



States into Statehood: Dr. Harekrushna Mahatab and the Political Integration of Angul's Princely Territories

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the integration of the princely states of Talcher, Athmallik, and Pallahara—now part of Angul district—into the modern state of Odisha. It examines the region's transition from feudal rule to democratic governance during the critical period of India's independence. A central focus is the Prajamandal movement, a powerful expression of people's resistance against the exploitative and autocratic rule of local kings. These grassroots uprisings, marked by mass mobilization, civil disobedience, and demands for democratic rights, played a crucial role in weakening princely authority. The essay also highlights the leadership of Dr. Hare Krushna Mahtab, whose political acumen and coordination with Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel facilitated the peaceful merger of 25 princely states into Odisha by 1948. By contextualizing the Prajamandal movement within the broader framework of national integration, the study emphasizes the dynamic interplay between popular resistance and visionary leadership in shaping the socio-political landscape of modern Odisha.

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Introduction

On 1st April'1993 Angul was carved out as a separate District from the old Dhenkanal District vide Notification No.14218 dated 27.03.93 of Revenue and Excise Department, Government of Odisha. Angul lies between, $20^{\circ}31'0''$ to $21^{\circ}41'0''$ North latitude and $84^{\circ}16'0''$ to $85^{\circ}23'0''$ East longitude. It shares its borders with Sundargarh in the north, Deogarh, Sambalpur and Sonapur in the west, Boudh and



Nayagarh districts in the south, Dhenkanal and Cuttack in the south-east and Keonjhar in the east. The present Angul district consists of four sub-divisions namely Angul, Talcher, Athmallik and Pallahara. Each of these sub-division had hoary past and at a point of time were princely states during the British rule.

On 16th September 1848, the British confiscated the princely state of Angul, stripping its last ruler, Loknath Singh (son of Raja Somanath Singh), of his hereditary kingship. Angul was then placed under the administration of the Superintendent of the Tributary Mahals. In 1891, it was constituted as a separate district, incorporating Khondmals. From that point, the British established a formal political structure in Angul, administering it through a Tahasildar, who oversaw revenue collection and justice¹.

On the other hand, until independence, the princely states of Talcher, Athmallik, and Pallahara operated as semi-autonomous entities under British colonial rule, retaining their sovereignty through agreements with the colonial administration. However, the rulers enforced oppressive practices such as Bethi, Begari, and Magana, leading to severe exploitation of the common people. This sparked widespread resistance, culminating in the Prajamandal or state people's movement, which reflected growing political awareness. Following independence, the integration of these states became essential for Odisha's political and administrative consolidation. With the efforts of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and Odisha's then premier, Dr. Hare Krushna Mahatab, they were merged into Odisha in 1948, abolishing feudal rule and establishing democratic governance².

This essay seeks to reassess the role of Dr. Hare Krushna Mahatab in the integration of the erstwhile princely states of present-day Angul district into Odisha, alongside 23 other princely states. It highlights his pivotal efforts in unifying Odisha, portraying him as the architect of a consolidated and administratively cohesive Odisha in the post-independence era.

Princely States of Angul- A Historical Survey

Until independence, the princely states of Talcher, Athmallik, and Pallahara operated as semi-autonomous entities under British colonial rule, retaining their sovereignty through agreements with the colonial administration. Below given a historical survey of these three princely states.

Talcher: The princely state of Talcher, spanning 399 square miles between 20°52' and 21°18' N latitude and 84°54' and 85°16' E longitude, was bordered by Bamara, Pallahara, Dhenkanal, and Angul. The Brahmani River flowed through the state, with Talcher village situated along its right bank.



Predominantly agricultural, the region had minor hill ranges near Samal, marking its boundary with Dhenkanal³.

Established in the 14th century, Talcher was composed of six administrative units known as Bisos: Remua, Khemoi, Balangi, Bajrakote, Nadikul, and Baruan, each ruled by zamindars or local chieftains⁴. By 1901, Talcher had 60,432 inhabitants across 293 villages, with a population density of 151 persons per square mile. The society comprised agrarian and tribal communities, alongside Brahmins, Karans, and Paiks⁵.

Talcher's ruling dynasty traced its lineage to Narhari Singh, a descendant of Arjun Singh, King of Jaipur, who settled in Odisha in 1471 AD. He became Talcher's first ruler, establishing its royal lineage⁶.

