the new States Department on 27 June 1947 in place of the old Political Department, with Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel as Minister and V. P. Menon as Secretary.³³

5. From Independence to the Nilgiri Takeover

The attainment of Independence on 15 August 1947, and the lapse of British paramountcy along with it, completely altered this equation, making the Garjat rulers devoid of the external guarantee upon which the survival of their distinct existence depended.³⁴ The pressure within the states themselves mounted in the intervening period, with organised groups within the states exerting pressure on their rulers to adopt

²⁸ Das and Nanda, *Harekrushna Mahtab*, 88; *The Print*, “The Man Who Started the Merger.”

²⁹ Das and Nanda, *Harekrushna Mahtab*, 88; *The Print*, “The Man Who Started the Merger.”

³⁰ Das and Nanda, *Harekrushna Mahtab*, 88.

³¹ Das and Nanda, *Harekrushna Mahtab*, 88–89.

³² Das and Nanda, *Harekrushna Mahtab*, 88; *The Print*, “The Man Who Started the Merger.” Neither source resolves the variance against a dated contemporary or archival original; this paper follows Das and Nanda as the more fully referenced of the two.

³³ Das and Nanda, *Harekrushna Mahtab*, 89.

³⁴ Ankit, “Letters from a Province,” 215.

responsible government, and resisting moves like the Eastern States Federation, which kept them out of the provincial orbit. Mahtab himself wrote to Nehru on 3 November 1947 informing him of his having “publicly advised” the people of the states to issue “an ultimatum” to their rulers, while “privately assuring the more reasonable ones that ‘if some accede, others will follow’” – a gamble with the bandwagon effect that the Nilgiri crisis would soon put to test.³⁵

The immediate reason for the first step towards merger presented itself in Nilgiri, where the oppressive measures of the ruler against the Prajamandal, who had established a parallel “Azad Nilgiri Government”, and had conducted social boycotts and picketing in order to cripple the administration of the state, created a law-and-order problem, which could not be handled by the state alone; the Raj Durbar’s counter-moves, of arming certain tribal groups with the aim of attacking the houses of the Prajamandal leaders and looting the rice from the fields, only aggravated the situation further.³⁶ Using the sanction of the Central government, the Government of Orissa took over the administration of Nilgiri on 14 November 1947.³⁷ This act, along with the non-recognition of the Eastern States Federation by the province, set the stage for an overall agreement with the Garjat rulers collectively, rather than a state-by-state arrangement. The takeover itself was carried out by the Divisional Commissioner, along with Nabakrushna Choudhury, as Commander-in-Chief of the Orissa Military Police Force, on 14 November 1947, after Patel had sanctioned the act, while warning Mahtab that he and the Orissa government would be held responsible for the failure, if any; the takeover was legalised only after the merger of all the princely states of Orissa into the province on 1 January 1948.³⁸

6. The Cuttack Conference and the Instrument of Merger, December 1947

The decisive discussion took place at Cuttack in mid-December 1947 when the meeting between the Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the minister of States, V. P. Menon, the Secretary in the Ministry of States, and Mahtab took place on 14 December 1947 with the rulers of the princely states.³⁹ Rulers of the smaller B- and C-class states were seen first, and rulers of the bigger and well-administered A-class states were discussed later that day and appeared to be more reluctant than the other group. In fact, Mahtab had been pressing for the very intervention two weeks prior to that discussion, writing on 12 December 1947 to Nehru that Patel and V. P. Menon were about to visit Orissa to sort the states’ issue – one of the few moments in this paper’s narrative (also see §5 and §7 below) based on a dated and file-referred archival letter rather than on a secondary account, although each of these letters was found by this paper through its citation in an intermediary secondary source.⁴⁰ Menon himself provides the firsthand account of the conference, as the Secretary who was negotiating the matters, and describes exactly the staggered sequence of discussions and Patel’s threats of “consequences” to the rulers who resisted.⁴¹ One should note that the secondary sources are not entirely consistent on the exact date of the arrival of Patel and Menon: Pradhan and Das and Nanda both discuss the discussion with rulers on 14 December and the signing of the

³⁵ Mahtab to Nehru, 3 November 1947, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment), NMML, as cited in Ankit, “Letters from a Province,” 215.

³⁶ Das and Nanda, *Harekrushna Mahtab*, 90.

³⁷ Sarat Parida, “The Praja Mandal Movement,” 19; Pradhan, “From Pages of History.”

³⁸ Das and Nanda, *Harekrushna Mahtab*, 90–91.

³⁹ Pradhan, “From Pages of History”; Ankit, “Letters from a Province,” 215.

⁴⁰ Mahtab to Nehru, 12 December 1947, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment), NMML, as cited in Ankit, “Letters from a Province,” 215.

