

War, Nationalism and Provincial Governance: Odisha's Political Experience (1939–1944)

Author : Himanshu Behera

Designation : Ph.D. Scholar, PG Department of History

Place : Berhampur University, Bhanja Bihar, Odisha, Pin-760007

ABSTRACTS:

The years between 1939 and 1944 was one of the dynamic and turning point in the political history of Odisha and colonial India. This period also witnessed the several political unrest in Odisha. This period saw the resignation of the First congress ministry and witnessed of governor's rule. The outbreak of the Second World reshaped whole functions of provincial autonomy which was introduced under the Government of India Act 1935. During this time Odisha deals with colonial administrative reforms, nationalist movements and war time situations. This article examines the interaction between wartime exigencies, provincial governance, and popular politics in Odisha from 1939 to 1944. This article examines the interaction between wartime needs, provincial governance, and nationalist movements in Odisha from 1939 to 1944. This article also explores the interplay between provincial government and Governor over several issues like provincial autonomy, war time crisis and other popular demands.

KEY WORDS:

Provincial Governance, Nationalism, Second World War, War Economy, Coalition Ministry, Agrarian Distress.

INTRODUCTION:

The outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939 which created a new constitutional and political history of India. All the Eight Provincial Congress ministries resigns because without consulting Indian leaders, the Viceroy Lord Linlithgow declared that India was part of second world war. The Congress ministries of Odisha also resigned in November 1939.

Odisha, which created as a separate province in 1936, was one of the youngest administrative units in British India. The formation of the province itself was the combination of a long-standing linguistic and regional movement aimed at unifying Odia-speaking tracts under a single administration. The province was economically underdeveloped, socially divided, and administratively fragile. Its deals with political factions, regional aspirations, tribal's problems, and agrarian crisis. Between 1939 and 1944, this periods Odisha experienced with three distinct political phases First the resignation of the Congress ministry led by Biswanath Das, second the imposition of Governor's Rule and the third formation of a coalition ministry under K.C Gajapati. In the same time Odisha experienced with war time crisis, economic disruption and nationalist movements.

This paper examines the three central arguments. First, it contends that wartime centralization exposed the fragility of provincial autonomy under the 1935 constitutional framework. Second, it argues that nationalist mobilization in Odisha both challenged and redefined provincial politics, linking regional aspirations with all-India struggles. Third, it suggests that the administrative and socio-economic pressures of the war years contributed to a transformation in political consciousness that would shape Odisha's post-war trajectory.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: PROVINCIAL AUTONOMY AND CONGRESS MINISTRY (1937-1939)

Odisha emerged as one of the eleven units of the British India in 20th Century. The new Province of Odisha was created on 1st April, 1936 on the linguistic basis. It was the first state in India to be formed on a linguistic basis. Odisha as a separate state officially enacted under the Government of India Act 1935. Odisha also got Provincial Autonomy through Government of India Act 1935. After its creation of as a separate province in 1936, Odisha faced with several challenges like acute poverty, natural disasters, low literacy rate and agrarian crisis due heavy burden by colonial and land revenue system.

The General election to the provincial legislatures was scheduled to be held in early 1937 throughout the country. In Odisha, the Election to the Odisha Legislative Assembly started from 18 January 1937 and

continued for six days. In this election Congress emerged as a single largest party and won 36 seats out of 60 seats. But All India Congress Committee declined to form ministry due to its opposition to Governor's "special powers." As a result, a non-congress member Krushna Chandra Gajapati, king of Paralakhemundi formed interim ministry on 1 April 1937. Krushna Chandra Gajapati Narayan Deo became the first Premier or prime minister of Odisha. But he resigned on 13 July 1937 after the negotiations between Congress high command and Governor-general. Congress Working Committee's decision in July 1937 to accept office under protest, Biswanath Das became the first Congress prime minister of Odisha on 19 July 1937.¹

The first Congress ministry's focused on Socio-economic reforms within the limited powers. The congress ministry focused on Agrarian and Tenancy reforms, development of education, rural development, civil liberties, Industrial and labour welfare etc. After World War II broke out in October 1939, the Viceroy announced India's entry into the war without consulting Indian leaders. The Congress ministries across all provinces of India, including Odisha, resigned on 4 November 1939 as a protest. The Governor took over the administration under Governor's rule.

GOVERNOR'S RULE IN ODISHA (1939-1941):

This period between 1939 and 1941 marked as very crucial phase in both political and administrative history of Odisha. After the resignation of the Congress Ministry, the Governor's rule was imposed in Odisha on 4th November, 1939. The Governor assumed direct control under Section 93 of the Government of India Act, 1935, which suspending the provincial legislature and ministry. During this period there were two Governors serve as Governor of Odisha. Sir Jhon Austen Hubback serve as Governor of Odisha from 8th December 1938 to 31st March 1941. Then he succeeded by Sir William Hawthorne Lewis, served from 1st April 1941 to 31st March 1946.

