

Agrarian Unrest and Congress Governance: Peasant Movements in Odisha (1936-1939)

*Dr. Sadananda Nayak¹, Himanshu Behera²

¹Department of History, Berhampur University, Odisha, India

²Department of History Berhampur University

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2025.1210000015>

Received: 06 October 2025; Accepted: 12 October 2025; Published: 27 October 2025

ABSTRACT

This research paper focuses on some aspects of agrarian unrest in Odisha from 1936 to 1939. This paper also focuses on the Socio-economic conditions of the agricultural population and how they led to mass Peasant Movements all over Odisha. This paper aims to provide the complexities of peasants' movements and how the provincial Congress government balances agrarian demands with limited constitutional powers.

Key Words: Agrarian Unrest, Peasant Movement, Provincial Autonomy, Zamindari System, Land Revenue, Tenancy Reforms, First Congress Ministry.

INTRODUCTION

The Period between 1936 and 1939 was one of the most dynamic and transitional phases in the Socio-political and agrarian history of Odisha. The Period between 1936 and 1939 was witnessed by significant agrarian unrest in Odisha. The new province of Odisha was created on April 1, 1936, on a linguistic basis by the introduction of Provincial Autonomy in Odisha under the Government of India Act of 1935. The Congress party assumed the Provincial power for the first time in 1937 through the first provincial election.

Odisha's agrarian structure in the 1930s was severely struggling with the Landlord and Zamindari System. Peasants suffered from high rents, illegal cesses, forced labour, indebtedness, and landlords' oppression. In the late 1930s, the emergence of peasant organizations like Utkal Provincial Krushak Sangha (UPKC) and Kisan Sabha spread the Peasant Movements in different regions of Odisha. In the Provincial Election of 1937, the Indian National Congress Party emerged as a prominent political force in Odisha. On 13th July 1937, Congress gained Provincial power in Odisha and played an essential role in shaping the response to agrarian grievances.

This study of Agrarian Unrest and Congress Governance: Peasant Movements in Odisha, 1936-1939, aims to analyze the dual-play between Peasant Unrest and Congress Governance in Odisha between 1936 to 1939. It provides, understanding of the roots of Peasant Unrest in Odisha within the nationalist struggle and how the Congress-led Provincial Government response to this situation.

Socio-Economic and Agrarian Conditions in Odisha in the 1930s: Odisha is an agricultural state more than 60 percent of people largely depended upon Agriculture. In the 1930s, Odisha faced a Socio-economic crisis due to a severe agrarian crisis, due to natural disasters like floods and droughts, and high taxation of the Zamindari system.

During this time, Odisha's agrarian economy was dominated by the Zamindari and Intermediary system, which was part of the permanent settlement. Peasants were dissatisfied with high rents, illegal cesses, and forced labour, which was known as Begar. The majority of cultivators were small tenants, share-croppers, or bargadars and bonded labourers or halias, who had no ownership rights. There were forced extraction of revenue from the people in the shape of bethi (to work without wage), Begari (to carry the luggage of the Raja or his office without payments), Magana (forcible payment of gift in weddings and other functions in the palace), Rasad (to supply free ration to the camps of the Raja or his

officials), Bhethi (to offer a gift on sunia) were collected from the people both physical and capital punishment.¹

The Permanent Settlement implemented in the coastal regions of Odisha and the Malguzari system in the western part of Odisha led to rigidity in the land revenue system in Odisha. The excessive taxation system forced peasants to move towards indebtedness—both zamindars and moneylenders combined powers, trapping cultivators in a cycle of debt bondage.

In the tribal region of Odisha, districts like Koraput, Keonjhar, and Sundargarh faced exploitation by revenue officials and encouragement by outsiders. Shifting cultivation was curtailed during this time. It forced the tribals to move towards dependence on moneylenders and landlords.

Unlike Bengal or Punjab, Odisha lacked in proper irrigation system and modernization in agriculture, and an appropriate market. Peasants were heavily dependent on the Monsoon. During this time, agricultural relations were divided into class and caste hierarchies. Landlords and Moneylenders belong to upper-caste and they dominated rural society. Most of the poor peasants belong to the lower-caste and tribal communities. Social inequality is one of the main reasons behind the peasant unrest in Odisha.

