

Raghu-Dibakar and the Prajamandal Movement in Ranpur

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Abstract

The Prajamandal Movement of the Garjat (Feudatory) States of Orissa constitutes an important episode of the Indian struggle against colonial rule, emerging out of the agrarian grievances and political marginality in the context of indirect British rule. From among the twenty-six Garjat states, it was Ranpur that experienced one of the most violent incidents in the course of the movement, the assassination of the Political Agent, Major R. L. Bazalgette on 5 January 1939, followed by the trial and hanging of two of its prominent youths, Raghunath Mohanty and Dibakar Parida known collectively as “Raghu-Dibakar.” Utilizing sources from published extracts from archives, newspaper accounts of the period, and the historiography on popular movements within princely states, this essay attempts to show that the level of violence witnessed in Ranpur was not a direct result of the severity of feudal rule Dhenkanal was worse ruled by contemporary criteria but rather a function of a specific set of local circumstances. In contrast to the experiences of Nilgiri, Dhenkanal, and Talcher, as well as the theory of peasant revolt and crowd action, the paper provides a perspective to overcome a reductionist approach of anti-colonial violence that only considers structural oppression, providing a reinterpretation of the sacrifice of Raghu-Dibakar in the context of the human consequences of the politicization process in princely India. The paper is not an account of any archival research, but a synthesis of secondary literature, as stated in Section 2.

Keywords: Bazalgette, R. L.; Contingency and Collective Violence; Garjat States; Odisha; Paramountcy; Prajamandal Movement

1. Introduction

The princely states in colonial India were situated in an unusual position constitutionally, since they were nominally independent and also bound through treaty and paramountcy to the British Crown, but largely left alone to rule as their chiefs saw fit as long as they remained loyal and paid the necessary tribute. The historical literature on the princely order has referred to this structure as a “patron-client system,”¹ affording rulers extensive discretion over the lives of their subjects without exposing them to constitutional and legal changes that had slowly been widening civil liberties in the directly ruled British India. In the case of Odisha, the result was

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¹Barbara N. Ramusack, *The Princes of India in the Twilight of Empire: Dissolution of a Patron-Client System, 1914–1939* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1978), 3–5.

the creation of twenty-six Garjat (Feudatory) states also known as Gadjat or Garajat states with vastly varying sizes and revenue sources, with Mayurbhanj covering an area of around 4,000 square miles with a population above ten lakhs at the time of the 1941 census, compared to Tigiria covering just about 46 square miles with a population of 20,000. With the formation of the new state of Odisha by splitting Bihar and Orissa in 1936, the Eastern States Agency was reorganized with twenty-three of the twenty-six Garjat states being put under the Odisha States Agency, while the remaining three Garjat states, Ranpur, Pallahara and Tigiria were categorized as 'C' category states.²

Within these states, there was the imposition of various forms of feudal dues by the rulers upon their subjects – Bethi (forced labor without payment), Magan (dues collected in terms of compulsory gifts on royal occasions like birth, marriage, and other festivities), Rasad (provisioning of traveling officials by compulsion), and various forms of begar, while denying various civil rights like freedom of assembly, freedom of press, and in a state like Ranpur, even the right to put up double doors to one's own house, use a palanquin during weddings, and wear certain types of headgears without permission from the Darbar. Such minor violations, when taken together, were perceived as the total denial of their dignity, and it is in this context that the rise of organized people's resistance in the Garjat states during the 1930s should be seen.³⁴

By mid-decade, this had led to the emergence of many Prajamandals ("people's associations") in the Garjat princely states, which were based on, and loosely co-ordinated by, the broader movement of all-India Praja Mandals, including the All India States' Peoples' Conference, established in 1927 and becoming increasingly active since the early 1930s.⁵ Political awakening amongst the people of the Feudatory states in Odisha is thought to have begun in 1931, following the formation of a States' People's Conference by Sarangadhar Das; the first formal conference of this body took place in 1937 in Cuttack under the presidency of Pattabhi Sitaramayya, a leading Congressman, whereby a committee was formed to investigate charges of illegality and misrule in the Odisha states. This was followed by a second conference on 23-24 June 1937, thus furthering the organisational strength of this movement and its association with the broader Indian National Congress, despite the official stance of non-interference in the internal affairs of the princely states by the Congress leadership under Gandhiji.⁶

Prajamandal movements in Odisha became violent mostly in four states, namely Nilgiri, Dhenkanal, Talcher, and Ranpur, resulting in the death of the young boatman Baji Rout at Dhenkanal in October 1938 and death of the Political Agent himself in Ranpur in January

²"Prajamandal Movement in Orissa," Orissa Review, August 1989, 131.

³Bijay Chandra Rath, History of the Prajamandal Movement in Odisha [in Oriya] (Cuttack, n.d.), 130.

⁴Biswamoy Pati, Resisting Domination: Peasants, Tribals and the National Movement in Orissa, 1920–1950 (New Delhi: Manohar, 1993), 22–28.

⁵John McLeod, Sovereignty, Power, Control: Politics in the States of Western India, 1916–1947 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 118–122.

⁶Barbara N. Ramusack, "Congress and the People's Movement in Princely India," The Indian Economic and Social History Review 25, no. 4 (1988): 461–463.