After the imposition of Governor rule in Odisha, Odisha saw as no elected government, all the executive power vested in Governor's executive council. Elected members lost their direct influence over administration Governor centralised all the powers in his own hand. The senior Indian Civil Service (ICS) officers and secretaries dominated in policy making and its implementation. During this time administrative priorities shifted from developmental works to wartime preparations. Administration dealing with various department like home, finance, revenue, finance, law and order and defence. The main priorities of administration were collection of more revenue from various sources and concentrate on war time preparation instead of welfare of common people of Odisha.²

Socio-economic condition of people Odisha was largely affected under Governor's rule. The people of Odisha mainly depended on Agriculture, but this period agrarian society of Odisha experienced economic hardship. Tenancy reforms initiated under Congress ministry were slow down. Farmers were protest against administration over rent and other agricultural demands. Revenue demands were not solved by the administration, which greatly contributed dissatisfaction among rural communities. The Tribal areas of Odisha were largely neglected by the colonial administration. From 1939-1941, there were no large-scale uprising among Tribal communities.

Ater the Imposition of governor's rule, it's major impact on politics of Odisha. The resignation of Congress ministry created a great political vacuum in Odisha. It leading to factionalism among regional leaders and political uncertainty in State. The main focus shifted from representative governance to bureaucratic governance. The Governor rule in Odisha weekend the Congress party's anti-colonial stance or mass movement in Odisha. It promoted anti-congress groups like K.C Gajapati's groups, rebel congress group and Zamindars or feudal groups.³

Governor's Rule in Odisha between 1939 and 1941 represents a crucial phase in the province's social and political history. It was triggered after the resignation of the first Congress ministry in protest against India's participation in the Second World War, without consent of Indian representatives. Governor's Rule was a formative phase that prepared the ground for subsequent mass movements and coalition politics in Odisha. The period between 1939 and 1941 thus functioned as a bridge between constitutional provincial governance and nationalist agitation against colonial rule.⁴

The Coalition Ministry under K.C Gajapati (1941-1943):

The Coalition Ministry under Maharaja Krushna Chandra Gajapati from 29 November 1941 to 29 June 1944 marks as a crucial phase in the political history of Odisha on the eve of Second World War. Provincial government Functioning under the constitutional framework of the Government of India Act 1935, the ministry emerged in the aftermath of the resignation of the Congress government in 1939 and after the end of Governor rule in 1941.

By 1941, the Congress remained unwilling to resume office without assurances of fully independence. Meanwhile, the colonial administration wants to stabilize provincial government in Odisha. They fully encouraged non-Congress political forces like zamindars, independents, rebel congress leaders, communal groups, and loyalists to form the coalition ministries. It had been discussed that there was a serious groupism or rift in Congress party in Odisha. Under the leadership of Pandit Nilakantha Das and Pandit Godavaris Mishra some congress MLA discredit the First congress ministry and high command. Soon after the resignation of ministry and imposition of Governor rule in Odisha they help the non-Congress forces or oppositions to formed a coalition ministry with the help British administration. The efforts towards formation of Coalition ministry started in early 1940s when Congress party planning to launch the Individual Satyagraha. The King of Khallikote and Pandit Godavaris Mishra met the governor of Odisha and discussed about the possibilities of ministry formation. Pandit Godavaris Mishra formed a political which known as “Odisha Congress Swaraj Dal” in October 1940. Which president was Pandit Godavaris Mishra and its Secretary was Dibakar Patnaik both were prominent congress leader in Odisha. Pandit Nilakantha Das also great supporter of this branch.⁵

In the meantime, Sir Jhon Austin Hubback took farewell from his post after five years serving as Governor of Odisha. Sir William Hawthorne Lewis succeeded him on 1st April 1941. Same time there was create a political crisis in political sphere of Odisha. During this crucial phase, emerged of Krushna Chandra Gajapati, the Maharaja of Paralakhemundi, was a prominent figure in politics of Odisha. He had already served as the first Prime Minister of Odisha in 1937 before the congress formed its ministry. He Known for his administrative experience and moderate political stance, he was considered acceptable to the other non-Congress members and Governor. He was met the Governor Hawthorne Lewis, to form a ministry with the help of Godavaris Mishra with some rebel congress MLA and other independent MLA. This move was immediately condemned by the Congress high command. Sardar Patel sent his Telegram from Wardha on 7th November 1941, to the President of Utkal Province Congress Committee P.K Parihari to asked Pandit Godavaris Mishra to resign from Congress Party on his anti-party activity. Mahatma Gandhi also condemned such move in Odisha.