Raja Bhagirathi Birabar Harichandan (1778-1846) consolidated his rule and maintained cordial ties with the East India Company⁷. Raja Dayanidhi Birabar Harichandan (1846-1873), honoured with the title Mahindra Bahadur, provided famine relief during the Na-anka famine of 1866. Raja Rama Chandra Birabar Harichandan (1873-1891) modernized governance, established judicial courts, police stations, and promoted education. He also constructed Victoria Hall and Circuit House in 1887⁸.

Raja Sriman Kishore Chandra Birabar Harichandan (1891-1945), an able administrator, initiated educational reforms, established the Byabstha Parisada (legislative council), Panchayat system, and developed infrastructure, including railways and thermal power generation in 1924⁹.

His successor, Hrudaya Chandra Dev Birabar Harichandan (1945-1948), ruled briefly before Talcher merged with Odisha on 1st January 1948, under India's larger princely state integration efforts¹⁰.

Talcher evolved from a medieval polity into a progressive princely state, embracing modern education, administration, and infrastructure development. The efforts of rulers, particularly Kishore Chandra Birabar Harichandan, were instrumental in this transformation. The merger with India in 1948 marked the end of Talcher's independent existence, contributing to Odisha's territorial consolidation and India's broader nation-building process.

Athamallik: The princely state of Athamallik was situated between 20°37' and 21°5' N latitude and 84°16' and 84°48' E longitude, covering 730 square miles. It was bounded by Rairakhol to the north, Angul to the east, the Mahanadi River to the south, and Sonpur and Rairakhol to the west. The region was characterized by dense forests, hills, and fertile land along the Mahanadi, rich in graphite and iron ore deposits¹¹.



The state's origins trace back to Pratap Dev, a descendant of Jaipur's Raja, who defeated the Dorn Raja, a local tribal chief, and established his rule at Handapagarh. The discovery of a metal vessel (Handa) led to the area's initial name, Handapa. The state's reorganization into eight administrative units by a successor led to its renaming as Athamallik, meaning "land of eight Malliks"¹².

Historically, Athamallik's territory was reduced due to annexation by Angul. Initially a tributary of Baud, it lacked independent status until 1894, when the British granted a Sanad, recognizing it as a princely state. The ruling chief, initially a Zamindar, was formally recognized as Raja in 1874, and in 1890, Raja Mahendra Dev Samant was granted the personal title of Maharaja¹³. Athamallik, along with Baud, was transferred to the Orissa Division in 1837. The ruling dynasty, known as Kadamba Bansa, bore the Kadamba flower (*Nauclea orientalis*) as its emblem. The Sanads of 1894 and 1908 formalized tribute payments of Rs. 730, and succession required additional nazarana payments¹⁴. Raja Kishore Chandra Deo (b. 1904) ascended the throne as a minor in 1918, completing his education at Raj Kumar College, Raipur. His administration formally began in 1925, after British management ended. The administration followed Central Provinces' governance, with Gaontias (village headmen) playing key roles¹⁵.

Following India's independence, Athamallik merged with the Indian Union on 1st January 1948, ending feudal rule. Raja Kishore Chandra Deo relinquished his princely authority, integrating Athamallik into modern Odisha, marking a transition from tribal conflicts and feudal governance to political and administrative reforms.

Pallahara: Pallahara, a princely state in present-day Odisha, was founded by Santosh Pal of Dharanagar before the 18th century. Originally comprising 198 villages, its territory was reduced to 67 villages (452 sq. miles) due to annexations by Keonjhar, Talcher, and Dhenkanal¹⁶. The ruling Paumar Rajput dynasty, known as the Pal dynasty, was established with the support of local Savars, Khonds, Maihars, and Jhoras¹⁷. The state faced multiple territorial conflicts, including a prolonged dispute with Keonjhar, which claimed suzerainty until British intervention in 1825¹⁸.

Pallahara became fully independent from Keonjhar in the early 19th century following a succession dispute, with the British formalizing its status in 1830 by imposing an annual tribute of Sicca Rs. 250¹⁹. The Chiefs, initially titled Zamindars, received the hereditary title of "Raja" in 1874, following Raja Chakradhar Munipal's assistance in suppressing the 1867–68 Bhuiyan rebellion in Keonjhar²⁰. During the 1857 Rebellion, Pallahara remained loyal to the British, earning concessions, including the recognition of its Chief as Maharaja²¹.