1939.⁷ These four states have been chosen for comparison in this paper, due to the fact that they all managed to generate an organised Prajamandal under more or less the same administrative circumstances, insofar as they were all small to middling 'B'/'C' category Garjat states, all under the same Political Department control, and all active in the same period of eighteen months from 1938 to 1939. This paper will focus on the Ranpur case in detail, examining the story of Raghu-Dibakar in light of the historical literature about the Garjat movement of Odisha and the political awakening of the princely states in India as a whole, and arguing, in a comparative context, that Ranpur, one of the smallest and least significant of the Garjat states from an administrative point of view, generated the single most significant act of anti-colonial violence in the entire Odisha Prajamandal movement, not because its rulers were unusually oppressive, but by a particular sequence of events relating to crowd psychology, rumor and official action on 5 January 1939, fully explained in section 13.

2. Sources and Methodology

2.1 Sources

This study will be primarily that of synthesis as opposed to an original contribution of archival research, and as such, its limitations should be explicitly expressed. The sources used for this paper can be broadly classified into three main categories. The first category includes the collection of histories of the Ranpur struggle written in the Oriya language⁸⁹ along with the Home Confidential Reports found in the Orissa State Archives, Bhubaneswar, quoted as they have been cited in previous literature written about this event rather than based on an archival review¹⁰; this paper has not examined the original HCR records, and any assertion based on the above citation alone should be considered keeping this in mind. The second source is the newspaper records of that time, including *Deshakatha* and *The Amrit Bazar Patrika*¹¹, who provide an invaluable account of the incidents of January 1939. The third is the considerable amount of secondary literature that exists in the form of published sources such as *Orissa Review*, *Orissa Historical Research Journal* and others, as well as the broader history of princely India written by historians like Biswamoy Pati, Ian Copland and Barbara Ramusack¹², as well as by more recent scholarship — covered in Section 3 below — that has kept remaking our understanding of princely state politics from the mid-2010s onward. In light of the sensitivity, and sometimes the incompleteness, of the extant sources — many of which have been framed in terms of nationalist commemorative writing composed long after 1947 — some

⁷Rath, *History of the Prajamandal Movement*, 130.

⁸S. K. Ram, *Ranpur Prajamandal Andolan* [in Oriya] (Cuttack, n.d.), 101.

⁹Satyabadi Baliarsingh, *Ranpur Bidroha* [in Oriya] (Cuttack, 1985), 12–13.

¹⁰Home Confidential Report (HCR), File No. 10, Acc. No. 1055 (con.), Orissa State Archives (OSA), Bhubaneswar, as cited in Baliarsingh, *Ranpur Bidroha* (1985) and Rath, *History of the Prajamandal Movement* (n.d.); the original file has not been independently consulted for this paper.

¹¹*Deshakatha*, 17 July 1938; *The Amrit Bazar Patrika*, 23 November 1939.

¹²Ian Copland, *The British Raj and the Indian Princes: Paramountcy in Western India, 1857–1930* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1982); Ian Copland, *The Princes of India in the Endgame of Empire, 1917–1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Ramusack, *Twilight of Empire*; Ramusack, “Congress and the People's Movement.”

of the facts (such as the exact order in which the attack on Major Bazalgette took place, or the number of people gathered on 5 January 1939) will necessarily remain open to some degree of interpretation.

That same reflexive approach should also be taken to the paper's own Oriya-language sources. The works of Ram, Ranpur Prajamandal Andolan, and Baliarsingh, Ranpur Bidroha and Ranpur Itihasa, were both composed within, and largely for, the nationalist commemorative tradition, which clearly had a vested interest in making Raghunath Mohanty and Dibakar Parida into martyred victims and not perpetrators of violence¹³; where the stories differ from what is found in the present-day press accounts – say, in terms of the relative responsibility of the actors involved in the murder – this paper has aimed at pointing this out rather than silently accepting the more favorable interpretation, but more apparatus than this synthesis paper can provide is necessary to settle this difference.

2.2 Theoretical Framework: Crowd Action and Contingency

The comparative claim in the paper – that it is not merely the degree of feudal oppression but rather contingency and dynamics of the crowd that decides whether Prajamandal agitation turns violent – is based, without an attempt at testing it formally, on two well-known models in the history of peasant and crowd movements. The Ranajit Guha model of peasant insurgency in colonial India states that the rebellion of the peasants follows its own laws of solidarity, negation, and transmission¹⁴; E. P. Thompson's idea of the "moral economy of the crowd" is based on a similar idea—that crowds were not merely responding mechanically to material necessity, but according to their sense of what was legitimate and illegitimate authority¹⁵. Neither theoretical approach is used in this case as an analytical framework because such an exercise requires discourse analysis of trial depositions and Political Department documents, which this review does not do according to Section 2.1. However, these approaches can account for why Ranpur, rather than the more repressive Dhenkanal, gave birth to the most violent single event associated with the Prajamandal movement – on 5 January 1939, the key factor was not the accumulated dissatisfaction with Darbar rule but the interpretation of the situation by the crowd itself.

3. Historical Background

3.1 The Garjat States of Odisha

The administration in the colonial period divided Odisha into "British Odisha" under direct rule as part of Bengal and later Bihar and Orissa Presidencies and the Garjat tract, consisting of twenty six states that were part of the subordinate alliance to the paramount power and came under the jurisdiction of a Political Agent, who was located at different places including

¹³Ram, Ranpur Prajamandal Andolan; Baliarsingh, Ranpur Bidroha; Satyabadi Baliarsingh, Ranpur Itihasa (Tangi, Puri: Shanti Press, 1990).

¹⁴Ranjit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983; repr. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 1–17.

¹⁵E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past & Present*, no. 50 (February 1971): 76–136.