However, after the several criticisms from Congress circle and some British authorities. Finally on 24th November 1941 Maharaja Krushna Chandra Gajapati sworn as Prime Minister of Odisha for 2nd time. Pandit Godavaris Mishra and Maulavi Abdus Sobhan Khan were also oath as Minister of Cabinet of Coalition Ministry. After sworn as Premier of Odisha, he tried to justified his stand in forming coalition Ministry. K.C Gajapati said:⁶

“We assumed charge today with the first and foremost point in our minds and that is to give a stimulus to war efforts. The present situation is serious and my colleagues and myself are alive to the fact.... When our ideal is mainly to do good to the country and serve the King-Emperor, we expect wholehearted support and cooperation from the public of Orissa from which were returned, and I hope our move to end the political impasse will be appreciated and receive popular support throughout India.”

Nature and Governance of the Coalition Ministry:

Finally, the Non-Congress Government formed with the help of Independent MLAs, rebel Congress MLAs, Muslim League, Rajas and Zamindars. The leadership was mainly belonged from landholders' aristocracy and conservative social groups. The ministry relied heavily on the Governor's support. There was absence of mass base or grassroot support like Congress party and unpopular among Odia people.

The Government of Odisha actively supported recruitment drives for the British Indian Army and War propaganda campaigns were organized to encourage loyalty towards the British Empire. The Coalition Ministry avoided major structural reforms in Agricultural reforms or Tenancy reforms which was initiated by Congress ministry. Zamindari interest remained protected by Coalition government because most Zamindars supported the government. Revenue collection remained priorities by government due Wartime financial pressures.⁷

There were major developments initiative by the Coalition Ministry under K.C Gajapati. The coalition government focused on expansion on Primary education and Secondary education. It also supported for promotion of Vernacular education in Odisha. One of the most significant developmental works was the establishment of Utkal University, which was first University of Odisha on 27 November 1943. Although other major institutions like the SCB Medical college in Cuttack, MKCG Medical college in Berhampur and Central Rice Research Institute (CRRRI) in Cuttack established by Coalition Ministry.

The Coalition Ministry under Krushna Chandra Gajapati (1941–1943) represents a transitional phase in Odisha's political history. It was formed in the shadow of Second World War and nationalist conflict. It attempted to restore constitutional governance in Odisha after the resignation of the Congress ministry. It functioned under the shadow of colonial authority and struggled to establish popular legitimacy among people of Odisha.

War Economy and Governance Challenges:

The outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939 marked a turning point in the social, political, economic, and administrative history of Colonial India and Odisha also. From 1939 to 1944, Odisha witnessed the resignation of First Congress ministry, Governor's rule, Coalition Ministry under K.C Gajapati, Wartime experience and Quit India Moment. The war economy transformed agrarian production, disrupted in trade networks, increased inflation, and food insecurity.

The war economy prioritized resource mobilization for military needs. During war time situation it increased demand for rice and pressure for food supply to military camp. Shortage of bullocks and labour due to military recruitment. Traditional trade routes were disrupted. Shortages of essential goods and commodities. Prices of rice, salt, oil, kerosene and cloth were sharply increased due to War. The poor people of rural areas, working class people of urban areas and landless labourers were severely affected by War. The purchasing power of common people were sharply declined. Odisha's coastline made it vulnerable during the war, when Japanese advances in Southeast Asia. Fear of Japanese invasion in Odisha led to restriction on costal shipping and disturbed in Maritime Trade.⁸

The Provincial Government under K.C Gajapati attempted to control price, providing ration in urban area, initiated relief works and anti-hoarding regulation. British government promoted war loans and savings for people. Government started public campaigns for war bonds and put pressure on landlords to contribute. Government passed the Defence of India Act, which rules were ban of public meetings, press censorship, preventive detention and seizure of property. In Odisha several national leaders were arrested, censorship on News paper and curtailed of civil liberties. After the outbreak of Quit India Movement in Odisha, it exposed tension between provincial governance and popular nationalism. The coalition government found itself a difficult position neither fully supported to nationalist movement nor fully supported to colonial government.⁹

The period from 1939 to 1944 was transformative phase of Odisha. The outbreak of Second World War imposed severe economic and administrative pressures on Odisha with limited resources. The war economy and governance challenges in Odisha from 1939 to 1944, how profoundly reshaped the provincial administration, economic structures, and political dynamics of Odisha which marks a region's historical evolution.