Roots of Peasant Unrest in Odisha (1936-1939): There were several reasons behind the peasant unrest in Odisha in the 1930s. The Colonial Agrarian system and Land Revenue Settlement, one of the main reasons behind the Peasant unrest in Odisha. The continuation of the Zamindari system and Malguzari system placed a heavily burden on peasants. Excessive rents, illegal cesses, and forced labour or bethi created dissatisfaction among Peasants. Landlords imposed high rents, and Moneylenders charged high rates of interest. Landlords, Moneylenders, and intermediaries created a nexus to trap peasants in cycles of debt. Agrarian poverty and economic distress during the 1930s, also one of the root causes behind the peasant unrest in Odisha. Low production, fully dependence on the monsoon, and frequent crop failures kept peasants in poverty.

Class and caste hierarchies were one of the root causes behind the peasant unrest in Odisha in the 1930s. Both tribal and lower-caste peasants faced double exploitation. They were both socially and economically exploited by landlords and moneylenders. Tribal peasants suffered from outsiders and moneylenders, who grabbed the tribal peasants' land. They were exploited in the name of forest laws, and they were restricted from their traditional rights.

Role of Organizations behind the Peasant Movements in Odisha: Several organizations and leaders contributed to peasant unrest in Odisha during Provincial Autonomy 1936-1939. Organizations like Utkal Krushak Sangha, the Indian National Congress, and the Congress Socialist Party greatly contributed towards peasant movements in Odisha.

Role of Kisan Sabha: The All-India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) was founded in 1936. Swami Sahajananda Saraswati was the president of this organization. Its first conference was held at Lucknow on 11 April 1936. Harekrushna Mahatab, Bhagirathi Mohapatra, Lingaraj Mishra, Nabakrushna Chaudhary, and Surendra Nath Dwivedi represented Odisha. This organization gave a platform to articulate the grievances of peasants and mobilized the peasants against the exploitation of landlords. This organization advocates for agrarian reforms all over India.² students, who took active part, were Harmohan Patnaik, Laxmidhar Sahu, Dayanidhi Patanaik, Gatikrishna Bhanja and Baishnab Charan Patanaik. And other young men of the State and some officials of the ruler also secretly associated with the students. Baishnab used to go secretly almost every night to the villages on the out skirts of Dhenkanal town and organized group meetings there.⁴ As he was a railway employee, he had the added advantage to move freely in train from Cuttack to Talcher. He enjoyed use of this facility to distribute Krushak(Magazine) secretly at **different places of Dhenkanal.**³

In Odisha, 'Utkal Pradesh Krushak Sangha' was founded in June 1935. Pandit Pranakrushna Padihary was the president, and Malati Chaudhary and Surendra Nath Dwivedy were the Secretary of this organization. This gave new hope and thrust to new possibilities of Peasant movements in Odisha. The First conference was held at Cuttack, and Mohanlal Gautam was the president. In this conference passed a resolution was passed for the abolition of the zamindari system in Odisha.⁴

In November 1936, Jawaharlal Nehru visited Odisha. In his speech at Puri, he attacked colonialism and feudalism, which inspired the peasants of Odisha.⁵

The second session of the Utkal Provincial Kisan Conference was held in Puri on 15 November 1936. Swami Sahajananda Saraswati presided over it. Lokanath Mishra was president of the reception committee. In this conference, more than three thousand delegates joined and passed a resolution. The main aims of this conference were the Abolition of the zamindari system, the transfer of the land to the tiller, a boycott of the Government in case it declared war, and the formation of peasants' defence committees to guard against the oppression of zamindars.

After this conference, several Peasants visited the Sub-Divisional Office of Puri district and made various demands like strengthening the embankments, abolition of salt taxes, and stopping the oppression of zamindars.

