



Modern Research Studies

Editor-in-Chief
Gyanabati Khuraijam

**An International
Journal of
Humanities and Social
Sciences**

An Indexed & Refereed e-Journal

www.modernresearch.in

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**Volume 2, Issue 2
June 2015**

pp. 264–285.

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What they had promised and what they did: A Critical Analysis of the Works of Congress Ministry in Colonial Odisha from Peasants' Perspectives (1937-39)

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Abstract: Peasants' struggles, barring its outward manifestations, was also fought within colonial state apparatuses like, in the provincial assemblies whose leaders were drawn from the dominant political parties with sympathy or obligations towards peasantry. Prior as well as posterior to the formation of ministries along the principles of Government of India Act, 1935, the leaders of the Utkal Pradesh Congress Committee and the Utkal Pradeshik Shamyavadi Karmi Sangathan had promised the poor peasantry to redress different peasant issues provided they would form government. Due to the circumstances of 'bounded reciprocity' between the peasantry and the congress party, the congress party was able to win the election and consequently formed the ministry in 1937. Unfortunately it could do nothing substantial for the peasantry as it had promised. Therefore this article endeavours to highlight the promises made to the peasantry by congress leaders in different times before coming to power. Apart from that, this article tries to evaluate the achievements and failures of congress leaders in the context of peasant mobilization. While dealing with those crucial points, this article too tries to unearth many of the important questions related to congress ministry vis-à-vis peasantry in the light of studies made on a few inter-provincial levels.

Keywords: peasant, legislation, kishan, ministry, congress.

Introduction

Considering the agrarian basis of Indian economy, occupational structure of the huge rural population and the oft-occurred tussle between the agrarian class and modern institutionalized government for diversified issues have made the question of peasantry an important issue in the field of social science research. The question spontaneously arises here as to the organic relationship between the peasantry and the civilian government which they make directly or indirectly. In order to find out the answer of many unsolved identical questions of present century the situation demands to explore the possibilities of colonial legacy in this regard and to assess the historicity of peasant-civilian government relationship in colonial framework in which neither the peasantry were well structured and well exposed, nor the leaders were given autonomous right to address the agrarian problems.

India was alike most of the colonized countries across the globe, one of the worst victimized Asiatic nation whose symptoms could easily be found in all walks of life – social, economic, political and cultural. However, the economic symptoms whose legacy is still persistent today clearly symbolized an aggravated and awesome picture of backward structural as well as sectorial economic scenario (Chandra, Mukharjee & Mukharjee 2000, 9-20). Agricultural sector stood first in the list of colonial exploitation as British colonial masters started plundering India through land revenue and tax leading to the birth and development of a half developed prototype of western capitalistic agrarian model (Desai 1948, 32-36) i.e., ownership of the means of production like land was controlled by a few while the real cultivators used to lose what they should have got in exchange of their labour. However there were some exceptions in case of other type of land revenue settlement. As a whole, the government sponsored cooperative movement through different land revenue experiments that had brought several changes in land tenure, property relation, agrarian productivity, food supply, marketing, agriculture indebtedness and cultivated land in British-India (Desai 1948, 30-43). The agrarian class emerged as the worst sufferer. When anti-colonial movement started to gain currency in the Indian subcontinent right from the 1860s it was these peasants, the

main segment of rural population and constituting the bulk of Indian masses, that helped national leaders become successful in their national mission. In that process of inter-dependence between the exploited marginalized social group (peasants) and the elite nationalist leaders, quite a new phenomenon came to dominate the social and political scenario of India i.e., the nationalist leaders promised to address the peasant issues in exchange of their unilateral cooperation, while the peasants wanted to snatch maximum benefits from them by putting pressure or conditioning support to them in times of need.

Colonial Odisha, being an inseparable part of British India and an important segment of Bengal presidency in nineteenth century, was no way an exception to the overall Indian phenomenon. Post 1803 period in Odisha, the year witnessing occupation of Odisha by British East India Company from the Maratha rule (Pradhan 2006, 233), witnessed the nasty episode of colonial exploitation in the form of economic and political segregation as well as gradual pauperization of rural agrarian population. Its resultant forces were so decisive that popular resistance surfaced in the form of *melis*, *bidrohas* and rebellions, while the participants were mostly drawn from poor peasantry (Sahoo 2004, preface). But the introduction of English sponsored administrative system, rule of law and promotion of other forms of western prototypes in other fields created space for the elite Indians composed of English educated middle class intelligentsia to speak for the marginalized. The whole process set in a new political calculation based on “making promises to and getting them accomplished for the subaltern as paternal guardian” (Nayak 2014). This fundamental theorization could easily be anatomized in the context of the process in which the dominant elite class mobilized the agrarian class in Odisha in different issues, formed the ministry in 1937 by dint of the latter's support and addressed the vogue promises in a way they should not have been expected.

