



**FROM AGRARIAN PROTEST TO POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY:
Peasant-Tribal Politics and Prajamandal Movements
in the Garhjat States of Odisha (1912-1947)**

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the transformation of agrarian and tribal resistance into organised political movements in the Garhjat (Feudatory) states of Odisha between 1912 and 1947. It situates peasant-tribal mobilisation within a framework of dual domination characterised by princely autocracy and British paramountcy, which together produced conditions of socio-economic exploitation, political exclusion, and administrative arbitrariness. Drawing upon historical evidence, the paper traces the continuity between earlier episodic uprisings and the emergence of structured resistance through Prajamandal organisations. Particular attention is given to the Talcher region, where early agrarian protests evolved into mass mobilisation under leaders such as Pabitra Mohan Pradhan, culminating in the Prajamandal movement of 1938 and the Talcher Exodus. The study further analyses the radicalisation of these movements in the Chasi-Mulia mobilisation of 1942, which witnessed the formation of parallel governance structures and the assertion of popular sovereignty. By foregrounding subaltern agency, including the role of village activists and women, the paper argues that these movements were not merely reactive but constituted a conscious political transformation. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that peasant-tribal struggles in the Garhjat states played a crucial role in dismantling feudal authority and facilitating the integration of these regions into a democratic political order in modern Odisha.

KEY TERMS: Prajamandal Movements, Peasant-Tribal Resistance, Garhjat States of Odisha, Popular Sovereignty

INTRODUCTION

The Garhjat (Feudatory) states of Odisha in the early twentieth century were characterised by a system of hereditary autocracy operating under British paramountcy, which produced a structure of dual domination combining princely despotism with colonial oversight. Governance in states such as Talcher, Athmallick, and Pal-Lahara was marked by arbitrary taxation, forced labour (*bethi, begari*), monopolistic controls, and the absence of legal or administrative accountability. Tribal and agrarian communities—including the Khonds, Gonds, Sabaras, Bhuiyans, and Chasas—formed the productive base of this system, yet remained socially marginalised, economically exploited, and politically excluded. The cumulative effect of these conditions was the emergence of deep-seated grievances rooted in material deprivation, social humiliation, and the denial of customary rights, creating a fertile ground for resistance .

These developments were not historically isolated but represented a continuation of earlier traditions of resistance in the region. The Angul resistance of 1848 and the Athmallick uprising of 1863 had already demonstrated the capacity of tribal and peasant communities to challenge both colonial and princely authority. Although these earlier movements were often localised and episodic, they established a moral and political framework of protest grounded in the defence of customary rights and opposition to arbitrary rule. Over time, the persistence of structural oppression and the absence of mediatory institutions transformed this inherited tradition of resistance into a more sustained and conscious form of collective action, linking past experiences of defiance with emerging forms of political mobilisation in the twentieth century.

Against this background, the present study seeks to address a central question: how did rural protest in the Garhjat states evolve from sporadic agrarian and tribal resistance into organised political movements culminating in the Prajamandal agitations and the Chasi–Mulia mobilisation? By examining the transformation of peasant–tribal grievances into structured political action between 1912 and 1947, the study highlights the processes through which subaltern communities developed organisational capacity, articulated political demands, and challenged the legitimacy of princely authority. It argues that the Prajamandal movements were not abrupt developments but the culmination of a long historical trajectory in which everyday resistance, collective memory, and socio-economic pressures converged to produce a new form of popular sovereignty rooted in rural society.

STRUCTURE OF FEUDAL GOVERNANCE IN THE FEUDATORY STATES

The Feudatory (Garhjat) states of Odisha were characterised by a system of hereditary autocracy¹ in which political authority was concentrated in the hands of the ruling chiefs, who exercised near-absolute power over administration, revenue, and justice. Governance operated largely through personal rule rather than codified institutions, with decisions often issued as royal commands influenced by court factions and intermediaries². Administrative structures were weak, lacking formal bureaucratic organisation, and relied heavily on local functionaries such as pradhans, gaontias, and other agents who enforced revenue collection and social control. This system enabled arbitrary taxation, forced labour, and coercive extraction, while providing little scope for accountability or legal redress, thereby embedding exploitation within the everyday functioning of the state³.

This internal structure was further reinforced by British paramountcy, which created a framework of indirect colonial control without dismantling princely authority. While the British refrained from direct administration, they exercised decisive influence through Political Agents, Residents, and treaty arrangements that ensured loyalty and stability. This dual system allowed the colonial state to maintain overarching control while delegating day-to-day governance to the rulers, effectively insulating princely regimes from popular pressure. At the same time, colonial intervention—particularly in matters of law, revenue, and policing—strengthened coercive mechanisms and legitimised authoritarian practices, contributing to a system of dual domination over tribal and agrarian populations.