⁴¹ V. P. Menon, *The Story of the Integration of the Indian States* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1956), 164–168, as cited in Ankit, “Letters from a Province,” 215.

instrument on 15 December, which is what this paper follows, but Das and Nanda's own narrative puts the visit "15 Dec" – a small inconsistency that can be explained most probably by the compression of the conference into a two-day narrative and cannot be sorted out without the States Department file.⁴²

The strategy involved making the promise of the privy purses and guarantees personal and coupled with an overt threat of consequences following continued rejection.⁴³ Under the persuasion and pressure, a solution was arrived at and the agreement of the merger was signed a day later on December 15, 1947. For twenty-five out of the twenty-six Garjat states, the merger came into effect from January 1, 1948, and this was made possible by both the prestige of the central leaders and the local initiative in the provinces, but in the case of Orissa, it happened largely due to the efforts of Mahtab as the chief minister of the state. Initially, the strategy of V.P. Menon was that of joint control which left the administrative control of the rulers untouched but this was not accepted by Mahtab and rejected by Patel after the conference had started in Cuttack. The rulers claimed the earlier soft memorandum according to which the proposal of Mahtab for a common administration on matters such as communication, education, public health, provincial police, administration of justice, excise, forest and agriculture and industrial planning was in place but Patel and Mahtab were not aware of it and Patel threatened the rulers that he would not be responsible for law and order in their states if they rejected the new terms.⁴⁴

The journalist Durga Das went on to quote Sardar Patel on how the concept of merging arose from Mahtab: "The idea itself had come from Mahtab. The foundation of that idea is the State Praja Mandal that was set up by Mahtab in the Orissa states in 1938; the enquiry committee formed by him immediately afterwards; and the plan submitted by him but not accepted by Sir Stafford Cripps during his 1942 mission to India, before he finally convinced Patel to go ahead with it in November 1947."⁴⁵ It may be noted that Patel referred to Mahtab as "the living spirit" behind the merger and even stated that "it was that backward province...which showed the way to the rest of India."⁴⁶

7. Completing the Merger: Mayurbhanj, Seraikela-Kharsawan, and Representation of the Ex-State Areas

Mayurbhanj, the largest among the states in Garjat, however, did not join at Cuttack. As recounted in his own narrative of the events later on, Mahtab observed that Patel had shown a restraint in applying pressure on Mayurbhanj in view of the state's sizeable Adivasi population. In October 1948, its administration was taken over quietly, and the state joined Odisha on 1 January 1949.⁴⁷ Opposition of the Adivasis against being incorporated into Odisha and rival claims made by some former rulers of the Eastern States Federation proved troublesome in settling the issues relating to Mayurbhanj and the Seraikela-Kharsawan problem in the months that followed.⁴⁸ It was finally on 1 August 1949 that "the final merging of the States with the province" was accomplished legally; on the occasion, Mahtab informed Nehru privately that a "huge joke in history [was] over."⁴⁹ Not even with that, though, did the issue come to an end; for on 1

⁴² Pradhan, "From Pages of History"; Das and Nanda, *Harekrushna Mahtab*, 91.

⁴³ Pradhan, "From Pages of History."

⁴⁴ Das and Nanda, *Harekrushna Mahtab*, 90–91.

⁴⁵ Das and Nanda, *Harekrushna Mahtab*, 92, quoting Durga Das, *India from Curzon to Nehru and After* (Bombay: Rupa, 1981).

⁴⁶ Das and Nanda, *Harekrushna Mahtab*, 93.

⁴⁷ Ankit, "Letters from a Province," 216; Pradhan, "From Pages of History."

⁴⁸ Das and Nanda, *Harekrushna Mahtab*, 93.

⁴⁹ Mahtab to Nehru, 1 August 1949, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment), NMML, as cited in Ankit, "Letters from a Province," 216.

September 1949, Mahtab again wrote to Nehru reporting that Seraikela and Kharsawan had become “restive,” and that he desired to “end forever” their “delusion” about their separate identity.⁵⁰

Yet another troublesome complication emerged relating to Seraikela and Kharsawan themselves, which though initially included in Odisha together with other states, were handed over to Bihar on 18 May 1948, on the ground that they constituted enclaves within Bihar's Singhbhum district and therefore could not be administered as a part of Odisha.⁵¹ The transfer of the two states, however, led to a long-lasting grievance among their Odia-speaking populations and continues to be remembered in the literature of the province as an unfinished settlement of the linguistic desire for a merger in Odisha.⁵²