The congress and peasantry: A bounded reciprocity

The romance between the congress as a dominated political organization and the peasantry as a subjugated class within a colonized state had to undergo many ups and downs since the inception of Indian National Congress in the 1880s. In the phase of political mendicancy as

well as neo-nationalist, Indian National Congress kept itself away from being an advocacy forum of any specific class (Chandra et al. 1989, 71-74) due to the seed time of Indian nationalism, or capitalistic socio-economic base as it was dubbed, or unripe time, or due to the infant stage of nationalism. However Gandhi's experiment in Champarn, Kheda coupled with his profound belief in the might of rural gentry composed of poor peasantry and subsequent rise of *kishan sabha* with wide mass base compelled congress to think of national independence from mass/peasant perspective. This psychosis of Congress got further boost in the time of non-cooperation movement and civil disobedience movement only due to large scale peasant participation. The changing regional as well as national politics in post 1934 times, radicalization of national congress with the emergence of leaders of socialist ideologies within, and above all the rise and growth of regional peasants and *raiya*t organizations with larger peasant affiliation in it were enough to create adequate space for the poor peasantry in national politics leading to changing the stance of congress. Even, situation took a new turn when both the opposite fraction realized the imperatives of mutual complementariness as the peasantry now led by congress socialists came nearer to congress and started considering congress as a party subsuming different class interests while congress required huge mass concurrence to be genuinely a national forum (Nehru 1937, 98-99) in the time of defamation of congress by parties formed along religion, caste, class and gender lines. Thus began a new situation giving birth to a notion called 'bounded reciprocity'. Declaration of election in 1936 on the basis of Government of India act, 1935 coupled with formation of All India Kishan Sabha as a national coordinating agency of regional peasant organizations and associations further concretized that notion.

Prior to election, most of the renowned congress leaders barely required three things from the peasantry namely, first, the congress, as Nehru usually talked about, wanted to fight election and enter office with large mandate (Kulke and Rothermund 1986, 307); secondly, it had to prove itself being the sole national forum/united front (Nehru 1937, 102) vis-à-vis other national forums; thirdly, it needed to widen its social basis to demand to and fight struggle for national

independence against colonial government. All seemed possible for congress provided the peasantry supported them. On the other hand the peasantry could see ample potentialities in congress as a saviour of peasantry and were ready to afford support to congress as far as their class interests were protected and augmented (*The Naveen*, 1936). Apart from that, the peasant electorate also put the congress under some obligation to adopt office in the province and to legislate in favour of the peasantry if they required the support of the peasantry (Kulke and Rothermund 1986, 307). The expectations on part of both the parties were natural and timely. The situation that came out of the inter-dependence between the two was worth being called bounded reciprocity as both were bound by time and mutual interests while the relationship that started begetting was completely based on give and take notion. The analysis of different historical sources of that time and context proves true to greater extent.

Jawaharlal Nehru in his presidential address to the Indian national congress at Faizpur clarified congress position vis-à-vis the peasantry when he said “ the real objective ... is to build a powerful joint front of all the anti-imperialist forces in the country.....the congress must be the basis and pivot of united action. The active participation of the organized workers and peasants in such a front would add to its strength.....thus to make the congress the widest possible joint front, the support of mass 75% of whom comes from peasantry is imperative.”(Nehru 1937, 97-107) Again, Nehru wanted to demonstrate that the congress had the mandate of people (Kulke and Rothermund 1986, 307). In various meetings held in 1936 in different places of Odisha, Nehru enthused the *raiya*s present there to join in the mission of Indian national congress as congress wanted amelioration of peasants' and workers' position. He also encouraged them to participate actively in the ongoing *Krushak andolan* in Odisha, and to get the congress candidates won in the scheduled election to the legislative councils of province (*The Naveen* 1936). Therefore congress had to make some promises to the pauperized peasantry while peasantry made every effort to cooperate the former in their mission.