Role of UPCC: The Congress was the leading political force in Odisha during Provincial Autonomy. The Congress initially focused on the political freedom movement, but in a later phase, it focused on the agrarian issues of Odisha. The Congress leaders were both directly and indirectly supported through the Utkal Krushak Sangha. The Utkal Pradesh Congress Committee (UPCC) gave space for discussions on Peasant issues at the district level all over Odisha. Prominent Congress leaders like Nabakrushna Chaudhary, Harekrushna Mahatab, Bhagirathi Mohapatra, Malati Chaudhary, and Pandit Nilakantha Das actively participated in the Peasant Movement in Odisha.

The UPCC election manifesto of 1937's Provincial Election, promised several agrarian issues like Abolition of zamindari system, a five-year debt moratorium, tax-free salt manufacture for consumption, 50 percent rent and water tax, a complete remission of taxes and rents for all whose annual income was less than 250 rupees, amendment of Tenant Act, etc.⁶

Major Peasant movements in Odisha (1936-1939): Several peasant movements broke out all over Odisha between 1936-1939, which played an essential role in Odisha's Socio-economic and political transformation, and also contributed towards the independence movement. During this time Indian National Congress's Odisha branch, Utkal Pradesh Congress Committee (UPCC), Kisan Sabha, Utkal Pradesh Krushak Sangha, and Congress Socialist Party led several peasant movements all over Odisha.

In Ganjam district, the peasant movement was at its peak between 1936 to 1939. Peasants were mobilized mainly under the leadership of local Congress leaders and Kisan leaders against landlords and zamindars for their tenancy rights. In 1937, a Ryots Association was established at Berhampur for serving the problems of peasants of Ganjam district areas like Chikiti, Sankhemundi, Jarata, and Badakhemundi. In 1939, the peasants of Khalikote started a no-rent campaign against the king of Khalikote under the leadership of Banamali Moharana.⁷

The Peasant Movement in Kanika Estate, which belongs to the Kendrapara district, was one of the significant peasant agitations against the King of Kanika. The king of Kanika followed the divide-and-rule policy towards peasants to suppress the peasant agitation. During this time Superintendent of Police visited Kanika and expressed his views that peasants were responsible for the situation, and he imposed the IPC section 107 to suppress the agitation. In October 1937, the Peasant movement spread all over Kanika Estate under the leadership of Chakradhar Behera. He was an MLA of the Congress Party. Finally, the king of Kanika agreed to give some relief for peasants, but it was insufficient for peasants.⁸

In 1937, the peasants of Sukinda and Korei Estates, which belong to Jajpur district, protested against the landlords to stop bethi or forced labour, grazing and manure fees, and other illegal taxes in the area of Parikud zamindari peasant agitation against the Raja for the abolition salami tax.

In the Koraput area, under the leadership of Radhakrishna Biswas Roy, he was a Congress leader. He actively participated in peasant movements in South Odisha and also organized a number of peasant meetings. He also established an organization named "Gandhi Gumasta", which consisted of 25 villages. Its main aim was to

collect the peasants' complaints and try to solve these problems. Tribals of Koraput also actively participated in the peasant movement.⁹

The Peasants of Paralakhemundi(Gajapati) also resisted the king of Paralakhemundi. In 1936, the king hiked the land revenue by 300 percentage or three 3times of previous rate of 7 rupees. After a long resistance, the Revenue Board reduced it to 36 percent.¹⁰ In 1937, Borasambar Estate, which belongs to the Sambalpur district, also saw a major protest between thikadars and landlords. Ryots were resisted to landlords due to high taxes and illegal ceases.

In the month of March 1938, the peasant unrest spread in Tirtol and Kujang (Jagatsinghpur). Peasants of these regions resisted against zamindars due to illegal cesses demanded to end of force labour system.

The Communist Party was born in Odisha in 1938. The Communist Party wanted to reactivate the Kisan Sangh in Odisha. The Communist leaders like Pran Nath Patnaik, Sachi Rautray, Laxmidhar Jena, Durjadhan Rai, and Gangadhar Paikray mobilized peasants of coastal regions. They organized several peasant conferences in Khordha, Puri, Cuttack, Jajpur, and Balasore districts.

The Prajamandal States, like Dhenkanal, Talcher, Nilgiri, Nayagarh, and Hindol, became major centers of Peasant agitation. The formation of the Orissa States People's Conference (1938) gave the peasant movement a new shape.

