Letters from a Province: Harekrushna Mahtab to Jawaharlal Nehru, 1947–1949

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Abstract
On 1 November 1947, Harekrushna Mahtab, premier of Orissa, British/independent India’s youngest province, wrote a letter to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. This was in reply to the first of Nehru’s famous letters to the provincial chiefs. In it, Nehru had expressed his wish to read similarly from them and Mahtab responded in kind. For the next 2 years, Mahtab wrote to Nehru, before leaving Orissa to become a union minister. These letters, present among the Mahtab Papers (NMML, New Delhi), provide an often-downplayed vantage of the province, to view the concerns of the nation contained in Nehru’s letters. Where the latter were meant ‘to educate and exhort’, the former comprised a return catalogue of official information, societal caution, and the Congress Party’s particularities.

Keywords
Province, Harekrushna Mahtab, Orissa, Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel, nation, ‘Congress System’

Introduction
Professor Biswamoy Pati (1955–2017), the late-leading historian of Orissa, has left behind a corpus of writing, recovering that young province from the margins of modern Indian history. This collection is held together by three strands, namely, those of that region’s presence in the ‘anti-colonial’ movement, its subsequent interactions with the ‘Nehruvian nation-state’, and its contribution to the post-colonial development ‘order’ (2012, p. 21). Dr Harekrushna Mahtab (1899–1987), the then-leading Congressman in Orissa, at the centre of these concentric circles, similarly recalled that ‘from 1946 to 1950’, he focused on three things: ‘a new capital at Bhubaneswar, the [princely] states’ merger [and] the building of the Hirakud dam’ (Oral History Transcript 306, Harekrushna Mahtab, NMML, pp. 200–201). This regional satrap was also rather regular among his provincial counterparts to correspond with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, in a manner mirroring the latter’s recently re-celebrated letters for a nation (Khosla, 2014). Mahtab’s letters provide the matter under focus in this article that enable another viewing

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of Nehru and Nation, anchored in a new but also backward province, with its fresh, developmental challenges, its old regional identity, and the party politics in between.

This material is framed around a protagonist, whose ‘ascendancy’ over 1942–1946 over the north-south regional divide and the caste-based cliques in Orissa Congress would see him, coming from a non-Brahmin zamindari family from northern Balasore, be ‘revered as the “Maker of Greater Utkal”’ (Rao, 1965, pp. 104–108) in a ‘decade of development’ (Das, 1978, p. 443). Mahtab was, at this transitional time, in a pantheon of Congress leaders, whose words and deeds enable a small-slice political history of both his province and the party, by being the archetypal ‘link man’ of the client-patron network that characterized this ‘Congress System’ (Kothari, 1964).

Harekrushna Mahtab was first elected to the Bihar and Orissa Legislative Council in 1924. Subsequently, he served as chairman of the District Board Balasore (1924–1928), emerged as president of the Utkal Provincial Congress Committee in 1930 and 1937 and was elevated as a member of the Congress Working Committee twice (1938, 1945). He became premier in 1946, after the provincial elections and remained so till 1950. After a ministerial stint in New Delhi till 1952 and a gubernatorial one in Bombay in 1955, he returned to Orissa as chief minister (1957–1961). Thus, Mahtab came from and went to precisely that arena of politics that Nehru often dismissed as ‘provincial-ism’, but that had indispensable ‘electoral implications’ (Zachariah, 2004, pp. 207–208).

In detailing this domain by drawing upon Mahtab’s letters from that 2-year period, this article is structured around five themes: law and order, party organizations and politics, languages and provinces, states and Adivasis and projects and policies. They chime with some of the prime ministerial emphases, while differing in their Patelite dispositions. Mahtab’s letters juxtapose provincial issues, fed the national apex then and provide the trees comprising its wood to study now. The letters also contain nuggets like it took a fortnight, instead of the usual 4 days, for Nehru’s first letter to reach Cuttack because of a postal strike, which, in other words, did not leave unaffected even the prime minister’s correspondence.²

In presenting aspects of the political persona of premier Harekrushna Mahtab between 1946 and 1950, this article argues that, first, they contrast elements of continuity and change in the state in Orissa across the divide of 1947. Second, the article unpacks the clustered concerns of a young regime, whose past impoverishment and new statehood (estd 1936) made Orissa a constructive arena. Third, while the post-1952 period has seen more scholarship on the Congress party’s dominance in Indian democracy (Kochanek, 1968), this trajectory had a somewhat still-shadowed pre-history in the liminal late 1940s, fragments of which, this article attempts to spotlight. Its purpose remains less to reconstruct the provincial picture at ‘freedom’s doorstep’, well-described as an ‘alternative order’ of ‘elite politics, administration, unification, development, and communalism’ (Pati, 2002, p. 198), than to render a sketch of a politician at work within it.