Contextualizing Demands and Promises made to Peasantry by Congress

The premature suspension of the civil disobedience movement in India as well as in Odisha in 1934 created a political vacuum for congress on the one hand while creating a congenial atmosphere for the peasantry for their struggle on the other. The new generations of political workers who were born from the womb of and received its baptism of fire in that great political movement were brought under the influence of leftist ideology (Chandra et al. 1989, 344). Those newly indoctrinated militant leaders within Congress (INC or UPCC) formed radical wings within parent organization and carried out their activities on socialist ideology by organizing peasants and workers along their respective class ideology. Odisha had never lagged behind all those warm political currents. The *Utkal Pradeshik Shamyavadi Karmi Sangathan* (UPSKS) emerged as a dominant socialist organizations with some veteran congress leaders – Surendra Nath Dwivedy, Malati Devi Choudhury, Nabakrushna Choudhury, Bhagabati Charan Panigrahi, Dr. Nipen, Gurucharan Patnaik, etc., – whose main task was to organize poor peasants along their class ideology for their class interests (Dwivedy 1984, 30-31). The real struggle of the peasantry in Odisha started under the banner of congress socialists with socialist ideology with the formation of *Krushak Sangha* or *Utkal Pradeshik Krushak Sangha* (UPKS) in 1935. In the process of that elite led peasants movements came a new twist when the question of possible formation of government under the Government of India Act 1935 came to dominate the political situation in Odisha.

The enactment of the Government of India Act 1935 with the provision of introducing limited responsible government in provinces in place of diarchy introduced in 1919 opened an era of intense anti-colonial movement in a relatively new manner i.e., struggle along constitutional line. The All India Congress Party, after an intense debate among the leaders as to the nature and objectives of the Act and its efficacy, decided to co-operate colonial government to execute the Act. Accordingly, election was decided to be held on early in the month of 1937. On the other hand, the former Bihar and Orissa province got bifurcated and Odisha became a new province on 1st April 1936

according to the provisions of Government of India Act 1935. Again the process of amalgamation of Odia speaking tracts into single administrative unit had by then been completed giving rise to a full-fledged configuration of Odia speaking tracts. At the instance of AINC, Utkal Provincial Congress Party came forward to fight election and accordingly declared its election campaign on 13 September 1936 officially (Pati 1993, 89). With this there came a new perception among the rural people or *mofussil* that the police raj and *zamindars* oppression would no longer exist as their leaders are coming to control them. As Krushak Sanghas and other class parties were dominated by the so-called Socialist groups, Congress manipulated the situation and canvassed for votes. The election campaign in Odisha was highly exciting and commendable due to charismatic leadership of CSP, UPKS, as well as UPCC. The Congress Party which had set up 87 candidates won 36 seats accounting 80% votes in favour of Congress (Patra 1979, 97). By that result congress party became the largest party in Odisha. The most important thing to note down here is that most of the elected candidates viz, Biswanath Das, Chakradhar Behera, Dibakar Patnaik, Jadumani Mangaraj, Nabakrushan Chaudhury, Nityananda Kanungo, Pranathata Pattnaik, Sarala Devi etc., had direct or indirect sympathy to the peasants' cause (Mishra 2007, 383-385). On the other hand, the credit for spectacular victory of the congress candidates had to go to the poor rural gentry who voted for congress in large scale, for which congress was indebted to them. As to the reason for congress victory in the election, Ben Bradley, one of the prominent communist leader of the time, was of his opinion that most of the important and striking successes were achieved in the agricultural constituencies where support was obtained for the congress on its election manifesto (Bradley 1937). Again the richer peasants and occupancy tenants, who were enfranchised for the first time in the election, voted massively for the congress (Kulke and Rothermund 1986, 306). Due to that fact, now the task before the congress ministry was to address those promises and assurances given to the poor peasantry before the declaration of election and in the process of canvassing for votes in many occasions.

The elitist led Indian National Congress and its regional units, UPCC being one of them, had been demanding and proposing to the

colonial government in many occasions for bringing about drastic measures for agrarian classes from 1930s onwards. The content of congress demands came to be dominated by agrarian issues with the coming of left ideologies and subsequent romance between Congress and Krushak Sangha. However, in the conferences of peasants or Krushak Sangha in different times the peasant leaders mostly drawn from congress cadre made promises to address different agrarian issues. Those demands, promises were as follows:

Promises of Indian National Congress at Karachi, Lucknow, and Faizpur

The radicalization of congress demands on agrarian issues found reflection in the famous Karachi resolutions of Indian National Congress in 1931. One of the resolutions guaranteed and promised substantial reduction in rent and revenue, exemption from rent in case of uneconomic holdings, and relief of agricultural indebtedness and control of usury, better conditions for workers including a living wage, etc. (Chandra et al. 1989, 284). The Lucknow session of Indian national congress also passed some pro-peasant resolutions. Those demands of Indian National Congress somehow gave some brighter agrarian future in India. On the same line the Indian National Congress at its Faizpur session in 1936 endorsed the election manifesto and adopted the following agrarian programmes: rent and revenue should be readjusted, having regard to present conditions and there should be substantial reduction in both; uneconomic holdings should be exempted from rent or land tax; agricultural incomes should be assessed to income tax subject to the prescribed minimum; canal and other irrigation rates should be substantially lowered; all feudal dues, levies and forced labour should be abolished and demands other than rent should be made illegal; fixing of tenure with heritable rights along with the right to build houses and plant trees should be provided for all tenants; the crushing burden of rural debt should be removed; arrears of rents for previous years should generally be wiped out, and common pasture lands should be provided and the rights of people in tanks, wells, ponds, forests should be permitted (Govt. of Orissa 1936, 206). Again, the election manifesto of India National Congress also resolved to address those burning agrarian issues. Contextualization of promises made to

peasantry by the Congress in its different sessions, though national in character, seems to be worth mentioning given the existence of UPCC as a mere regional branch, and whatever transactions were carried out within that was only the manifestation of the programmes and policies of Indian National Congress.

Apart from the national phenomenon, the regional politics of both the UPCC and UPKS had much to do with. Out of numerous peasants conferences organized in different parts of Odisha right after the formation of UPSKS and UPKS, a few conferences and their important resolutions containing promises to the poor agrarian class could be cited here due to time and space limit. However, the Puri conference of UPKS, Jawaharlal Nehru's election promises, and resolutions passed in the Odia Peasants' Conference in Calcutta, Congress election manifesto, and some demands of important peasants meeting seem to be worth mentioning.

Promises given to peasantry by UPCC and UPKS in different times

In order to enlist full cooperation of the *kishan* leaders and peasants in the province for the congress cause in Orissa, UPCC in its meeting held at Cuttack in October 1936 approved the manifesto of the Krushak Sangha. The manifesto stated the abolition of Zamindari system, a complete remission of rents and taxes for all whose annual income was less than Rs. 250/- and a debt moratorium for five years. Besides it, the manifesto also stated that the final solution of the problems of India lay in the removal of British exploitation and a thorough change in the land tenure and revenue system with elimination of all intermediaries between the state and the cultivators (Patra 1979, 96). However, the manifesto contained the following demands: (a) abolition of permanent settlement affecting Kanika, Parlakhemundi and a number of smaller landlords in Parlakhemundi, smaller landlords in Ganjam and Cuttack and the very important *Zamindari* of Jeypore; (b) Remission of arrears of rent and land revenue; (c) reduction of all rents and water rates by half; (d) graduation of rent on the line of income tax; families with an income of less than Rs.250/- a year to be excused altogether; (e) amendment of Tenancy Act in various respects to the detriment of landlords; (f) forests to be thrown open to neighbouring villages; (g)

securing a living wage for labourers; (h) death duty on property over Rs.20,000/- and succession duty as well; (i) free primary education; (j) relaxation of the salt law; (k) religious endowments to be diverted to the upkeep of schools and dispensaries.

It is worth-observing that under the overall pressure exerted through *Krushak Sangha* activities, PCC was made to incorporate demands like abolition of *zamindaries* in certain estates and complete remission of rents and taxes for all whose annual income did not exceed Rs.250/- and a debt moratorium for five years by releasing a supplementary election manifesto (Nanda 2008, 67).

On the eve of the election, UPSK organized a peasants' conference in October 1936 in Puri districts and another conference in Calcutta in November 1936 to ventilate growing peasants' discontentment against the colonial government and its ally – *zamindars*. The resolutions passed in both the conferences seemed to have been catalysts for peasant mobilization as the leaders organizing peasants' movements belonged to UPCC. Whereas the UPCC had by then established itself unparalleled in the political scenario of Odisha, and by dint of it the peasants were very much crazy to see the good days of their class after election. The promises made to the poor illiterate peasants through those resolutions were as follows (*The Naveen* 1936):

1. *Demands related to Land revenue*: The land revenue of the share-cropper peasants (*Bhaga chhasies*) should not be collected for the 1340,41,42,43 *sana* (the year 1932, 33, 34, 35). Due to the losses of profit, the condition of the peasants had been precarious. So, one of the resolutions demanded that 50% of the land taxes should be waived. As to the faulty land revenue assessments, the conference demanded that the taxes on income incurred on land should be imposed by taking a family of 5 members whose annual income should not exceed Rs. 250/- as a single unit. Water tax should be reduced by 50%, and it was too demanded that immediate steps should be taken to provide water to far off lands by the government keeping in view the scarcity of water and non-availability of other alternative sources.