Pallahara's governance evolved under British influence. Rani Annapurna signed an agreement with the East India Company in 1804, receiving a *Kaulnama* (assurance document). In 1842, its Sarbarakar issued an engagement prohibiting *Sati* under Governor-General's orders. The British granted an Adoption *Sunnud* in 1862, ensuring succession rights, followed by a *Sanad* in 1894 outlining the Raja's powers. Later *Sanads* (1898, 1908, 1915) refined administrative controls, shifting oversight from the Superintendent of Tributary Mahals to the Orissa Division Commissioner²².

Geographically, Pallahara was bordered by Bonai, Keonjhar, Talcher, and Bamra, with hilly terrain, dense *Sal* forests, and rivers like Samakoi and Mankara flowing into the Brahmani. The region had extreme climatic conditions and a predominantly agrarian economy. It was divided into nine *Praganas*, managed by *Behera Pradhans*, with village-level administration by *Sarbarakars*. British policy ensured firm control while limiting the Raja's autonomy. Pallahara merged with the Indian Union on January 1, 1948, following its accession on December 14, 1947, under the leadership of H.K. Mahatab and Sardar Patel.

Prajamandal Movement & after

At the beginning of 20th century, the Prajamandal movements in the princely states of Talcher, Athamallik, and Pallahara emerged as powerful responses to feudal exploitation and oppressive governance of the feudal ruler. In these regions, feudal chiefs imposed draconian practices such as Bethi (forced labor), Begari (unpaid labor), and Magana (compulsory gifts), sparking widespread discontent. The resistance gained momentum through local and national efforts, ultimately catalyzing the integration of these states into post-independence Odisha.

Talcher: Epicenter of Resistance: The movement in Talcher crystallized under the leadership of Pabitra Mohan Pradhan with the formation of the Prajamandal on September 6, 1938. Demanding the abolition of feudal exactions, fundamental rights, and agrarian reforms, the movement faced brutal repression from the Raja, triggering a mass exodus of 65,000 people to British-administered Angul. This crisis drew national attention, galvanizing support from the Indian National Congress and leaders like Hare Krishna Mahatab, who linked local struggles to the broader freedom movement. The Quit India Movement saw further escalation in 1942, when activists attempting to seize the Talcher palace were met with British aerial fire, resulting in several martyrs²³. Despite setbacks, sustained agitation led to Talcher's merger with Odisha on January 1, 1948, following negotiations spearheaded by Mahatab and Sardar Patel.



Athamallik: From Petitions to Mass Mobilization: In Athamallik, initial demands for responsible governance in 1938 were met with arrests, stalling progress until post-independence. In October 1947, Pabitra Mohan Pradhan mobilized thousands in a march from Kishorenagar, compelling the Raja to appoint interim ministers. This strategic pressure paved the way for the state's peaceful integration into Odisha, marking a triumph of organized civil disobedience²⁴.

Pallahara: Grassroots Mobilization: Pallahara's movement, closely tied to Talcher's struggle, focused on exposing administrative corruption and economic exploitation. Leaders like Udayanath Sahu and Nabaghana Pradhan rallied communities through clandestine meetings and public assemblies, advocating for civil liberties and reduced taxation. Though less confrontational, the agitation exposed systemic oppression and gained momentum with Congress support. Pallahara's merger in December 1947, formalized through the Instrument of Accession, underscored the cumulative impact of persistent grassroots activism²⁵.

Hare Krushna Mahatab's diplomatic efforts, alongside Sardar Patel, was pivotal in unifying these princely states with Odisha. The Congress's 1938 Haripura Session resolution and the All India States' People Conference bolstered demands for accountable governance. While each state's movement varied in intensity—from Talcher's militant clashes to Pallahara's reformist agitations—they collectively dismantled feudal autocracy, fostering political consciousness and setting the stage for Odisha's territorial consolidation. The Prajamandal movements not only challenged exploitative regimes but also exemplified the interplay between local resistance and national strategy in reshaping India's political landscape.

Hare Krushna Mahtab and Merger of the states

During the Prajamandal agitation in Odisha's princely states, H.K. Mahtab, as the Premier of Odisha, actively pursued their merger with the province. On 6 April 1946, he formally raised the issue before the Cabinet Mission at Simla and later wrote to Sir Stafford Cripps on 26 April, but the matter was not prioritized²⁶. Undeterred, Mahtab continued advocating for integration. In May 1946, he issued a press statement urging ruling chiefs to support a unified Odisha. However, this was met with resistance²⁷.