The Quit India Movement in Odisha:

On 8th August 1942, the Indian National Congress, Session at Bombay, pass the historic Quit India Resolution. Under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, the Quit movement demanded immediate British withdrawal from India or Complete Independence of India. Gandhi's famous slogan or last call of "Do or Die", which largely impacted on common people of India. The Quit India Movement of 1942 represents one of the most decisive and significant phases of India's struggle for independence movement. Its impact seen in all over India and Odisha also. In Odisha, the movement reflected a combination of urban resistance, rural protest, massive participation of Tribals and participation of Women.

The failure of the Cripps Mission in 1942 which created nationalist frustration. When the Quit India Resolution was passed on 8th August, the British administration immediately arrested all the prominent national leaders on 9 August 1942, including Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Sardar Patel. This triggered massive

protests all over India, including Odisha. In Odisha prominent Provincial leaders were arrested including Biswanath Das, Harekrushna Mahatab, Nabakrushna Chaudhury, Malati Chaudhury and Surendranath Dwivedi. The British Administration declared the All-India Congress Committee (A.I.C.C.) and Working Committees unlawful through a gazette notification of Criminal Law Amendment Act. Police immediately took possession of 38 provincial organization offices, including the Provincial Congress Committee (P.C.C.) and District Congress Committee (D.C.C.) offices. After the arrest of prominent provincial leaders, the movement assumed a decentralized, which led by Students, youth groups, peasants, and local activist.¹⁰

In the first week of September 1942, the Quit India movement spread all over Odisha Situation in district of Cuttack, Koraput and Balasore witnessed the Mob violence and cutoff of communication. In the district of Puri, Sambalpur and Ganjam remain normal as compared to other districts. In Cuttack movement start in Ravenshaw College by students. Students were burnt the office of Ravenshaw college on 14th August. Police suppressed the movement with the arrest some student leader. Others place of Cuttack district, particular in Kendrapada and Jajpur, violent activities took place in several places. People were vandalized the Post office, Revenue offices and P.W.D Bungalows. Telephone and Telegraphs lines or wires were cutdown by protesters. The Congress Ashram at Bari was seized by police. In Kaipada five people were killed in Police Firing. In Bhandaripokhari near Bhadrak local people demolished road-bridges. The Government imposed 6,000 rupees fine on villagers.¹¹

The Quit India Movement in Koraput district took very violent by Tribals. Most of population of Koraput were Tribals they lived in dense forest and literacy rate lowest in the state. When Mahatma Gandhi calls for open rebellion in August 1942, people were started no rent campaign against British Government. Initially different places of Jayepore, Nandipur and Potangi. Under the leadership of Laxman Naik, a prominent Congress leader united tribals group with lathis, cudgels and carrying with Congress flags. The famous slogan of Laxman Naik:

“We are Warriors, the British Government has gone, Mahatma Gandhi is our king, Maharaja of Jeypore is dead, the British king is dead, the country is ours, we have got independence, rise brethren, all of you take part in this war, Mahatma Gandhi Ki Joy.”¹²

It reveals the innocent belief of the tribal people which inspired by Laxman Naik to start violent against the British. Lakshman Nayak was arrested and sentenced to death and hanged on 29 August 1943 at age of 43. He was first prominent freedom fighter and tribal leader of Odisha who hanged by British during Quit India Movement. He remembered as a symbol of tribal resistance and patriotism for motherland.

The Quit India Movement in Odisha was a significant chapter in the province's freedom movement. Odisha witnessed widespread protests, sabotage, and underground resistance by the students, peasants, tribals, and women were actively participated in Movement. In spite of though suppression from British administration the movement lasting for years. It strengthened the grassroots nationalism, produced new leadership in Odisha, and prepared the final phase of India's independence struggle.¹³

CONCLUSION:

The period between 1939 and 1944 as one of the most transformative and dynamic phases in the political history of colonial Odisha. This phase witnessed the outbreak of the Second World War, the resignation of Congress ministries, the imposition of Governor's Rule in Odisha, the formation of the Coalition Ministry under Krushna Chandra Gajapati, and the outbreak of the Quit India Movement in Odisha, these years witnessed an intense interaction between imperial war priorities, nationalist aspirations, and provincial governance. One of the central conclusions derive from this study is that war fundamentally reshaped the political and administrative structure of Odisha which created in separate province on 1st April 1936. The interaction of war economy, centralization of Odisha, coalition politics in Odisha, and mass mobilization created a dynamic and transformative phase in the province's history. The years 1939–1944 thus stand not merely as a chapter of wartime adjustment, but as a decisive stage in the transition from colonial subordination to democratic aspiration.

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