Sambalpur and Nayagarh for the Odisha states.¹⁶ These principalities owed their lineage to old dynasties such as the Bhanjas and Kadambas, which successively accepted the suzerainty of the Mughals, the Marathas, and eventually the British, in return for maintaining their own sovereignty. Indian princes, as historians such as Ian Copland and Barbara Ramusack have argued, were dependent upon a precarious "patron-client" bargain in the interwar years, whereby the British ensured the safety of the ruler's position from any potential rebellion in return for obedience and flexibility in administration, but provided at best sporadic and unwilling supervision over the way the ruler dealt with his own subjects.¹⁷ The lack of structure created leeway for misgovernance by rulers, and it was this very area that the Prajamandal movements wanted to challenge.¹⁸

Biswamoy Pati's research into princely Orissa, such as his chapter "The Order of Legitimacy: Princely Orissa, 1850-1920"¹⁹ — contextualizes the Garjat rulers within a wider order of legitimacy that has been perpetuated by means of ritual, coercion, and colonial patronage and makes an important contribution by offering a corrective reading of princely rule that refutes romanticized, 'post-orientalist orientalist' interpretations of princely governance and highlights the despotic nature of such regimes.²⁰ Revenue exploitation and forced labor grew more oppressive in the Garjat states of Odisha throughout the 1920s and 1930s, as rulers struggled to finance their palace-building and ritual expenses and fulfill their tribute requirements. Moreover, these states had an elaborate hierarchical system of administration that included Raja, Dewan, and other local administrators who generally belonged to either the landowning or client classes. Grievances from below were communicated upwards to the ruler or Political Agent through this hierarchical chain, which ensured their dilution.²¹

The historiography of princely India, on which this paper relies, has advanced significantly further than that which was pioneered by Copland, Ramusack, and Pati. In this vein, both Amanda Lanzillo's work from 2019 on lithographic print culture in the princely states run by Muslims and Benjamin B. Cohen's 2021 article on associational activity in Hyderabad have pushed the study of politics and culture in the princely states into areas other than administration and revenue history.²² The recent book by Razak Khan (2022) on locality,

¹⁶Rath, *History of the Prajamandal Movement*, 41–44.

¹⁷Copland, *British Raj and the Indian Princes*; Copland, *Princes of India in the Endgame of Empire*; Ramusack, *Twilight of Empire*.

¹⁸Pati, *Resisting Domination*, 30.

¹⁹Biswamoy Pati, "The Order of Legitimacy: Princely Orissa, 1850–1920," in *India's Princely States: People, Princes and Colonialism*, ed. Waltraud Ernst and Biswamoy Pati (London: Routledge, 2007), 15–33.

²⁰Biswamoy Pati, "Interrogating Stereotypes: Exploring the Princely States in Colonial Orissa," *Studies in History* 21, no. 2 (2005): 205–207.

²¹See also Biswamoy Pati, *Situating Social History: Orissa, 1800–1997* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2001); Biswamoy Pati, *Identity, Hegemony, Resistance: Towards a Social History of Conversions in Orissa, 1800–2000* (New Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2003); Biswamoy Pati, *Tribals and Dalits in Orissa* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019).

²²Amanda Lanzillo, "Printing Princely Modernity: Lithographic Design in Muslim-Ruled Princely States," *South Asian Popular Culture* 16, no. 2–3 (2019): 245–252; Benjamin B. Cohen, "Social Clubs

emotions and belonging under the Princely State of Rampur and Dick Kooiman's (2022) study on communalism in Travancore, Baroda and Hyderabad have also contributed to this trend away from the relatively institutionalized 'patron-client' paradigm towards a more socially and affectively rich perspective of princely rule.²³ On the issue of integration, Sandeep Bamzai's 2020 history of the negotiations between Nehru, Patel, and Mountbatten, although written for a popular audience rather than an academic one, is a work that has been quoted extensively regarding how this process was centrally motivated.²⁴ In tandem with the general shift towards interconnected histories of the nation-states, recent methodological critiques have sought to position the history of princely India within global rather than national frameworks²⁵. This recent literature makes no mention of Ranpur whatsoever, and in this regard alone it can be seen that the history writing on the 'C' category Garjat has been very localized indeed.

3.2 Feudal Exploitation and the Genesis of Discontent in Ranpur

For Ranpur, this pattern of exploitation was even more pronounced. Ranpur is mentioned in contemporary sources as second only to Dhenkanal in terms of "royal torture and illegality" among the Garjat states of Odisha.²⁶ The officials in the Darbar, starting from the Dewan downwards, were not very hesitant in collecting money from the peasantry, while the Raja, Birabar Krushna Chandra Singh Deo (Brajadhar Narendra Mohapatra), made efforts to protect his subjects from the impact of any external politics by banning newspapers, which in itself indicates that the ruler knew how politically dangerous this awareness could be for him.²⁷

But ignoring the ban, people of Ranpur monitored the political activities going on in the adjacent states, where Prajamandals were formed with the leadership of persons like Sarangadhar Das and Baisnab Charan Patnaik in Dhenkanal, Pabitrāmohan Pradhan and Nabakrushna Choudhury in Talcher and Kailash Chandra Mohanty in Nilgiri²⁸, and started to organize their own peaceful meetings against exploitation. When the State Enquiry Committee was set up to look into the situation in Ranpur, witnesses from the locality made a lot of statements, and, according to all accounts, gave evidence very willingly regarding corruption and repression on the part of the authorities, but the findings of the Committee were kept from being published at the behest of the Dewan.²⁹ Such a situation of institutional obstruction,

in a Princely State: The Case from Hyderabad, Deccan," *Indian Historical Review* 48, no. 2 (2021): 187–201.

²³Razak Khan, *Minority Pasts: Locality, Emotions, and Belonging in Princely Rampur* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2022); Dick Kooiman, *Communalism and Indian Princely States: Travancore, Baroda and Hyderabad* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2022).