Mahtab argued that Odisha was financially weak, surviving on government subventions, while the smaller princely states lacked resources for development. He proposed pooling resources for economic prosperity and assured rulers that dynastic privileges and privy purses would be safeguarded²⁸. Additionally, he suggested a Planning Board with equal representation from the states and the province to oversee economic and administrative integration²⁹.

Despite Mahtab's efforts, conservative rulers strongly opposed the merger. The Raja of Saraikela and Maharaja of Kalahandi reacted sharply³⁰. On 12 August 1946, the Kalahandi State Legislative Assembly passed a resolution rejecting Mahtab's merger proposal³¹.

In response, Mahtab warned rulers to recognize the "signs of the times"³². He dismissed their belief that popular uprisings were orchestrated by external forces³³. Committed to integration, Mahtab attended multiple meetings with rulers of Odisha and Chhattisgarh, advocating that administrative collaboration was the first step toward full merger³⁴.

However, opposition intensified in June 1947 when the All India States People's Conference (AISPC) rejected the merger, supporting the Eastern States Union (ESU) instead. B. Pattabhi Sitaramayya, AISPC President, doubted Mahtab's claim that Odisha's people wanted integration³⁵. Meanwhile, P.H. Krishna Rao, Prime Minister of the ESU, accused Mahtab of anti-state activities. The Ruler of Patna further complicated matters by pushing for a separate Koshal territory and opposing the Hirakud Dam project³⁶.

British authorities also obstructed Odisha's progress, encouraging ESU and Hyderabad to form a large independent unit, using Bastar as a link. This posed a serious threat to Odisha's integration and India's unity³⁷. Despite these challenges, Mahtab's persistence and strategic efforts ultimately paved the way for the merger of princely states, shaping modern Odisha.

The Case of Talcher, Athamallik and Pal-Lahara

The princely states of Talcher, Pallahara, and Athmallik were part of Odisha's tributary mahals. Pallahara, a Class 'C' state, signed the merger document without resistance. However, Athmallik and Talcher, both Class 'B' states, initially hesitated.

In July 1946, the rulers of these states, along with those of Kalahandi, Nilgiri, Boudh, Sonapur, Dasapalla, Dhenkanal, Patna, Gangpur, Bamra, Ranpur, Khandapara, Kharsawan, and others, convened at Tripura House, Calcutta, to form a federal union of Odisha and Chhattisgarh states³⁸. Subsequently, at the seventh Rulers' Conference in Raipur (December 1946), the rulers of Athmallik and Talcher agreed to establish responsible government³⁹.

Meanwhile, growing unrest prevailed in these states, with Prajamandal movements demanding responsible governance, sometimes through coercive means. Despite their hopes of retaining power, the rulers faced increasing pressure as the central government pushed for rapid integration. Odisha's political landscape remained uncertain, marked by chaos and confusion.

To expedite the integration of princely states with Odisha, a Merger Conference was convened in Cuttack from 14 to 15 December 1947 by H.K. Mahtab, the Premier of Odisha. On 13 December, Sardar Patel and his officials arrived, and Mahtab presented the merger case, citing the sanads granted to Odisha's ruling chiefs. Patel, after deliberation, decided to merge all Class A, B, and C states with Odisha. Consequently, he instructed Mahtab to discard the earlier memorandum drafted by the Ministry of States, and a new one was prepared by B.C. Mukherjee, Odisha's Chief Secretary⁴⁰.

Mahtab assured Patel that failure to merge the princely states would result in severe lawlessness, which the Odisha Government would not permit. He was prepared to take over all states immediately if the rulers resisted. Military police were strategically deployed to handle any dissent. On 14 December, a meeting with the rulers of Class B and C states was held at the Government House in Cuttack, presided over by Patel, with Mahtab in attendance. Among those present were the rulers of Pallahara and Talcher, while the ruler of Athmallik abstained⁴¹.

Patel emphasized that the merger was a family matter and urged the rulers to cooperate. However, they sought guarantees on the continuation of the privy purse and dynastic succession. Patel reassured them that these assurances were incorporated in the merger agreement and would later be reflected in the Indian Constitution. Despite these guarantees, the rulers requested additional time to consider the agreement. A follow-up meeting was scheduled for the evening, presided over by V.P. Menon, where the rulers of 12 Class B and C states, including Talcher and Pallahara, signed the merger agreement on 15 December 1947⁴².