2. *Demands related to rural indebtedness:* In order to relieve the poor *raiya*s from indebtedness, independent enquiry should be undertaken by the government and proper remedial measures should be undertaken instantly. Apart from it, the government should stop the implementation of the Laws which allowed authorities collecting arrears for 5 years, and till that date all the arrears should be cancelled. Collecting more than 60% as interest (*sudha*) should be declared illegal. On the other hand the government should provide institutional mechanism for easy and timely credits to the farmers. The government should too ban the rampant use of compound interest. For the sake of the poor farmers non-institutional as well as non-traditional sources of credit supply should be regulated with tough hand. The money lenders (*mahajan*s) should be registered and be given license from the government to carry on their transactions.
3. *Demands related to tenancy reform:* In view of peasants interest, the leaders demanded, there should be a uniform Tenancy Legislation throughout Odisha with following outstanding features: (a) the *raiya*s and *sikmi raiya*s should have ownership on tilling land; (b) the *raiya* should have complete independence of transferring ownership rights; (c) legal steps should be taken to prevent *benami* transfer (unauthorized transfer)/sub-infeudation; (d) the *raiya*s should have full right and independence on fish and trees that belonged to their land; (e) they should have right to make bricks, construct concrete home, dig well independently and it should be independent of zamindars; (f) in order to make a barren land fertile, if the initiative was not taken by *zamindars*, the *raiya*s should not give any extra dues to *zamindars* and should be given *patta* (deed of occupancy) without any difficulties; (g) in case of default of land dues, *zamindars*, instead of other belongings of the *raiya*s, should seize only those lands whose revenue had not been deposited; (h) there should be adequate provisions in regard to the auction and selling of land according to the court decree so that the poor *raiya* must get right and adequate compensation; (i) the *zamindars* should not be given the right to certify the same procedure directing that transaction; (j) *raiya* could deposit their land revenue through money order. In case of non-acceptance of money order by the *zamindars*, the same should be returned to the *raiya*s as soon as possible; (k) stringent policy should

be made by the government as to forced labor and illegal dues so that the *zamindars* demanding those dues could be easily penalized; and (1) the *raiya*ts should have full rights to use jungle and uncultivated government land in the way they liked.

4. *Demand as to land revenue settlement*: Due to numerous difficulties, the government should nullify the permanent land revenue settlement forthwith.
5. *Miscellaneous demands*: Apart from above demands as to agrarian reforms, there were numerous other demands which were of non-agrarian nature made in that conference. They were as follows:
 - i. The peasants in general and tenant-at-will in particular should be guaranteed just and adequate wage by the government leading to easy life style.
 - ii. The poor children of *raiya*t should be provided elementary education free of cost.
 - iii. Adequate policies should be made on god land and charitable land so that the revenue coming from that should be spent on managing schools and charitable hospitals.
 - iv. Import taxes on some of the indispensable articles of the day today life –kerosene, matches, sugar etc., – should be lifted to facilitate easy peasant life.
 - v. Cheap post cards should be provided even at the cost of 1 paisa per copy.
 - vi. In permanent settlement areas, adequate places should be arranged for storing cow dung.
 - vii. Fish taxes collected in coastal areas of Orissa by *zamindars* should be lifted forever.
 - viii. Adequate government provisions should be made to prepare fallow lands cultivatable by the government and provisions should also be made for water supply to the lands.
 - ix. Enactments made to diffuse peasants and labor movements in Orissa should be banned as soon as possible, and;
 - x. The poor peasants should be enabled to keep arms and ammunition with themselves for self-protection and self-defense.

Translating Promises and Demands into action by Congress ministry

As was expected, peasant leaders started dominating UPCC in post-election Odisha which was a good sign for peasants in their anti-feudal struggle. The influence of peasants' movement in Odisha was so intense that in a meeting of UPCC at Cuttack in the first week of March, Biswanath Das, the champion of peasant cause in ex-madras Ganjam region and popularly known as *raiyyatt-sakha* was elected unanimously as the leader while Nityananda Kanungo and Jagannath Mishra became the Joint secretary of the legislature party (*The Samaja* 1937). After a long drama as to the formation of government, the first Congress ministry was formed on 19 July 1937 with Cabinet of three members. The ministry continued up to 4 November 1939. The newly formed Congress ministry tried tooth and nail to utilize the opportunities given to them for the betterment of masses in general and peasant communities in particular. As already mentioned, most of the legislators were directly or indirectly concerned with peasants' issues while some of them i.e., Biswanath Das was an ex-peasant leader with abundant personal experience. However, the performances of the ministries as well as members of Odisha Legislative Assembly as far as peasants' issues were concerned could be well assessed through their efforts and pro-peasant sympathy in enacting a series of Tenancy Legislations despite stiff opposition from colonial-*zamindars* nexus. The leaders here carried on their struggle against colonial patronized feudal elements within the four walls of Legislative Assembly.

