

Mobilising popular opinion for the establishment of a linguistic state for the entire Oriya speaking population spread over different provinces and princely states was relatively easy : managing contradictions , especially those relating to land reforms was indeed a challenge , especially as the Congress was committed to abolition of intermediaries in land and recognition of the rights of the cultivators. Meanwhile, the Praja Mandals in the princely states was determined to replace the rule of the Rajas with that of elected representatives. While there was power struggle within the Congress even when it was still a ‘movement for independence’, it intensified when after the 1935 GoI Act when it participated in elections, and was invited to form Ministries, albeit with limited powers.

In the case of Orissa, the Congress did emerge as the largest party, but the first Premier of Orissa was KC Gajapati Narayan Deo of the Paralakhemundi royal family who held office for a few months before handing over to Biswanath Das from the Congress party. The first Budget speech of Orissa was delivered by Biswanath Das on 29<sup>th</sup> August 1937, in which the ambivalence of the Congress towards the new arrangement is spelt out quite clearly: *The new Government of India Act of 1935 has been thrust upon us against our will, and in spite of our stringent opposition. When this measure became an Act of (British) Parliament and was set to be enforced the INC changed its tactics, and took a dual parliamentary programme of combat and construction in order that this imported Constitution may go and we have the Constitution of our own through a Constituent Assembly to be formed by ourselves.. Then only we will have real Swaraj and our real growth*

The first budget was difficult . It involved settling administrative and financial issues with the predecessor governments of Madras and the Bihar. Das also made the point about ‘unfairness in the distribution of assets, and requested the GoI for immediate release of Rs 50 lakhs for the Orissa Flood Relief Committee. Irrigation, flood control and agriculture – all inter related – were on the top of the agenda of the first government, as also the spread of

agriculture extension, co-operatives, cottage industries and Khadi. Three important tenancy legislations – Madras Estates Land (Orissa Amendment Act), Orissa tenancy (Amendment Act) Bill, and the Money Lenders(Regulation ) Bill were introduced during his tenure.

The budget speech highlighted that more than half the area of the state (over 20,000 square miles and a population of 2.67 lakhs) was under the Partially Excluded Areas, in which the writ of the Governor ran supreme. Another takeaway was that the main income in Excise came, not from liquor, but from opium, and the difficulties in imposing prohibition especially the neighbouring princely states .However before the Das Ministry could actually come to grips with the situation, the Congress directed its legislators to quit the government in 1939.

After brief spells of Governor's rule and the second tenure of KC Gajapati Narayan Deo, the Congress resumed power in 1946 with Hare Krusna Mahtab as the Chief Minister. Such was the strength of big zamindars that Mahtab actually claimed that the big landlords 'will remain at least neutral', and that he would prevent any organized party from contesting the 1946 elections. Thus at freedom's doorstep, one observes a strengthening of alliance between the landlords and the Congress. In 37 of the 60 constituencies, the Congress was elected unopposed, and with another 11 seats in the contested constituencies, the Congress tally was 47 in a sixty member house.

The positive steps taken by his Ministry included the abolition of the Salt Tax, provisions for Temple entry , and Abolition of Untouchability , but with regard to agrarian reforms, a committee was set up to *'make land revenue uniform, remove intermediaries , prevent fragmentation of holdings, provision of common lands , amendment of laws relating to tenure, simplify sale laws, rent ceiling , agricultural income tax , as well as laws to make it easier for government to acquire land for private companies in the interest of planned economic development.'* It was clear that the pro -active land legislation, which was so central to the polity in the previous decade, had been side-tracked.

However it is also important to look at the context from the point of view of Mahtab. He wanted to unite the princely states with

Orissa on the one hand, and integrate the Adivasis in the agrarian economy of the state – and he had to choose the middle path between these spectrums.

Meanwhile the CPI led Kisan Sangha started direct action against the Zamindars, and mobilised the peasants for a Bhagchashi movement (share cropper) to claim three fifth of the gross produce as the farmers' share as well as written lease agreements .In November 1947, the Share Croppers Act officially accepted this proposition, but government of the day was rather indifferent to this responsibility.

As far as the princely states were concerned, they made a list ditch effort at trying to assert their sovereignty and independence, which led Biswanath Das, then a member of the Constituent Assembly to forcefully argue that with the lapse of paramount, sovereignty vested with the people of India .The Praja Mandals were clear that these principalities had to be merged with Orissa. Although Mahtab also broached the idea of an 'administrative merger ' than complete merger the States Ministry under Sardar Patel and VP Menon were clear : no exceptions were to be allowed , and though some Rajas tried to mobilise Adivasis against the farmers in the plains, they were up against the wall , and it must be placed on record that the Praja Mandal and the Communists were working together and in unison to get the princes to sign the Instrument of Accession for the merger of 24 princely states into Orissa.