²⁴Sandeep Bamzai, *Princcstan: How Nehru, Patel and Mountbatten Made India* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2020), chaps. 4–6.

²⁵"The Indian Princely States in the Global Nineteenth Century," *Global Nineteenth-Century Studies* 1, no. 1 (2022): 101–107.

²⁶"Prajamandal Movement in Orissa," 131.

²⁷Baliarsingh, *Ranpur Itihasa*, 15–18.

²⁸S. Das, *Prajamandal Movement in Nilgiri: A Study* (unpublished dissertation, Sambalpur University, 1987), 61–62; "The Prajamandal Movement of Nilgiri," *Orissa Review*, April 2016, 74–77.

²⁹Ram, *Ranpur Prajamandal Andolan*, 101.

typical of many Garjat states during this era, played a vital role in making the peasantry of Ranpur realize that they would not get justice unless they took collective political action, which is quite similar to how things developed in the Talcher and Nilgiri Prajamandals, where everything started from demand for enquiries and petitions.³⁰

4. The Ranpur Prajamandal Movement, 1938–39

4.1 The Formation of the Ranpur Prajamandal (1938)

Ranpur Prajamandal was formed through various public meetings held during the later part of 1938. On 18 September 1938, a meeting of about one hundred persons was held at Tangi Bazar with Krupasindhu Mishra as the president of the meeting, where it was decided to form a temporary Prajamandal for the state.³¹ The follow-up meeting held in Tangi on 25th September 1938 decided to present a petition to the Raja for the redressal of their grievances. Some of the other members of the temporary Prajamandal included Gadadhar Sahu, Antaryami Sahu, Gangadhar Behera, Banshidhar Nayak, and Krupasindhu Mishra. In another meeting held at Sanapadar (P.S. Begunia), the people openly condemned the administration of the state and adopted resolutions for civil liberty and recognition of the Prajamandal.³²

The reaction from the Darbar was that of oppression: orders were issued restricting gatherings of more than two people at a time – a move that was designed specifically to cripple the Prajamandal's ability to conduct itself in public.³³ This, on the contrary, provoked and not deterred mobilization. On 14 October 1938, several hundred people assembled at Siko defying the ordinance, where a handbill in Oriya language, entitled "Minimum Demands" of the Ranpur people, was distributed³⁴, and the nationalist leader, Malati Choudhury, addressed an audience that was clearly bigger than the one at Sanapadar. The news of the death of Bika Nayak through police firing in Talcher during this period gave another dimension of urgency to the Ranpur agitation by connecting the agitation with the broader Garjat unrest. The organisers of the local agitation did not want their martyr to be like the one in the neighbouring state.³⁵

4.2 Repression and the Radicalisation of the Movement

Until December 1938, the Ranpur Darbar oscillated between offering small concessions and adopting coercive measures. This trend was consistent with the behaviour of princes confronted with Prajamandals' agitations in Odisha. It is comparable to the Nilgiri Durbar, which offered some sort of negotiated settlement to its own Prajamandal for a short period of time before adopting coercive methods, or even to the Talcher Raja whose treatment of Pabitra Mohan Pradhan's movement evolved from being conciliatory to becoming coercive. After failing to offer the desired concessions in spite of months of peaceful agitations, the Prajamandal of

³⁰Rath, History of the Prajamandal Movement, 130.

³¹Ram, Ranpur Prajamandal Andolan, 45–47.

³²Baliarsingh, Ranpur Itihasa, 22–24.

³³Baliarsingh, Ranpur Bidroha, 15–16.

³⁴Ram, Ranpur Prajamandal Andolan, 52.

³⁵Rath, History of the Prajamandal Movement, 133.

Ranpur adopted a more militant approach. The role of leadership moved from elders to young leaders like Banamali Ram, Achyut Ram, Banchhanidhi Senapati and many others who organized village movements in areas surrounding Chandpur.³⁶

Even by December, police had been called from adjacent feudatory states due to the inadequate force available in Ranpur itself, which clearly shows the extent to which the regular capacity of administration was surpassed by the size of the movement. However, even with this additional support, the police of the Darbar failed to stop the growth of the movement, and on 2 January 1939, the Raja had no choice but to take the ultimate step and declare the Prajamandal an illegal body.³⁷

4.3 The Chandpur Phase and the Rise of Raghunath Mohanty and Dibakar Parida

In the Chandpur phase of the movement, towards the end of 1938, it was the local leaders such as Raghunath Mohanty from Badabhumi and Dibakar Parida from Gada Banikilo who came to prominence along with Muralidhar Panda and Antaryami Kalasa of Mayurjhalia and Dayanidhi Parida and Krupasindhu Mishra, along with the help of Agadhu Barada, in Gopalpur and Manikagoda. It was through the initiative of these leaders that a Demand Sheet with thirty-nine demands was sent to the Ruler regarding civil rights, rights of forest and pond lands, and bethi and bheti cesses – demands which were basically in line with those raised in Nilgiri, where the leadership of the Prajamandal had forwarded thirty-one demands to the Durbar.³⁸

Processions and meetings became common occurrences after the Demand Sheet was submitted to the Darbar, and as the power of the ruler became evident, chaos engulfed the state with the Darbar's officials' directives being increasingly disobeyed. As already mentioned above, the Darbar declared the Prajamandal organization illegal on 2nd January 1939, and arrests were made of several Prajamandal leaders, such as Krupasindhu Mishra, which greatly provoked the movement. On the following days, more police forces were dispatched to Ranpur from the neighboring Baud, while the Prajamandal headquarters in Chandpur were destroyed, and more Prajamandal leaders, including Nilakantha Behera and Agadhu Sahu from Chandpur, were arrested. Instead of calming down the movement, this move stimulated it even more – on the night of 4th January 1939, the Prajamandal leaders toured the neighboring villages asking the people to rally in Ranpur the next day to demand the release of the arrested people.³⁹

5. The Assassination of Major Bazalgette and Its Aftermath

5.1 The Assassination of Major R. L. Bazalgette

On 5 January 1939, a large number of people ranging from four thousand to eight thousand, according to the press and archival reports, had congregated around the Ranpur palace calling for the release of the arrested leaders, an approach that was not new in view of the previous gherao tactics used in other Garjat states; the former is based on later studies in the Orissa

³⁶Rath, History of the Prajamandal Movement, 135–137; Baliarsingh, Ranpur Itihasa, 30.