Pressure and Persuasion to Congress Ministry for Pro-peasants' Legislation

To remind the representatives of their given promises or words, the peasantry under UPSK and leaders of UPSKS put pressure and persuasions to the ministry to bring pro-peasant legislations as soon as possible. It was not surprising at all that the expectation from the ministry was a gross miscalculation. However, of all those factors responsible for the enactment of a series of pro-peasant tenancy legislations by the Congress ministry under Biswanath Das, the nature and characters of the MLAs were most important. Most of the Congress

MLAs like, Nabakrushna Choudhury, Jagannath Mishra, Pranath Patnaik, Godavarish Mishra, Nityananda Kanungo, Biswanath Das, Dibakar Patnaik, Sarala Devi, etc. belonged to Congress Socialist Party and UPKS or Communist Party of Odisha with leftist ideology (Pradhan 2007, 8-9). Secondly, all were active in the peasants' movements in Odisha before the formation of Ministries. MLAs like Chakradhara Behera and Biswanath Das were former heroes of *Kanika* peasants' rebellion and ex-Ganjam *raiya*ts struggle respectively. Against this background, all pro-peasant activities were bound to prevail on.

The process of persuasions and pressurization to Congress ministry was extensively carried out by both the national and regional newspapers soon after the Congress' victory in the elections. The *Samaja* in its editorial page dated 3 October, 1937 demanded immediate action to elevate the poor *raiya*t by the ministry, whereas the *Naveen* dated 4 October, 1937 tried to bring the ministry's attention towards the poor *raiya*ts of Khallikote, Badakhemundi, Jarada etc., by describing *raiya*t's conviction on their savior Biswanath Das.

Even Mahatma Gandhi motivated the newly formed Congress ministry of the provinces in an article titled '*The peasantry*' in the *Harijan* which reads "... the relief of the peasantry is an elaborate programme. No Congress Ministry that does not handle this universal problem can exist for ten days" (Mishra 2007, 186). The observation of All India Kishan Day at the Cuttack Municipal ground on 1 September 1937 by Utkal Provincial Krushak Sangha was considered to be a well pre-conceived plan by Sangha leaders "to strengthen the hands of the Congress Ministry for initiating radical tenancy reforms" (Patra 1979, 117). The central aim of the peasants' gathering on the Kishan day was to "felicitate and interview the Congress Ministers and put pressure on them to bring legislations for redressing the grievances of the peasants and for immediate reduction of rents." This meeting attended by about twelve thousands cultivators, was presided over by Pranakrushna Parihari, a veteran Congress leader of Odisha. Malati Devi, the then Secretary of UPKS moved a resolution requesting the Congress Ministers to enquire into illegal and oppressive measures of landlords and to take immediate steps for mitigating the distress of cultivators.

Prominent peasant leaders in the meeting were Gouranga Charan Das, Malati Choudhury, Nabakrushna Choudhury, Harekrushna Mahatab, Mohan Das, Baidyanatha Rath and many more (*The Samaja* 1937).

Manifestation of Actions of Congress Ministry through important Legislations

It was against this background that the Biswanath Das led first congress ministry initiated the process of redressing peasant grievances within the legal framework. The rate of success of the ministry in peasants' cause could be well assessed through the process of enactment of the agrarian laws and the provisions that were implied in it.

There had been a long demand by peasants in coastal Odisha since the enactment of Orissa Tenancy Act of 1913 to amend the same bill so that the *raiya*ts or tenants could be benefited. Though it was amended in 1929, it could not be applied in permanently settled estates of the then Odisha (Mishra 2007, 185). With those objectives, the Orissa Tenancy (Amendment) Bill, 1937 was introduced by Nityananda Kanungo, the Revenue Minister on 25 September 1937 in the first session of the Assembly. However, the proposed Bill aimed at four aspects viz., first, free transfer of occupancy holding without giving any fee to the zamindars for their consent; secondly, to give tenants the right to cut trees standing on their holding without any interference; thirdly, to debar the tenants from paying all illegal levies (*abwabs*) and unauthorized cesses; and fourthly, to reduce interest rate from 12½ per cent to 6 percent on arrear rents (Govt. of Orissa 1937, 1212). But it was not an easy task at all as the move of the ministry faced the strong opposition from the Orissa Nationalist Party and the United Party composed of landed gentry. However, to neutralize the move of the opposition retaliatory measures were taken by UPKS and local Krushak Sanghas which held several meetings of the raiya^{ts} at Patia, Annapurna of Chandal, Mahanga, Kishorenagar, Darpan, and Cuttack, which was highlighted by print media at that time. Despite opposition from landed gentry, the Bill was accorded consent by governor on 1 September 1938 due to constant efforts of congress ministry (*The Samaja*, 26 October 1938).