**Law and Order**

Even before the transfer of power, Harekrushna Mahtab had felt a desire to have ‘the system of regular letters from the Governor-General [to] the Governors be adopted by the future Prime Minister’. Drafting a letter of complaint to Nehru, then-member home and states, Vallabhbhai Patel and the then-Congress president, J. B. Kripalani, Mahtab wrote thus:

² 3 November 1947, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment), NMML.
I share my feelings with other Premiers … that the provincial ministers are not informed … leave aside consult [ed] … This is obviously not an enviable position … This policy may have the effect of creating fissiparous tendencies and a sense of irresponsibility towards the centre.3

Apart from wishing to be informed from above, Mahtab also endeavoured to inform those below in a manner imitating not just Nehru’s emerging habit but continuing the colonial state’s bureaucratic practice. On 5 September 1947, he wrote to his district officials that ‘in view of the changed circumstances’, it was necessary that they ‘should know the background of all policies’.4 In the first of his letters to them, Mahtab identified the ‘standstill’ situation with the neighbouring Hyderabad princely state and the stagnant economic condition as the ‘two major problems’ faced by the country, with special significances for Orissa. He had received reports that money for the two mosques being built in the Koraput district—‘the number of Muslims [there] is less than 1%’—was coming from Hyderabad as well as that some of the eastern princely states were ‘negotiating with Hyderabad’ and forwarded these to New Delhi.5 There, his patron, Vallabhbhai Patel shrugged them off, because ‘in Orissa, the Muslim population [was] infinitely small’.6 In that month of post-Partition violence—towards which Mahtab’s contribution was giving ‘shelter to 2,500 refugees’—in another letter to Patel, he anticipated trouble for the province from other sources, anticipating the fodder for his later correspondence with the prime minister: ‘Lawlessness … the [language] Telugu-Oriya question … the tense situation in the [eastern princely] States … the Communist Party [and] popular [left] organisations…’.7

So far as Orissa was concerned, if the absence of violence sufficed then there was ‘no communal trouble’ in 1947 barring isolated occasions at Jharsuguda (Sambalpur) in April, when the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) ‘observed its first anniversary’, the circulation of an ‘anti-Muslim leaflet’ at Cuttack in May, and an instance of ‘police firing on a “Muslim” gathering, which [had] obstructed a “Hindu” procession’ at Bhadrap (Balasore) in June (Pati, 2002, p. 208). With Hindus constituting 98% of the population, it was ‘rather easy to keep them under control’ and, in accordance with Nehru’s wish, Mahtab claimed to be ‘very particular about keeping the Musalmans satisfied in all respects except one … stopping music before mosque’. On this point, he was grateful to the ‘reasonable section of the Musalmans’, for appreciating his inability.8

Meanwhile, from April 1946, the RSS had opened its account in Orissa. Mukund Rao Moonje, a nephew of B. S. Moonje, the Nagpur-based doctor who had left the Congress in 1920 and headed the Hindu Mahasabha from 1927 (Bapu, 2012, p. 100), started ‘a unit in Cuttack [before] Gandhi’s assassination’ but, it was in 1949 that Baburao Paldhikar was appointed as ‘the first prant pracharak’, with his earliest contacts being among the ‘Congress dissident[s]’ (Kanungo, 2003, p. 3298). They gave it an initial ‘attention’ that gradually dwindled except at Jharsuguda and Mahtab attributed the communal mistrust there to the RSS, while admitting that ‘some Congressmen are more communal’. 9 Nehru would reiterate his concern about the activities of the RSS in early-December 1947 to his premiers, complaining that they had ‘taken no action in this matter’ and charging that ‘a number of Congressmen … are attracted to [it]’.10

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3 Undated, between 2 June and 15 August 1947, Subject File Serial No. 6, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
4 5 September 1947, Mahtab to his officials, Subject File No. 13, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
5 22 May 1947, Mahtab to Patel, Subject File Serial No. 6, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
6 28 May 1947, Patel to Mahtab, Subject File Serial No. 6, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
7 19 September 1947, Mahtab to Patel, Subject File Serial No. 6, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
8 See footnote 6.
9 3 November 1947, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
10 7 December 1947, Nehru to provincial premiers, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
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Concealing his appreciation of ‘the discipline of the RSS’ (Kanungo, 2003, p. 3301), Mahtab assured Nehru that he did ‘not show any concession’ to it. In Sambalpur, he had ordered legal proceedings against it but accepted that ‘some Congressmen [were] involved in [it]’. This was worrying because the Orissa Muslim League had ‘wound itself up’, and therefore Mahtab agreed that it was ‘the duty of government to control the Hindu elements…’. With Gandhi’s assassination and the consequent banning of the RSS in February 1948, there was a temporary lull in the communal situation in the country as the central control over intelligence apparatus was tightened, so much so that Mahtab pleaded with Patel that such reports about Orissa ‘should be submitted to him directly’ (Das, 1973, Vol. VII, pp. 530–531).