³⁷Baliarsingh, Ranpur Bidroha, 18–19.

³⁸Ram, Ranpur Prajamandal Andolan, 58–60; Das, Prajamandal Movement in Nilgiri, 61–62.

³⁹Baliarsingh, Ranpur Itihasa, 35–37.

Historical Research Journal literature, the latter on press reports at that time.⁴⁰ Alarmed, the Raja sent a telegram to the Political Agent Major R. L. Bazalgette, who was allegedly at Nayagarh at that time. There were different versions of how things followed after that incident. According to one version, which is based on the edited version of the History of the Freedom Movement in Orissa by H. K. Mahatab, Major Bazalgette quickly reached Ranpur after receiving the telegram along with a few dozen police officers.⁴¹ By contrast, modern press accounts indicate that he was in the process of conducting a tour and making his way to Ranpur on the morning of 5 January, without having gotten the telegram at all, since it had only just been sent the night before.⁴²

Whether the order to block the road came first is not precisely known, but agitators set about barricading the road at Lodhachua to ensure that the Political Agent could not enter the kingdom. When an attempt by the Political Agent to disperse the crowd via lathi charge resulted in a man being seriously injured, there were rapid reports that he was dead, and this news enraged the crowd even more. As Bazalgette approached the area of the palace, he was faced with an angry mob. In most versions of the event, Bazalgette ordered the mob to disperse so that the way to the palace was cleared; failing this, he shot one man dead, Arjun Rout.^{43 44}

The wrath of the people turned at once upon the Political Agent. His revolver was knocked out of his hands in the first clash, and he was pelted with lathis of bamboo. He ran for shelter first to the steps of Bimba Padhiary's house, but his wife closed the door on him, and next to a cart wheel on a neighboring verandah, from which place he was stoned to death by the mob when they found it hard to pelt him with their sticks alone. The subedar of Nayagarh, who tried to save Bazalgette, was brutally assaulted and fell unconscious with severe head injuries, and Ranpur's very own policemen, who were in large numbers but unable to take action in time, too, were assaulted and at least one constable was injured seriously while other constables ran away. The Dewan of the Ranpur state, Mr Chandeswar Mishra, is said to have fainted during all this commotion and had to be taken away safely, hence rendering him powerless in taking any action. It was when Jailor Gulab Lal arrived there carrying water that he saw only the dead body of Bazalgette.⁴⁵

Mahatab's edited account, coupled with the interpretations made in Baliarsingh and Rath, point to an understanding of the event as one of spontaneity and not premeditation — an outburst of pent-up frustrations resulting from the immediate impact of Arjun Rout's demise⁴⁶ -- although Bazalgette's choice to open fire upon an already riotous crowd is assessed, even in these

⁴⁰Orissa Historical Research Journal 47, no. 3 (2004): 63; "Popular History: A Case of Praja Mandal Movement," Orissa Historical Research Journal 47, no. 3: 58.

⁴¹Harekrushna Mahatab, ed., History of the Freedom Movement in Orissa (HFMO), vol. 4 (Cuttack: Orissa State Committee, 1957), 22.

⁴²The Deshakatha, 14 January 1939.

⁴³Mahatab, ed., HFMO, 4:23.

⁴⁴The Amrit Bazar Patrika, 23 November 1939.

⁴⁵Baliarsingh, Ranpur Itihasa, 40–42; Mahatab, ed., HFMO, 4:24.

⁴⁶Mahatab, ed., HFMO, 4:22–24; Baliarsingh, Ranpur Bidroha, 129; Rath, History of the Prajamandal Movement, 138.

otherwise supportive portrayals, as having triggered the disaster and sharing blame for its escalation.

5.2 Administrative Takeover and the Enquiry

In terms of the contemporary rhetoric used to describe the event, the assassination of a British Political Agent by members of a princely state's populace was one of "immense significance," and the response to it was equally harsh. According to Gandhi, the act of murder was "shocking" and highly regrettable – although no quotations of his statement are provided here – for it would be detrimental to the movement for freedom if anyone deviated from the path of non-violence in British India or the Feudatory states.⁴⁷ The aftermath in Ranpur was that of repression after the incident, partly tempered by the arrival of Harekrushna Mahatab in time through the invitation of Banamali Ram, requesting the villagers to leave the state to protect themselves from the police reprisal as well as asking for patience on the part of the Dewan for the poor people of Ranpur. An anecdote that is remembered to this day and highlights the political ignorance of the villagers during that period is one in which, upon hearing about the murder of the Political Agent, the villager asked Mahatab if "the Company itself" had passed away, presumably thinking that the murder of an individual would bring down the entire colonial power structure.⁴⁸