Role of Provincial Congress Government and Policy Response: The Period between 1936 to 1939 marked a crucial phase in the political history of Odisha. This Period marked the first experience of Congress Provincial Autonomy in Odisha. The Congress Ministry was set up in July 1937 under the leadership of Biswanath Das as the first Congress Premier of Odisha. This new government faced several challenges, like peasant agitation, exploitation of tenants by zamindars, and poverty among rural people.

On 1st September 1937, on the occasion of the celebration of All India Peasant Day, under the leadership of Malati Devi Chaudhary, she was the secretary of Utkal Kisan Sabha. More than ten thousand Peasants gathered in Cuttack town, and a peasant delegation met the Prime Minister of Odisha, Biswanath Das, and presented their demands for some tenant reforms. The Prime Minister assured them that their needs would be given due consideration.

During this time, the Congress Socialist Party emerged as a significant force for the interests of peasants in Odisha. They developed some Agrarian programs for the interests of peasants. The following demands were:

Fifty percent Reduction in revenue.

Abolition of the Zamindari system.

Stoppage of Salami taxes to the Zamindars.

Amendments to Tenancy Laws. ¹¹

The Odisha Provincial Kisan Sabha demanded that the Congress ministry for an Enquiry Committee to enquire about the exploitation of peasants by zamindars and stop the injustice towards peasants. Enquiry Committees were set up at the district level under the leadership of local Congress leaders.¹²

For the interest of peasants, the provincial Congress government makes various reforms and changes in the Odisha Tenancy Act, the Money Lenders Act Madras Estates Land Act, and the Odisha Co-operative Land Mortgage Bank Bill for the betterment of Peasants of Odisha. On the other end, zamindars and landholders united to oppose these reforms strongly. The Rajas of Kanika, Puri, and Khalikote were against these reforms. They also started a weekly Odia newspaper, which was named "Utkal Barta" to advocate for the interests of Landlords and Zamindars. On 22nd September, 1937, more than three hundred Zamindars and landholders from various regions of Odisha mobilized in Cuttack to express their dissatisfaction towards these

amendments. The Provincial Government in Odisha between 1937-1939 played a significant role in the field of agrarian reforms for the betterment of Odisha's Peasants. These Reforms were:

Madras Estate Land Bill: The Madras Estate Land Bill of 1937 was applicable to those areas that were separated from the Madras Presidency and joined in Odisha after the creation of a separate province in 1936. Mainly, South Odisha or Koraput and Ganjam districts were separated from the Madras Presidency in 1936.

The rent collected in this area was very high, more than fifty percent of the total production of rent collected from Peasants. The main aim of this bill was to rationalize the rent structure and reduce the rent.

This bill faced opposition from the Zamindars of South Odisha. The Raja of Khallikote and Mandhata Gorachand Patnaik strongly opposed this bill, and they did not agree to reduce the rent. Finally, this bill was passed on 5 February 1938. The Governor refused to give his assent in May 1938, and it was reserved for the viceroy's assent, and the viceroy also declined to give his consent to it. It was a failed attempt for the conditions of peasants in Southern Odisha.¹³

Odisha Tenancy (Amendment) Bill: The Odisha Tenancy Amendment Bill of 1937 was introduced on 25th September 1937 by the Revenue Minister, Nityananda Kanungo, in the assembly. The main features of this bill were the Abolition of mutation fees, the reduction of the rate of interest from 12.5 percent to 6 percent on rent arrears, and the giving of rights to the tenants over trees standing on their holdings. The landlords and Zamindars got together against the Bill and prayed to the Government not to pass it.¹⁴ After a lengthy debate on the Bill was finally passed on 3 May 1938 with some minor changes. The final Act's provisions were:

Abolition of mutation fees and giving free rights of transfer of agricultural holdings to the tenants.

The Act gave ownership rights to tenants of trees.

Reduction of the rate of interest from 12.5 percent to 6 percent on rent arrears.