Athmallik, however, continued to hesitate. In response, Menon warned on 15 December that states unable to maintain law and order would be taken over by force. He also addressed certain demands of the rulers to facilitate the merger. With no viable alternatives and a growing lack of trust in either the Central Government or the Prajamandals, the remaining rulers followed the precedent set by Nilgiri and agreed to merge with Odisha.

By 15 December, the rulers of major Class A states—including Boudh, Bamra, Dhenkanal, Gangpur, Kalahandi, Patna, Sareikella, Sonapur, Keonjhar, and Nayagarh, except Mayurbhanj—reluctantly signed the merger document⁴³. Athmallik also merged, effective from 1 January 1948⁴⁴. Dr. Mahtab viewed this as a historic achievement, as the successful merger of 25 princely states paved the way for Odisha's political consolidation, creating a unified province within independent India.

The merger of princely states with Odisha was not a seamless process; rather, it involved strategic pressure and coercive measures when necessary. H.K. Mahtab played a crucial role in this integration by adopting a firm stance against resistant rulers. During negotiations, Sardar Patel indirectly



warned the rulers about the consequences of non-compliance, but it was Mahtab who took a more direct approach.

Mahtab's strong warning to the ruler of Ranpur had a profound impact, particularly on the rulers of Class B and C states. His assertive handling of the situation created a sense of urgency among the hesitant rulers, making it clear that resistance would not be tolerated. This approach significantly influenced the decisions of rulers like those of Talcher, Pallahara, and Athmallik, who ultimately agreed to the merger⁴⁵.

By aligning his strategy with Sardar Patel and V.P. Menon, Mahtab ensured that Odisha's integration process remained on track. His ability to balance diplomatic persuasion with firm action played a decisive role in bringing 25 princely states into Odisha, contributing to the formation of a unified province within independent India.

Hare Krushna Mahatab: Architect of Odisha's Political Integration- An Introspection

Hare Krushna Mahtab's political career in Odisha began in 1920 when he joined the Indian National Congress and actively participated in the Non-Cooperation Movement. His early activism included championing tenant farmers' rights in Kanika, leading to imprisonment in 1922. He later played a key role in the Salt Satyagraha (1930), earning another jail term. Following Gandhi's suspension of the movement, Mahtab focused on rural empowerment in Balasore (1933–1936).

With the creation of Odisha as a separate province in 1936, Mahtab prioritized strengthening the Provincial Congress Committee rather than seeking office. Recognized for his strategic acumen, he was nominated to the AICC Working Committee by Subhash Chandra Bose in 1938. He also aligned with the Orissa State People's Conference, addressing grievances in princely states like Nilgiri, Ranpur, and Talcher. In 1939, he proposed the merger of princely states with Odisha to Viceroy Lord Linlithgow, but World War II and the resignation of Congress ministries stalled progress.

Arrested during the Quit India Movement (1942), Mahtab remained politically active upon his release in 1945. Leading the Congress to victory in the 1946 elections, he prioritized state integration despite opposition from rulers and the Eastern States Union. Sardar Patel and V.P. Menon initially proposed forming state unions with limited autonomy for rulers, but Mahtab opposed this and persuaded Nehru and Patel to support complete integration⁴⁶.

To advance the merger, Mahtab invited Patel to Cuttack and presented his plan, which led to the abandonment of Menon's earlier proposal. On 14–15 December 1947, Odisha's princely rulers, after deliberation, agreed to sign the merger document. Kalahandi was the last to comply, while Mayurbhanj



resisted, citing its responsible government. Meanwhile, Talcher, Pallahara, and Athamallik were among the first to sign the Instrument of Accession in December 1947, ensuring their formal merger with Odisha on January 1, 1948.

The merger faced criticism, with some rulers alleging coercion and officials questioning Patel's bypassing of cabinet discussions⁴⁷. Despite opposition from rulers like those of Kalahandi, Patna, and Sareikela, the merger was legally finalized in August 1949⁴⁸. Mahtab defended the integration, highlighting Odisha's early success in Nilgiri as a model for broader state consolidation, reinforcing his role in shaping post-independence Odisha.

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