In addition, there arose the issue of representation of the incorporated former states populations in the provincial legislature. Mahtab wrote a letter to Nehru on 1 July 1949 wherein he mentioned that thirty-four members from the former states will be nominated to the legislative assembly of the province. He expressed his wish “that the present ratio between the Congress Party and that of the Opposition be kept intact” which clearly indicated that the terms of political incorporation were still being taken into account by the prime minister rather than just the administrative incorporation.⁵³ In September 1949 when the governor general Rajagopalachari gave the official notification of nomination of thirty-one members from the former states to the legislative assembly, “Mahtab has not recommended a single ruler because the former rulers had made themselves unpopular” and “it is such dispossessed rulers, who were responsible for 1857.”⁵⁴

8. Mahtab's Wider State-Building Beyond Integration

Mahtab's concern with the issue of the states was not in any way isolated from the rest of his concerns as a chief minister. In the series of letters Mahtab exchanged with Jawaharlal Nehru during this very period, we find him addressing the concerns of law and order, party organization, and border conflicts with Bihar, Bengal, and the Andhra regions, while at the same time proceeding with the merger process of the states.⁵⁵ Three main priorities Mahtab himself recognized about the years between 1946 to 1950 were, according to him, the development of a new capital in Bhubaneswar, the merger of the princely states, and the construction of the Hirakud Dam.⁵⁶ Thus, the merger of the Garjat states was an integral part of the larger project of provincial consolidation in the eyes of Mahtab.

Analysis of Mahtab's place within this larger project has also been offered through the framework of the so-called “Congress System,” the name which the historians have given to the role played by this political force in Indian democracy of the early decades, according to which Mahtab has been defined as “the archetypal ‘link man’ of the client-patron network that characterized this ‘Congress System’.”⁵⁷ In the case of Odisha, the history written by Weiner provides an account of the special role played by this state in the activities of the Congress Socialist Party, in which context Mahtab is identified as the leader of the

⁵⁰ Mahtab to Nehru, 1 September 1949, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment), NMML, as cited in Ankit, “Letters from a Province,” 216.

⁵¹ Pradhan, “From Pages of History.”

⁵² Mahanta, “Raghu-Dibakar,” 89–90.

⁵³ Mahtab to Nehru, 1 July 1949, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment), NMML, as cited in Ankit, “Letters from a Province,” 216.

⁵⁴ Mahtab to Nehru, 16 September 1949, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment), NMML, as cited in Ankit, “Letters from a Province,” 216.

⁵⁵ Ankit, “Letters from a Province,” 210–214.

⁵⁶ Oral History Transcript 306, Harekrushna Mahtab, NMML, 200–201, as cited in Ankit, “Letters from a Province,” 208.

⁵⁷ Rajni Kothari, “The Congress ‘System’ in India,” *Asian Survey* 4, no. 12 (1964): 1161–1173, as quoted in Ankit, “Letters from a Province,” 209.

party faction which made possible “the Socialist break from Congress.”⁵⁸ The biography of Nehru, by Zachariah, interprets the situation in terms of the “electoral implications” which Mahtab’s kind of politics was bound to have despite Nehru’s refusal to see in it anything more than “provincial-ism,”⁵⁹ while Morris-Jones’s work on Congress domination identifies the existence of “party ... effect” in spite of “judicial instrumentalities.”⁶⁰ Two modern studies of Orissa politics make similar conclusions about Mahtab’s ability to keep “the intra-party tussles, the Prajamandal politics, and the Sambalpur agitation against Hirakud [under control]⁶¹ ... through his capacity as the proprietor of two dailies and of a monthly paper.”⁶² This interpretation finds corroboration in the retrospective account provided by the ICS officer S. V. Sohoni, present at the Cuttack negotiations, who remembers the rulers as “stunned by the late-reversal from accession to merger” and by the “wet” condition of an agreement which had been “drafted on the spot and printed in the government press.”⁶³ None of the five works – Kothari, Weiner, Zachariah, Morris-Jones, Dash – has been independently read for this paper; each of them is cited here solely in terms of Ankit’s article.

In parallel with the merger of the states, the same period also saw Mahtab’s efforts to move the capital to Bhubaneswar and build the Hirakud dam on the Mahanadi river, both of which have produced a considerable body of historical writings. Hart’s contemporary discussion of river valley projects in India, and Kalia’s description of the metamorphosis of Bhubaneswar into a planned capital are mentioned here for the sake of referencing the works to which Ankit referred, without having consulted them independently.⁶⁴ More readily verifiable is the finding, quoted in its entirety by Ankit, of Routray, Oskarsson and Satpathy that “the costs and benefits of the Hirakud dam were shared inequitably.”⁶⁵ This is a useful reminder not to take the Hirakud dam at face value as an example of public welfare. In addition, Mahtab’s two-volume History of Orissa, written in the same period, is another illustration of his commitment to associating the building of the provincial state with the writing of its history. He was, in particular, recently recognized as “a patron of Odishan Historical Research.”⁶⁶

The uniqueness of Odisha in comparison with other princely-state amalgamations lies in the speed of the merger and the absence of an interim phase of paramountcy substitute arrangements. While Hyderabad enjoyed its associational and print culture through its princely regime until the police action of 1948 ended

⁵⁸ Myron Weiner, *Party Politics in India: The Development of a Multi-Party System* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 36–37, 42, 49, as quoted in Ankit, “Letters from a Province,” 211–212.