A defining feature of this governance structure was the complete absence of representative institutions or mechanisms of popular participation. There were no legislative bodies, elected councils, or institutionalised forums through which subjects could articulate grievances or influence policy. Political life was thus marked by exclusion, with subjects denied basic civil rights, freedom of expression, and access to justice. In this context, resistance emerged not through constitutional means but as extra-institutional protest, as peasants and tribal communities gradually transformed their grievances against arbitrary authority into organised movements. The absence of representative governance therefore played a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of resistance, pushing subaltern groups toward collective mobilisation against princely misrule.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION

The socio-economic structure of the Feudatory States of Odisha was marked by an extractive and coercive system that placed heavy burdens on tribal and agrarian communities. Taxation operated without a uniform legal framework and was characterised by arbitrariness and multiplicity. In addition to land revenue, subjects were compelled to pay a range of cesses such as forest, road, and ceremonial

levies often unrelated to productivity or capacity. State monopolies over essential commodities and additional informal charges further intensified economic pressure, reducing subsistence security and driving sections of the rural population into indebtedness or migration.

A central feature of this exploitative system was the widespread use of forced labour, particularly *Bethi* and *Begari*⁴. *Bethi* involved compulsory unpaid labour imposed for a variety of state purposes, including road construction, royal duties, forest work, and ceremonial obligations, often consuming a significant portion of the agricultural year. *Begari*, similarly, was extracted during royal tours and administrative demands, compelling peasants to abandon their own economic activities. These practices not only deprived cultivators of labour time but also exposed them to physical hardship, social humiliation, and economic insecurity, reinforcing a system of dependency and subordination.

Beyond formal taxation and labour obligations, a range of extra-legal exactions—such as *Rasad*, *Magan*, and other customary levies—further burdened rural society. *Rasad* required villagers to supply provisions, goods, and cash for officials and royal establishments, while *Magan* was collected for ceremonial and personal expenditures of the ruling elite. These demands were often enforced coercively and without compensation, reflecting the arbitrary nature of princely authority⁵. The system was sustained through a network of intermediaries and village officials—such as *gaontias*, *pradhans*, and other local agents—who acted as the primary instruments of extraction and control. Their position enabled them to exercise considerable power over land, labour, and social discipline, often intensifying exploitation at the village level. Together, these mechanisms created a pervasive structure of socio-economic oppression that formed the basis of sustained peasant and tribal resistance in the region.

EARLY PEASANT AGITATIONS IN TALCHER (1912–1932)

The early decades of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of organised peasant protest in Talcher, marking a transition from passive discontent to collective resistance against princely exploitation. The immediate catalyst for these agitations was the imposition of enhanced taxation and arbitrary cesses, which placed an unbearable burden on the agrarian population. The introduction of additional levies—often unrelated to agricultural productivity—provoked widespread resentment among peasants, who increasingly perceived such demands as unjust and oppressive⁶. These tax protests represented one of the earliest organised expressions of rural dissent in the Feudatory States, signalling the growth of political consciousness among the peasantry.

Leadership played a crucial role in articulating and organising this resistance. Figures such as Purandar Pani and Banmali Paramguru emerged as prominent leaders who mobilised peasants, voiced grievances, and sought redress through petitions and collective action⁷. Along with other local leaders, they attempted to channel agrarian discontent into structured protest, challenging both excessive taxation and coercive practices such as forced labour. Their leadership reflected a broader shift in the nature of resistance, with political initiative increasingly emerging from within rural society rather than from traditional elites.

The response of the princely authorities was marked by repression and punitive action. Instead of addressing the grievances, the state sought to suppress dissent through fines, arrests, and legal sanctions against leaders and participants. Activists were penalised for organising protests or even for petitioning against the ruler, while surveillance and intimidation were used to prevent further mobilisation⁸. Despite this repression, the agitations of 1912–1932 played a significant role in laying the groundwork for later movements, demonstrating the capacity of peasants to organise collectively and challenge princely authority, and setting the stage for the more intensive Prajamandal mobilisations that followed.

EMERGENCE OF PRAJAMANDAL ORGANISATIONS

The emergence of Prajamandal organisations in the Garhjat states of Odisha reflected a significant phase of political awakening among tribal and agrarian communities in the early twentieth century. This transformation was rooted in the cumulative experience of socio-economic exploitation, administrative arbitrariness, and political exclusion under princely rule. Earlier forms of protest—centred on taxation, forced labour, and local grievances—gradually evolved into more organised and

politically articulated movements. Peasants and tribal groups began to recognise the structural nature of their oppression and increasingly sought collective platforms to challenge princely authority and demand basic rights, thereby marking a transition from sporadic resistance to sustained political mobilisation.