This, then, was the end of the Ranpur Darbar, as the Raja lost all his power, the Political Department took direct control of the state affairs, the Dewan was arrested, and there was a thorough reform in the administration of the state. To find out the persons responsible for this crime, a Special Enquiry Court was set up with B. Sivaraman, I.C.S., Joint Magistrate of Berhampur as Enquiring Magistrate, who was the officer-in-charge of the investigation. This is a highly legalistic approach to solving a murder case considering the mode of Garjat administration.⁴⁹

5.3 Trial, Sentencing, and the Execution of Raghu-Dibakar

Persons like Raghunath Mohanty, Dibakar Parida, Agadhu Baral, Bhagaban Sahu, among many others, were arrested for crimes like murder (Section 302), unlawful assembly or rioting with a common object (Sections 147 and 149), grievous hurt (Section 325), and assault on a public servant (Section 353).⁵⁰ Even though the authorities had decided from the beginning that they were going to punish those who killed the man and not the whole of the Ranpur population, almost the whole Prajamandal leadership was picked up, with no regard for whether they had participated in the killing or not – an act that has been interpreted by later analysts as an intentional move by the colonial government to cripple the movement's organizational capacity under the guise of investigating a murder case.⁵¹

⁴⁷Ramusack, "Congress and the People's Movement," 470.

⁴⁸Baliarsingh, Ranpur Itihasa, 44.

⁴⁹Orissa Historical Research Journal 47, no. 3 (2004): 64.

⁵⁰Baliarsingh, Ranpur Bidroha, 100–102; Rath, History of the Prajamandal Movement, 140.

⁵¹Mahatab, ed., HFMO, 4:25.

In fact, on March 10, 1939, Krupasindhu Mishra was independently arrested under Section 384 (Extortion) and Section 347 (Wrongful Confinement) of the Indian Penal Code, indicating that the government launched an independent case against Prajamandal leaders.⁵² Among those put on trial following the incident, eleven were awarded transportation for life, and two were jailed for two years, while Raghunath Mohanty and Dibakar Parida were awarded capital punishment, and the former's plea for pardon was denied. In the local commemorative literature, including Baliarsingh's version, it is argued that while Mohanty and Parida played a relatively minor role in the assassination of Bazalgette in comparison with the eleven who were sentenced to lighter punishments, their death sentences were too heavy a penalty relative to their specific role in the events of 5 January. This article accepts the above reading as the view of the local commemorative literature and not a proven fact because, first of all, a proper evaluation of proportionality requires analysis of the court sentence and witness testimonies, which are not included into this synthesis, and secondly, it is possible that the court's reasoning based on evidence may differ significantly from the causal story of individual hits as preserved in the local memory.⁵³

Both the convicted criminals were taken out of Ranpur jail with heavily armed guards, tied up with hands and feet in a dark military truck; popular memory remembers how thousands of people stood along the route from Ranpur to Kalupadaghat railway station, in a silent and tearful vigil as the truck passed, in one last tribute to their leaders. They were sent to Bihar via train from Kalupadaghat jail to Bhagalpur jail, which was the condemned cell of the jail. It was on the morning of 4 April 1941 that Raghunath Mohanty and Dibakar Parida were hanged to death, almost two years after the murder case.⁵⁴

6. Contested Memory and Comparative Perspectives

6.1 Publications, Print Culture, and Contested Memory

The Ranpur massacre was responsible for the creation of its own print culture, even before the execution of the killings. Two printed materials were noted as circulating in the aftermath of the massacre – one being a poem titled “On the Massacre of the Political Agent at Ranpur”, which harshly criticized the behavior of the tenants who were responsible; the second, “Sufferings of the Ranpur People,” which criticized the oppressive behavior of state officers and praised the Raja.⁵⁵ The fact that both these opposing interpretations of the same event coexist shows the highly controversial nature of the interpretation of the Ranpur killing even in contemporary times. This would happen before the time when the event became part of the nationalist history of India, where Raghu Dibakar was remembered as a martyr in the fight for freedom and not as killers of a colonial official.⁵⁶

⁵²HCR, File No. 10, OSA.

⁵³Baliarsingh, Ranpur Bidroha, 129.

⁵⁴Baliarsingh, Ranpur Itihasa, 87–91.

⁵⁵“Popular History: A Case of Praja Mandal Movement,” 60–62.

⁵⁶Rath, History of the Prajamandal Movement, 141.

6.2 Gandhi, the Congress, and the Wider Response

Ranpur murder was taking place at a very delicate time for the Congress and its relations with the princely states. The Congress official policy, enunciated partly through the cautiousness of Gandhi himself regarding not involving violence in the Feudatory States or the British ruled states of India, was a policy that tried to stay clear of confronting the princely authority despite sympathy towards the Prajamandal demands; however, many of the leaders within Congress, like Nabakrushna Choudhuri, were sympathetic towards the agitation of Odisha Garjat, in disregard of this official stand⁵⁷ that has been discussed above with specific reference to the Ranpur incident. The incident in Ranpur, along with disturbances in Nilgiri, Dhenkanal, and Talcher at the same time, received ample attention in the nationalist press and the Odia press like *Deshakatha* and *Amrit Bazar Patrika*.⁵⁸ — and had been frequently cited as proof of the necessity of reforming, and ultimately abolishing, princely rule at conferences of the All India States' Peoples' Conference. The Conference itself, which John McLeod examines in his work on politics in the western Indian states and its Odisha-related activities⁵⁹, would soon disband itself in April 1948, its component parts being absorbed by the Congress party, except for the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference, when the original aim, the transformation of princely India into constitutional, eventually democratic units of the Indian Union, had largely been accomplished.