This quiet was threatened in the autumn of 1948, by developments in Hyderabad, regarding which Nehru stressed that the Muslims in India have ‘emphatically condemned the activities of the Razakars’ and, instead, ‘danger may come from the Hindu communalists’. Two days before the military invasion of Hyderabad on 11 September 1948, he repeated that ‘…what we have to guard against is any non-Muslim aggression…’. Once the take-over was achieved (Noorani, 2014), Nehru urged his premiers to order the release of Muslims arrested ‘for their sympathies with Hyderabad or on suspicion …’. In reply, Mahtab underlined to him that these were not sentiments in line with the wishes of the majority, which would extract its pound of flesh as found by the visiting Pandit Sunderlal, Qazi Abdul Ghaffar and Maulana Abdulla Misri mission in November–December 1948 (Purushotham, 2015). Next door in Orissa, Mahtab was exulting that ‘disgruntled persons were looking upon Hyderabad … the Communists were banking on the conflict. Now they have been disillusioned’.

Reminding Nehru that ‘wild vulgar abuses are heaped upon you in public meetings’, given his wish to be ‘generous and friendly’ towards Muslims, Mahtab utilized this to press ‘for legislation to prevent personal criticism of Ministers’. In August 1947, in a signed editorial in his landlord-funded newspaper Pratatantra, he had exhorted ‘the public to realize the responsibilities of independence’ (Pati, 2002, p. 210). Arguing in colonial terms that ‘vilification [affected] discipline’, Mahtab declared that ‘in India, people have to be trained in democracy and if that requires a little coercion … that should not be minded’.

Party Organizations and Politics

Unlike Nehru, to Mahtab, it was the socialist and the communist parties, who provided the biggest challenge to the Congress organization. Orissa was among the states where the Congress Socialists were strong (Weiner, 1957, pp. 36–37, 49) and Mahtab represented that wing of the party that had forced ‘the Socialist break from Congress’ (Weiner, 1957, p. 42), led by Patel. The Congress, as has been well put, ‘after [their] departure, was a centrist party with a leftist rhetoric, dominated by right-wingers but fronted by a moderate left-winger’ (Zachariah, 2004, p. 166).

Before all that, in February–March 1947, when the Congress lost a by-election in the district of Sambalpur, Mahtab complained to Patel that the ‘Congress Socialist Party [CSP] got hold of the

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11  6 November 1947, Mahtab to Azad, Subject File Serial No. 6, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
12  12 December 1947, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
13  2 May 1948, Nehru to provincial premiers, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
14  9 September 1948, Nehru to provincial premiers, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
15  21 September 1948, Nehru to provincial premiers, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
16  23 September 1948, Mahtab to his officials, Subject File Serial No. 13, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
17  1 September 1949, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
affirming the ‘socialist challenge’ in the province (Das, 1973, Vol. V, p. 269). Eventually, no real damage was done as the winning candidate, uncle of the deceased incumbent—the local zamindar—‘applied to the Congress’. 18 After all on the question of zamindari abolition, an issue that Mahtab had side-tracked since 1946 so as to keep the landlords ‘neutral’ (Pati, 2002, pp. 198–202), he now proposed to ‘guarantee’ compensation. Nehru favoured a ‘cooperative’ but left it to the premiers to ‘deal with it’. 19 It was thus that Mahtab’s party men were ‘intervening between landlords and peasants … [and in] strained caste relations’ (Pati, 2002, pp. 202, 208).

In the summer of 1948, Mahtab mocked the communists for ‘their imagination for armed revolt’ in the coastal district of Ganjam, where they were ‘organising villages into forts’—the politics of the Kisan Sangha there ‘occupied the centre of Communist Party’s activities’ (Pati, 2002, p. 211)—and Mahtab’s ministry ‘decided to locate police stations…’. This step turned sour when villagers objected to it, the police fired and three people, including two women, were killed. 20 The prime minister hastened to reply and hoped that Mahtab ‘will deal with the Communists individually’, as he did not ‘want any more banning’. 21 Mahtab continued to give personal attention to the matter and soon had ‘70 communist detenues’. This brought an end to their anti-zamindari and pro-share-cropper movements that had been going on since March 1947 in the districts of Cuttack, Puri and Balasore and which Mahtab had hitherto met with a classic carrot (Share-croppers’ Act, November 1947)–and-stick (Firing in Ganjam, May 1948) (Pati, 2002, pp. 211–214).