An important step in this process was the formation of social and reform-oriented organisations such as the *Sobhagya Samiti* in Talcher in 1925. Established by members of the peasant community, the organisation aimed at promoting social reform and spreading education, particularly English education, among the rural population. Although not initially political in a direct sense, such associations played a crucial role in fostering awareness, encouraging collective identity, and creating networks of communication among peasants. The princely state, however, perceived these developments as potential threats to its authority and responded by suppressing the organisation—banning its activities, confiscating its funds, and penalising those associated with it⁹. This reaction underscores the growing significance of even moderate forms of organisation in challenging autocratic rule¹⁰.

The growth of Prajamandal movements was also closely linked to the wider Indian nationalist movement, which provided ideological inspiration, organisational models, and, at times, direct support. National-level developments—particularly the expansion of the Indian National Congress and the activities of the All-India States People's Conference¹¹ helped to connect local struggles in the Garhjat states with broader anti-colonial politics¹². Prajamandals thus emerged as regional expressions of a larger political awakening, combining local grievances with demands for civil liberties, responsible governance, and the end of autocratic rule. This linkage not only strengthened the movements but also integrated the struggles of tribal and peasant communities into the wider narrative of India's freedom movement.

MASS MOBILISATION: TALCHER PRAJAMANDAL MOVEMENT (1938)

The Talcher Prajamandal Movement of 1938 marked a decisive phase of mass mobilisation in the Garhjat states, transforming earlier agrarian protests into a Comprehensive political struggle against princely misrule. Under the leadership of Pabitra Mohan Pradhan, the movement drew strength from peasants, tribal communities, and rural labourers, who collectively challenged the legitimacy of autocratic governance¹³. Pradhan's leadership was significant not only for its organisational capacity but also for its rootedness in agrarian society, enabling the movement to articulate popular grievances in a coherent and politically assertive manner¹⁴.

A key feature of the movement was the formulation of a clear charter of demands, which reflected both immediate economic concerns and broader political aspirations. These demands included the abolition of forced labour practices such as *bethi* and *begari*, the elimination of illegal cesses and exactions, reforms in tenancy and forest laws, and the recognition of fundamental civil rights such as freedom of association and assembly. The articulation of such demands signalled a shift from protest against specific grievances to a more comprehensive critique of princely authority, emphasising accountability, justice, and representative governance¹⁵.

The response of the princely state was marked by severe repression aimed at suppressing the movement and discouraging further mobilisation. Authorities resorted to arrests, intimidation, and punitive measures against leaders and participants, while attempts were made to dismantle organisational networks and silence dissent. Despite these efforts, the movement sustained momentum through collective action, including large-scale participation and, eventually, innovative forms of resistance such as mass exodus. The repression thus underscored both the threat posed by the Prajamandal movement to princely authority and the growing determination of the people to assert their rights and challenge autocratic rule¹⁶.

THE TALCHER EXODUS MOVEMENT

The Talcher Exodus Movement of 1938 represents one of the most remarkable forms of collective protest in the history of the Garhjat states, marked by the unprecedented mass migration of villagers in response to princely repression. Faced with intensified coercion following the Prajamandal mobilisation, tens of thousands of peasants, tribal communities, and rural labourers abandoned their homes, lands, and livelihoods, and crossed into neighbouring British-administered Angul¹⁷. This large-

scale withdrawal was not merely an act of flight but a deliberate and organised strategy of resistance, aimed at delegitimising princely authority by refusing cooperation and revenue payment. The exodus thus transformed passive suffering into an active form of political protest grounded in collective sacrifice¹⁸.

The displaced population established refugee camps in various parts of Angul, including locations such as Kosala, Paniola, and other settlements, where thousands lived for several months under conditions of hardship and uncertainty. Despite severe material deprivation—lack of adequate shelter, food scarcity, and disruption of agrarian cycles—the refugees maintained solidarity and refused to return without assurances of reform. These camps became important centres of political organisation, attracting attention from nationalist leaders and social organisations, and linking the local struggle with broader currents of anti-colonial politics. The persistence of the refugees underscored the depth of popular commitment to the movement and the willingness to endure suffering in pursuit of collective rights.

Significantly, the exodus also led to processes of social transformation and collective organisation within the refugee camps. Traditional hierarchies and caste distinctions were weakened as people lived and worked together under shared conditions. Camp life was organised through collective decision-making, often through informal panchayat structures, which managed resources, resolved disputes, and coordinated daily activities. Women played active roles in sustaining the camps and supporting the movement, contributing to a broader reconfiguration of social relations. In this sense, the Talcher Exodus Movement was not only a political protest against princely oppression but also an experiment in alternative forms of social organisation, reflecting the emergence of a new collective consciousness among peasant and tribal communities¹⁹.