6.3 Comparative Perspectives: Nilgiri, Dhenkanal, and Talcher

The Ranpur incident is better explained as one of the four flashpoints in a wider wave of Prajamandal insurgency that took place around the same period among the Odisha Garjat states. In the case of the Nilgiri uprising, orchestrated by Kailash Chandra Mohanty with the backing of Harekrushna Mahatab and Sarangadhar Das since 1938, the movement followed a more negotiated path whereby after long agitation the Nilgiri Durbar signed a compromise with the Prajamandal between 1938 and 1939, although the agreement was short-lived and the administration of the state did not implement the promised reforms, thus declaring the Prajamandal an illegal organization in February 1939.⁶⁰ In Dhenkanal, which was considered to be the most poorly governed of all the Garjat states of Odisha, the Ruler's action in crushing unrest through firing by the police in October 1938 led to six deaths, including that of Baji Rout, the twelve-year-old boatman, who became another icon of the Odisha Prajamandal movement after Raghu-Dibakar. In Talcher, under the leadership of Pabitra Mohan Pradhan starting in September 1938, the repressive actions of the Raja led to the mass migration of about 65,000 people to Angul, the neighboring district that was under British rule — a different kind of non-violent struggle as compared to the violent confrontation in Ranpur.⁶¹

The comparison is illustrated in Table 1 below. As can be seen, the severity of the oppression

⁵⁷Ramusack, "Congress and the People's Movement," 468–470

⁵⁸The *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, 23 November 1939.

⁵⁹McLeod, *Sovereignty, Power, Control*, 210–212.

⁶⁰Das, *Prajamandal Movement in Nilgiri*, 61–62; "The Prajamandal Movement of Nilgiri," 75.

⁶¹"The Praja Mandal Movement and the Birth of Greater Orissa," *Orissa Review*, January 2009, 18.

by the Darbar in itself does not predict either the tactical nature or the level of fatalities in the ensuing protest: Dhenkanal, with its worse governance than Ranpur, saw a lesser number of casualties on the first day of its Prajamandal's suppression; similarly, Talcher, operating under comparable levels of severity, witnessed none whatsoever, having resorted to fleeing as its form of protest. That which is distinctive about Ranpur is not the severity of the Darbar oppression in comparison to its neighbours but a particular sequence of events that unfolded on January 5, 1939: an already agitated crowd, the fatal lathi charge leading to a misunderstanding, and a Political Agent who chose to fire on the agitated crowd. This case study thus serves as a counter to the assumption that the level of violence in the Prajamandal movement could be easily attributed only to the severity of feudal oppression – a hypothesis disproven by the comparative analysis in Section 1 above.

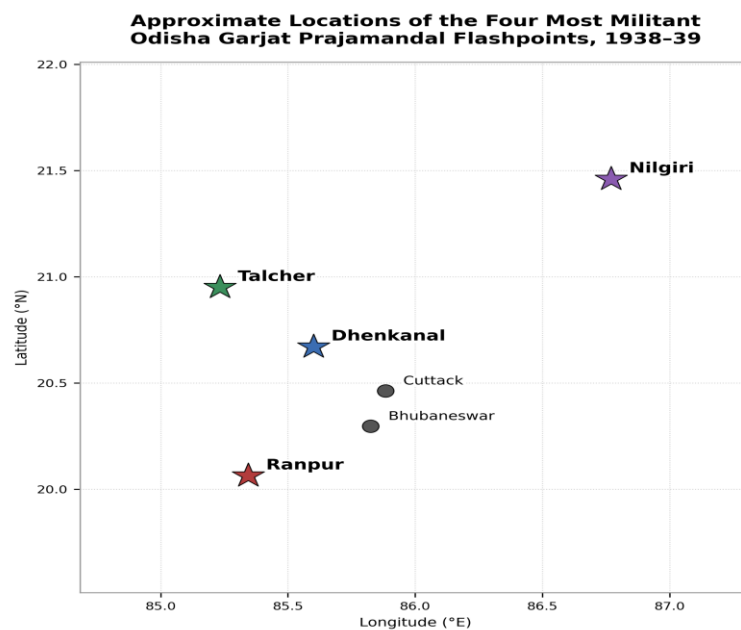


Figure 1. Approximate present-day locations of the four comparator towns discussed in this section (Ranpur, Dhenkanal, Talcher, Nilgiri) relative to Cuttack and Bhubaneswar. Coordinates are modern town locations, not a reconstruction of 1938–39 Garjat state boundaries, which are not shown to scale.

Table 1. Comparative overview of the four most militant Odisha Garjat Prajamandal agitations, 1938–39. Sources: as cited in the text of Section 13.

State	Principal Leadership	Dominant Tactic	Lethal Outcome	Immediate Result
Ranpur	Raghunath Mohanty, Dibakar Parida, Krupasindhu Mishra	Gherao of the palace demanding release of arrested leaders	Killing of Arjun Rout by police fire; retaliatory killing of Political Agent Bazalgette (5 Jan 1939)	Darbar suspended; Political Department direct rule; two leaders executed (1941)

Dhenkanal	(Ruler's suppression of unrest; martyrdom of Baji Rout)	Peasant unrest met with police firing	Six killed, including Baji Rout (Oct. 1938)	Regarded as worst-governed state; unrest continued into the 1940s
Talcher	Pabitrāmohan Pradhan	Mass exodus into British-administered Angul district	No lethal confrontation recorded	Estimated 65,000 people left the state; national and Congress attention
Nilgiri	Kailash Chandra Mohanty, with Harekrushna Mahatab and Sarangadhar Das	Negotiated settlement with the Durbar	No lethal confrontation recorded in the 1938–39 phase	Short-lived agreement; Prajamandal declared illegal, Feb. 1939, after reforms were not implemented