The Ganjam Districts Raiyat Association and other *raiya*t sabhas of Ganjam district, which once formed the part of Madras presidency before 1936, had been demanding amendment of the Tenancy Act of 1908 in order to get parity in rent collection. It is a matter of fact that in those ex-Madras areas of Odisha, the zamindars realized very high rents from the tenants according to the provisions of Madras Estates Land Act 1908. The rents then calculated on the basis of half of the gross produce of land was widely varied from and relatively higher than the *raiya*twari areas of the same districts (Patra 1979, 118). As a result, there was no parity in the collection of rents for which *raiya*ts had to bear great hardship. The UPCC, UPKS and leaders of national repute had promised to redress the problem through proper legislation. On 23 September 1937, The Madras Estates Land (Orissa Amendment) Bill introduced by the Premier himself aimed at granting permanent relief to the *raiya*ts by bringing down the level of the rents obtaining in the *zamindari*es of the ex-Madras areas to the level of rents prevalent in the *raiya*twari areas to afford a more rational basis of assessment than before. Now the opposition to the bill was so intense that the governor denied giving his assent to the bill (Mishra 2007, 257) which proved the nasty nexus between the government and landed gentry.

The Agricultural development of Odisha was gradually becoming stagnant due to lack of absolute and appropriate funds. An agriculturist had to often go to the rural moneylenders to borrow money for the development of their lands and other agricultural purposes (Mishra 2007, 297). The land they mortgaged for that purposes was eventually slipped to the hands of money lender in default of payment of debt which in turn caused 'Sub-infeudation' or 'absentee landlordism' (Chandra, De & Tripathi 2007, 18-19). The phenomenon was widely prevalent in Odisha for want of easy accessibility of mortgage banks. The Congress and the socialist leaders had promised to redress those problems. To alleviate those problems and to enable the cultivators for developing their lands by an equitable and affordable interest rate, the government under Biswanath Das on 27 September 1937 announced in the House his intention to set up a committee for enquiring into existing condition of the co-operatives movement and the working of the co-operative banks in the provinces. Afterwards, the Premier himself

introduced the Bill in the Legislative Assembly on 24 January 1938 (Govt. of Orissa 1938, 48). With the active support of the colonial government as well as of the opposition parties, the Bill was passed by the house on 25 January 1938 which envisaged that government would establish a provincial cooperative bank which was to be managed fully by a Board of Directors nominated by the government. That bank was to control and supervise all the activities of all other co-operative banks in the provinces (*The Samaja*, 14 June 1938).

Apart from these commendable legislations, they also enacted many other burning issues touching agrarian aspects which had been demanded by peasants of Odisha since a long time. To enable the government to advance money on easy terms to the innumerable agriculturists of the province for paying off their old debts to the money lenders, the Government introduced the Agriculturists Loans (Orissa Amendment) Bill on 6 September 1937 with the prime aim at amending Section-4 of the original Agriculturist loans Act of 1884 (Govt. of Orissa 1937, 215). Without any substantial difficulties the bill was passed with two fold aims – (a) indebtedness of the agriculturists was to be held a valid ground to obtain loans from the government in order to pay off the old debts if any, and (b) the government was to advance *taccavi* loans to the needy agriculturists as deserving cases on easy interests.

The slipping of lands from small holder's hand to the greedy money lenders due to the inability of debtor to pay back the borrowed sum was so rampant in Odisha that UPKS since its inception had been demanding to the government for making a legal hindrance for the moneylenders to do so. Viewing the gravity of the demands and reminding Congress promises, the government of Biswanath Das introduced the Orissa Small Holders Relief Bill on 3 May 1938 (Govt. of Orissa 1938, 2092) for preventing the eviction of small holders from their lands and also the attachment and sale of their movable property as a result of decree now pending. Due to mass mobilization created by both UPKS leaders and the vernacular newspapers i.e. the *Krushak*, the *Samaja*, the Governor accorded his assent on 15 June 1938 (Mishra 2007, 303).