CHASI-MULIA MOVEMENT AND PARALLEL GOVERNANCE (1942)

The Chasi-Mulia Movement of 1942 emerged within the wider context of the Quit India Movement, when anti-colonial sentiment combined with long-standing agrarian grievances in the Garhjat states to produce a radical phase of mass mobilisation. In Talcher, the political consciousness generated by earlier Prajamandal struggles intensified amid rumours of repression and leadership crises, particularly concerning Pabitra Mohan Pradhan. This atmosphere of heightened tension and nationalist momentum encouraged peasants and tribal communities to move beyond protest toward direct assertion of authority, transforming resistance into a struggle for control over local governance²⁰.

A defining feature of this phase was the formation of the *Chasi-Mulia Sarkar* (peasants' and labourers' government), which represented an unprecedented attempt to establish parallel governance in opposition to princely rule²¹. Organised through village networks and collective mobilisation, the movement effectively displaced royal authority across large parts of Talcher, except the headquarters. Administrative functions were assumed by the people themselves, with panchayat-based structures managing local affairs, enforcing decisions, and coordinating resistance. Communication networks were disrupted, state symbols dismantled, and officials either driven out or compelled to submit, indicating a direct challenge to the legitimacy of princely sovereignty²².

This experiment in grassroots governance reflected a profound shift from resistance to the assertion of peasant sovereignty. The movement articulated a vision in which authority derived from the collective will of the people rather than hereditary rule, thereby redefining the nature of political power in the region. The organisation of people's militias, the establishment of local administrative systems, and the emphasis on participatory decision-making demonstrated the capacity of subaltern groups to create alternative structures of governance. Although the movement was eventually suppressed through military intervention and repression, its significance lies in its radical reimagining of political authority, marking a high point in the evolution of peasant-tribal politics in the Garhjat states.

LEADERSHIP AND SUBALTERN AGENCY

The trajectory of resistance in the Garhjat states reveals a significant shift in leadership from princely figures to grassroots actors embedded within rural society. Village-level activists—drawn from peasants, tribal communities, school teachers, petty traders, and local functionaries—played a crucial

role in articulating grievances and organising collective action. Unlike elite leadership, their authority was relational and derived from everyday engagement with local communities. They mobilised support through kinship networks, village institutions, and informal associations, transforming dispersed discontent into structured movements. This decentralised leadership ensured that resistance was not confined to a few prominent figures but was sustained through a broad network of local organisers who connected villages, coordinated protests, and maintained continuity despite repression.

Women's participation constituted an equally significant dimension of subaltern agency. In movements such as the Talcher Prajamandal and the Exodus, women were not merely supportive participants but active contributors to political mobilisation. They assumed responsibilities within refugee camps, acted as messengers, provided shelter and provisions to activists, and, in some instances, took on leadership roles in organising and managing collective life. The weakening of rigid social hierarchies within camp settings further enabled women to participate more visibly in public action, reflecting a broader transformation in gender roles within the context of resistance. Their involvement highlights the inclusive and socially transformative character of these movements.

At the core of these developments was the emergence of collective political mobilisation that transcended caste, tribe, and local divisions. Peasants and tribal groups, bound by shared experiences of exploitation, forged solidarities that enabled large-scale participation in protests, exodus movements, and parallel governance structures. Resistance was sustained through collective decision-making, often organised around panchayat-like institutions, which facilitated coordination, dispute resolution, and the articulation of demands. This process marked the evolution of subaltern agency from fragmented protest to conscious political action, demonstrating the capacity of rural society to challenge established authority and construct alternative forms of organisation and governance.

CONCLUSION

The developments in the Garhjat states between 1912 and 1947 illustrate a significant transformation from fragmented agrarian protest to organised political mobilisation. Early resistance, initially centred on issues such as excessive taxation, forced labour, and arbitrary exactions, gradually evolved into structured movements with clear leadership, articulated demands, and coordinated strategies. The emergence of Prajamandal organisations and movements such as the Talcher agitation and the Chasi-Mulia mobilisation marked a decisive shift in which peasants and tribal communities moved beyond local grievances to challenge the very foundations of princely authority. This transition reflects the growth of political consciousness among subaltern groups, who increasingly asserted their rights through collective action and alternative forms of governance.

These movements also played a crucial role in the eventual integration of the Garhjat states into modern Odisha. By weakening the legitimacy of autocratic rule and demanding administrative accountability, civil rights, and representative governance, peasant-tribal mobilisation created the conditions for political transformation. The sustained pressure generated by these struggles not only exposed the limitations of princely authority but also aligned regional resistance with broader nationalist currents. In this sense, the Prajamandal movements and associated mobilisations contributed directly to the dismantling of feudal structures and facilitated the incorporation of the Garhjat states into an emerging democratic political order, marking a significant phase in the historical evolution of eastern India.

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