⁵⁹ Benjamin Zachariah, *Nehru* (London: Routledge, 2004), 207–208, as quoted in Ankit, “Letters from a Province,” 209.

⁶⁰ W. H. Morris-Jones, “The Indian Congress Party: A Dilemma of Dominance,” *Modern Asian Studies* 1, no. 2 (1967): 109–132, at 130, as quoted in Ankit, “Letters from a Province,” 213.

⁶¹ S. C. Dash, “Government and Politics in Orissa,” *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 26, no. 4 (1965): 83–100, at 90, as quoted in Ankit, “Letters from a Province,” 219.

⁶² S. C. Dash, “Orissa Politics, 1952–53,” *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 14, no. 3 (1953): 239–246, at 243, as quoted in Ankit, “Letters from a Province,” 219.

⁶³ S. V. Sohoni, “The White and Brown Civil Servants,” in *Memoirs of Old Mandarins of India*, ed. Raj Nigam (New Delhi: Documentation Centre for Corporate & Business Policy Research, 1985), 333–334, as quoted in Ankit, “Letters from a Province,” 216.

⁶⁴ Henry C. Hart, *New India’s Rivers* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1956); Ravi Kalia, *Bhubaneswar: From a Temple Town to a Capital City* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994), as discussed in Ankit, “Letters from a Province,” 217.

⁶⁵ Sasmita Routray, Patrik Oskarsson, and Priya Satpathy, “A Hydrologically Fractured State? Nation-Building, the Hirakud Dam and Societal Divisions in Eastern India,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 43, no. 3 (2020): 429–445, at 437, as quoted in Ankit, “Letters from a Province,” 217.

⁶⁶ H. K. Mohapatra, “Mahtab, a Patron of Odishan Historical Research,” *Odisha Review* 71, no. 9 (2015): 37–41, as quoted in Ankit, “Letters from a Province,” 216.

Nizami rule,⁶⁷ and the princely character of Rampur lasted as a result of “locality, emotions and belongingness” long after 1947, with integration occurring in the form of a process of accommodation rather than through a single negotiated conference,⁶⁸ Travancore and Baroda saw a reassessment of their communal and administrative organization over a greater post-1947 period than the thirteen months when twenty-five of the twenty-six Garjat states of Odisha signed away their autonomy.⁶⁹ In the context of Bamzai’s discussion of the negotiations between Nehru, Patel and Mountbatten, the speed of Odisha’s mergers can be understood in terms of a deliberate central policy to set precedents with an early, conclusive merger of a type represented by Odisha to use them for the difficult cases to follow,⁷⁰ whereas McLeod’s comparative history of princely Western India shows that the all-India States’ Peoples’ Conference movement that organized the Odisha’s Prajamandals also worked in Kathiawar and Gujarat in parallel without achieving the same prompt settlement there.⁷¹ In other words, the case of Odisha should be understood as a fast one among other instances of a general pattern rather than as a historically unique case; this is a more defensible claim based on the current available evidence than the latter one.

9. Conclusion

The amalgamation of Odisha’s princely states, however, did not come about in a moment but was the result of a process during which Harekrushna Mahtab played a role for nearly a decade, starting from being the investigator who gave the merger case its documentary form in the late 1930s, then failing as a premier who appealed to the rulers directly in 1946 to little effect, before being present as a provincial politician along with Sardar Patel and V.P. Menon when the merger actually took place in Cuttack in December 1947 and dealing with its Adivasi, territorial, and representational consequences until 1949. Merger was accomplished in thirteen months since the time of independence, but not all of its results were equally welcome to Odia opinion: the cession of Seraikela and Kharsawan to Bihar left behind a complaint that has occasionally emerged from the political memory of the province ever since. It was not an independent authority that made Mahtab a leading figure in this process, but the long experience he gained in tackling the issue of the states over many years, which made it possible for him to operate within the parameters set by Patel and Menon and shape their consequences for his own province.

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⁶⁹ Kooiman, *Communalism and Indian Princely States*, as cited in Mahanta, “Raghu-Dibakar,” 81.

⁷⁰ Bamzai, *Princistan*, chaps. 5–7, as cited in Mahanta, “Raghu-Dibakar,” 89.

⁷¹ McLeod, *Sovereignty, Power, Control*, 210–212, as cited in Mahanta, “Raghu-Dibakar,” 87.

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