Substantial penalty on landlords for exaction of illegal taxes or cesses.¹⁵

Odisha Moneylenders Bill: The Congress Ministry also introduced the Odisha Moneylenders Bill on 25 July 1938. The main aim of this bill was to regulate the Money-Lending system of Odisha. The provision of this bill was that Moneylenders should be registered to continue their profession. It prevents moneylenders from charging excessive interest rates. This Bill introduced the principle of a simple interest rate not more than 9 percent in case of a secured loan and 12 percent in case of an unsecured loan. It also provides some penalties for moneylenders for illegal extortions and cancellation of their registration certificate.¹⁶

Odisha Co-operative Land Mortgage Bank Bill: The Congress Ministry introduced the Odisha Cooperative Land Mortgage Bank Bill on 24 January 1938. The primary purpose of this Bill was to facilitate loans to the peasants with a lower interest rate from the Mortgage Bank for agricultural development all over Odisha.¹⁷

The first Congress ministry also took other Legislative measures during this period. They were Odisha Inams Bill 1939, Sambalpur Tenancy Regulation, 1938, Odisha Small Land Holders Relief Act, 1938, etc.¹⁸ The Provincial Congress Governments from 1936 to 1939 played an essential role in shaping policy responses to the socio-economic challenges, and they made significant efforts in agrarian issues.

CONCLUSION

The Period between 1936 and 1939 marked a very crucial phase in Odisha's agrarian history. This period witnessed both Peasant Movements and Congress Governance in Odisha. The Peasant movement of Odisha between 1936 to 1939 changes the rural politics and created political awareness among the agrarian community. It greatly influenced to Provincial Congress Government to reform several policies in the field of Agriculture in Odisha. This period marked a transitional phase and paved the way for agricultural reforms under Provincial Congress Governance in satisfying peasants' expectations.

REFERENCES

1. Sadananda Nayak & Balaram Prusty, Braja Kishor Dhall: A Pioneer of Dhenkanal Garjat Movement, *Journal of Critical Reviews*(Online), 2021, p.940
2. Bichitra Nanda Mishra, Peasants Protest Resistance in Orissa: 1937- 39 in M.A. Karna, (ed.) *Peasant and Peasant Protests*, New Delhi, 1989, p.131.
3. Sadananda Nayak & Balaram Prusty, Garjat Movement in Dhenkanal, *Tathapi-UGC Care Journal*, 2020, p.146
4. J.K. Samal, ed., *A comprehensive History and Culture of Orissa*, vol. III, New Delhi, 1996, p-340.
5. *History of Freedom Movement Papers*, R-I, File No. 29/3, NAI, New Delhi.
6. Sushil Chandra De, *Diary of Political Events in Orissa (1st April, 1936-15th August, 1947)*, Cuttack, 1964, pp.6-8.
7. *History of Freedom Movement Papers*, R-I, File No.29/3, NAI, New Delhi.
8. *History of Freedom Movement Papers*, R-I, File No, 30/3, NAI, New Delhi.
9. *Indian Annual Register*, vol. 1936, p.202.
10. Jadunath Mahapatra, *Government of Orissa at Work: Work of the Congress Ministry from 19 July 1938 to 31 March, 1939*, Cuttack, 1939, p.11.
11. Chandi Prasad Nanda, *Ideological Transformation of Congress Movement: A Case Study on Orissa of 1935-39*, *Orissa Review*, vol.XLVI, No. I, 1989, p.145
12. *History of Freedom Movement Papers*, R-I, File No.30/3, NAI, New Delhi.
13. K.M. Patra, *Orissa State Legislature and Freedom Struggle: 1912-1947*, New Delhi, 1997, p.118-119.
14. Jadunath Mohapatra, op.cit., p. 14.
15. Biswamoy Pati, *Of Movement, Compromise and Retreat: Orissa; 1936-39*, *Social Scientist*, vol. 20, nos 5 and 6, May-June, 1992, p.74.
16. Brajendra Narayan Patnaik, *The First Congress Ministry in Orissa: 1937-39*, *Orissa Review*, vol. XLVI, no. I, 1989, p. 161.
17. Jadunath Mahapatra, op.cit., p.15.
18. *Indian Annual Register*, vol. II, 1938, p.243.