7. Legacy and Conclusion

7.1 Legacy: Martyrdom, Memory, and the Integration of the Garjat States

The movements continued in the aftermath of Ranpur incident, and in some instances, even escalated in the Odisha Garjats. The pressure brought about by such movements, coupled with the changes in the political situation after the Second World War, the increasing organizational power of the Odisha States' People's Conference, and the negotiations held by the Cabinet Mission in 1946, where Harekrushna Mahatab, who was then the Congress-appointed Premier of Odisha, presented a memorandum to the Cabinet Mission for the unification of the states with the province, eventually led to the fall of Garjat rule.⁶² Members of several Garjat states such as Dasapalla, Dhenkanal, Patna, Gangpur, Bamra, Ranpur, and Khandapara met at the Tripura House, Calcutta, to deliberate on the creation of the federal union of Odisha and Chhattisgarh states, and at the seventh Rulers' Conference in Raipur in December 1946, the rulers of Athmallik and Talcher concurred, in principle, on the creation of responsible governments in their respective jurisdictions. According to Bamzai's 2020 description of the negotiations between Nehru-Patel-Mountbatten, the above process taking place in Odisha is just one case study of the larger integration process of the nearly five hundred princely states of India.⁶³

After the attainment of Independence in 15 August 1947, a total of twenty-seven princely states signed agreements for the merger with Odisha, while the disintegration of the Eastern States Union in 1948 led to the merger of most of the states of Orissa Tributary States into the province. The largest among the Garjat states, Mayurbhanj, signed the Instrument of Merger

⁶²“Integration of Princely States Under Dr. Harekrushna Mahtab,” Orissa Review, April–May 2009, 8–10; “Role of H. K. Mahatab in the Integration of Princely States,” Orissa Review, January 2007, 30–32.

⁶³Bamzai, Princcstan, chaps. 5–7.

agreement on 17 October 1948, was taken over by the Government of India on 9 November 1948 and became subject to the administration of the Government of Orissa on 1 January 1949. A total of twenty-four princely states were finally merged into the Orissa Province.⁶⁴ while the neighboring states of Seraikela and Kharsawan, although with strong feelings of wanting to merge into Odisha, were controversially kept in Bihar – an act which caused a lot of unrest amongst the Odia-speaking people there and continues to be a regrettable part of Odishan history⁶⁵, and an indication that the merger did not wholly fulfill the desires of the Garjat people. The process of merger marked the end of the Prajamandal period, along with the end of the twenty-six princely states that had dominated the political scene in rural Odisha for more than one hundred years.

While the surviving victims of the Ranpur incident were later freed after independence, and the dreams of the people of the princely states of Garjat have been to a large extent, if not completely fulfilled through the merger process, neither Raghunath Mohanty nor Dibakar Parida lived to see it happen. Their sacrifice, which is referred to collectively as “Raghu-Dibakar,” holds a unique position in Odisha’s popular memory along with Baji Rout of Dhenkanal, as a representation of the sacrifice made by common peasants and young boys in the fight against the feudal system of princely states which has often gone unrecognized in the context of India’s freedom struggle that was mainly focused on British India, despite taking place in tandem with, and feeding into, it.⁶⁶

7.2 Conclusion

The Ranpur Prajamandal Movement and the story of Raghu-Dibakar exemplify the specific character of anti-colonial and anti-feudal struggle in Indian princely states, where the challenge comes not from opposition to the British Raj but rather to the rule of the princes who are nominally subordinate to that power.⁶⁷ The Ranpur incident highlights the speed with which peaceful and organized agitation could easily become violent once state repression shut off all legal avenues of protest. Local historical texts understand the ensuing punishment – the death penalty in the case of two leaders who are considered less significant and either transportation or imprisonment in the case of other leaders – as an excessive form of punishment meted out by the colonial legal system. As is the case with the interpretation of the Nilgiri, Dhenkanal, and Talcher incidents discussed in Section 5.3, the current paper simply states this interpretation without offering a further evaluation of its validity because it requires the judgment of the court for it. Together with the similar, but not identical cases of Nilgiri, Dhenkanal, and Talcher and summarized in Table 1, the Ranpur event marked a crucial step in the awakening of Odisha's princely-state peasantry politically, and ultimately led to the political integration of Odisha after Independence through the negotiated end of Garjat rule. In

⁶⁴“Amalgamation of Princely States,” Orissa Review, August 2007, 94–96; Balabhadra Ghadai, “Integration of Princely States: A Study,” Orissa Review, April 2006.

⁶⁵“Merger of Princely States of Orissa with Indian Dominion,” Orissa Review, January 2010, 14–17.

⁶⁶Rath, History of the Prajamandal Movement, 145.

⁶⁷Pati, Resisting Domination; Copland, Princes of India in the Endgame of Empire; Ramusack, Twilight of Empire.

the context of a larger historiography of princely India in light of recent historiography discussed in Section 3.1 and in light of crowd theory discussed in Section 2.2, this example also serves as a warning against theories that attribute violence among the masses merely to structural oppression, and instead highlights the interplay of rumor, crowd action, and the decisions made by individual government officials in making peaceful agitation turn into deadly violence.

Declarations

Funding: This research received no external or internal funding.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Ethics Approval: Not applicable. This study concerns historical documentary, press, and published secondary sources relating to events of 1938–1941; it does not involve living human subjects, and no IRB/ethics board review was therefore required.

Data Availability: No new dataset was generated. All sources cited are either publicly available published works (books, journal articles, government-published magazines) or, in the case of the Home Confidential Report cited via Baliarsingh and Rath, a secondary citation of an archival file held at the Orissa State Archives, Bhubaneswar, which this paper has not independently consulted (see Section 2.1).

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