Partly as a result of the gravity of the issue itself and partly due to strong demands of UPKS, local Krushak Sanghas and *raiya*s in general, the government brought The Orissa Moneylenders Bill 1938 on 31 August 1938. It primarily aimed at minimizing the rampant rural debt, providing some relief to the poor debtors and regulating money-lending transactions in the province (Patra 1979, 131). Despite facing strong oppositions from the zamindar-cum-moneylenders, the assent of the Governor-General was accorded to the Bill on 30 June 1937. This enactment envisaged that (i) the money lenders were required to register themselves for legalizing their practices (ii) the principle of simple interest rates of not exceeding nine percent in case of secured loans and twelve percent in case of unsecured loans, and (iii) the money lenders were to be penalized including the cancellation of registration certificates granted to money-lenders for illegal activities (Govt. of Orissa 1938, vol. III, 45-46). Besides the above legislative measures for the progressive amelioration of the conditions of peasantry, the Congress ministry also brought out some suitable legislation on meeting successfully the problems of flood and calamities. Before the ministry could do more for peasantry, the ministry had to resign from office following the directions of Indian National Congress in the question of India's participation in the World War II.

Conclusion

With regard to the performances of Congress ministry shouldering the task of setting things right through legal avenues, there has been a wide controversy among the scholars. Scholars like Bipan Chandra and his school claim successful achievement of the Ministry whereas scholars like R. Coupland, Sumit Sarakar and their school vehemently criticized and raised doubts on the role of Congress leaders in the provincial legislatures in regard to the peasants' cause. However, the performance of the leaders required to be scrutinized in the light of anti-feudal and anti-colonial angles keeping in mind the promises the Congress had made earlier. The Congress ministry under Biswanath Das in Odisha came to function under many constraints. First, the legislative body, created under the Government of India Act 1935, was a colonial instrument to pacify the moderate leaders of the Congress,

but not for setting the things in right place. Secondly, the Ministry had stipulated times to fulfill all the demands as there was possibility of resignation of Ministry in each minute due to hot situation in Europe (Chandra et al. 1989, 328). Thirdly, the power to veto any decision taken by the Ministry was vested with either Governor of Odisha or Viceroy of India. Fourthly, the pre-dominance of landed gentry as well as money lenders in the legislature strongly supported by colonial government could not let any radical anti-*Zamindari* legislation be passed in the house, and fifthly, the Congress party, at the instance of AICC, never wanted to create dissention in Congress along the class line as Congress needed an united front to fight against colonialism.

However, it is argued that with so many constraints, the leaders of Congress, who had entered the legislature with mass support, in the first ministry tried tooth and nail to redress the peasants' grievances. The Congress failed to actualize the dream shown to the peasantry prior to election as to the abolition of *Zamindari* system and permanent settlements. The "*Zamindari* abolition" which was the main 'issue' in both the Kishan Manifesto of UPKS, AIKS as well as pre-election Congress manifesto in Odisha could not even be raised once. It was that important 'Issue' for which peasants supported the Congress to come to power. In short, the Congress leaders belied and this seems to be an important factor for breach in the relationship between the UPKS and UPCC in 1940s onwards. Besides that, the peasants' leaders failed to prove the efficacy of their being existence in power as the Congress Ministries and leaders adopted an increasingly hostile attitude towards Kishan Sabha Militancy. Police pickets and Section 144 were freely used in Congress ruled Orissa (Odisha) (Sarakar 1999, 365). Sumit Sarakar argued that Congress Ministries' hostile attitude to the peasant militancy.... Sahajanand's advocacy of the *danda* as going against the creed of non-violence and in the September 1938 All India Congress Committee's denunciation of 'Class War' specifically made in the context of Kishan Sabha agitations" raised question on Congress leadership on peasants' issues (Sarakar 1999, 365). The ministry could not get the Madras Estates Land (Orissa Amendment) Bill 1938 passed, thus leading to the stand stillness of the prior disparity and heterogeneity in land revenue in some parts of the then Odisha. Apart

from those failures, the Congress ministry too could not create any organizational mechanism to look after the proper implementation of those acts enacted by it. Despite multiple weaknesses, the government, however, successfully helped many important Bills passed viz., the Orissa Tenancy (Amendment Bill) 1937, The Orissa Co-operative Land Mortgage Bank Bill 1938, The Agriculturist Loans (Orissa Amendment Bill, 1938, The Orissa Small Holder's Relief Bill, 1938, and The Orissa Money Lenders Bill 1938. These Bills somehow met some of the genuine demands made by UPKS and radical leftist to certain extents.

In short, barring those achievements, the leaders of UPCC and UPSKS could not perform true to their words when we compare the achievements of Congress ministry with those of other provinces of the then British India.

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