As for the CSP, in Mahtab’s reckoning, it ‘would have gone out of existence but for the fillip given by Mrs. Asaf Ali’; wife of the governor of Orissa, whom Mahtab had accepted in June 1948 (Das, 1973, Vol. VI, p. 314). He had agreed to Nehru’s suggestion of Asaf Ali as they had ‘spent nearly three years … in Ahmednagar prison’ (Gopal, 1987, Second Series, Vol. VI, pp. 402–403, 407). And so, Mahtab held Aruna Asaf Ali’s association initially ‘helpful in that the local socialists … would have [otherwise created] unpleasant situations …’. An example of this was provided by ‘Sarangadhar Das, Congress MLA [and] a member of the Constituent Assembly [CA]’. As an MLA could not simultaneously attend both, Das resigned from the former and released a statement criticizing the party’s ‘loss of touch with the common man’. By January 1949, however, Patel was asking Nehru to help Mahtab by restraining ‘Mrs. Asaf Ali [from] public activities [there]’ (Das, 1974, Vol. IX, p. 98). Subsequently, in the by-election in Orissa, Mahtab found ‘that all kinds of people had combined to fight the Congress’; 22 presaging the emergence of the Ganatantra Parishad, ‘a grouping of local landlords [ex-princes]’ (Guha, 2008, p. 284).

This factionalism in the region, however, was a left-over from inter-war politics (Acharya, 2008; Nanda, 2008). Mahtab recalled Orissa Congress as containing four clusters led by Nilkantha Das and Pandit Godavaris Misra (the Swarajist veterans of the 1920s), Nabakrushna and Malati Chaudhury (CSP, 1934), Utkal Mani Gopabandhu Das (Gandhian) and Biswanath Das and himself (Patelite) (Oral History Transcript, Harekrushna Mahtab, NMML, p. 199). By April 1946, Mahtab had succeeded as the ‘seasoned soldier’ of the Sardar (Das, 1972, Vol. II and 1973, Vol. V, p. lii), and like the latter, relied more and more on his senior ICS/IP officers (Pati, 2002, p. 200), seeking ‘to retain’ even the Europeans after August 1947 (Das, 1972, Vol. III and 1973, Vol. V, p. 274).

In 1949, after a provincial tour, Mahtab claimed to Nehru that the modus operandi of the Socialist Party was ‘the same’ as that of the communists, with the difference being ‘only in degree’. This method

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18 25 March 1947, Mahtab to Patel, Subject File Serial No. 6, Mahtab Papers (I Installment).
19 6 August 1948, Nehru to Mahtab, Jawaharlal Nehru (SG) Papers, File No. 12 (Part 1), NMML.
20 3 June 1948, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Installment).
21 8 June 1948, Nehru to Mahtab, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Installment).
22 1 July 1949, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Installment).
was ‘that some young men are trained in drilling and lathi play and with [their] help … the villagers are terrorised …’.23 Mahtab’s tour had been boycotted by the CSP and he quipped that while the ‘Communist party disturbs public meetings; the Socialist party attempts not to have [them]’. However, acknowledging them as a ‘danger of disruption’, Mahtab argued again that ‘too much public criticism of Congress [was] not helpful’. In Orissa, he felt ‘pressure from West Bengal [Tebhaga] and Madras [Telangana]’, from where the stronger Communist Party movements were ‘trying to link up’. Dealing with it often ran into a legal-administrative cul-de-sac of the 1935 Act and Mahtab claimed in August 1949 that the Communist Party had ‘gained a victory over the police, when two under-trial prisoners escaped’. The practice of handcuffing and tying the prisoners had been stopped and, feeling compelled ‘to revise notions of civil liberty’, Mahtab argued that in the colonial days, the Congress, ‘when breaking laws’ was ‘inviting punishment’, and wanted Nehru to reconsider ‘whether the same regard should be shown to [the CPI]’.24

A month later, elaborating, he was ‘constrained to observe that unnecessary sensitiveness is exhibited whenever criticisms are made’, complained that ‘the propaganda [of] the Government, [was] very defective’, and wanted ‘a strong attitude against critics …’.25 This backdrop helps contextualize the result of the general elections of 1952 in Orissa, where the Congress was opposed effectively by the Ganatantra Parishad, which, in the state legislature, won 31 seats against the Congress tally of 67. While many landlords and feudal chiefs had ‘thronged the Congress’, others ‘reaped an impressive political harvest’, in opposition (Pati, 2002, p. 222).

An anonymous warning had been shot across the party’s bow in early 1952, when a ‘common man’ sent a note, making charges of widespread corruption in the province with a complicit Mahtab at its helm, to Nehru.26 Mahtab dismissed these as ‘allegations [from] 1947–48’, on which he had received a clean chit,27 for ‘judicial instrumentalities [notwithstanding], there [was] a party … effect’ (Morris-Jones, 1967, p. 130) at play, in such moments.

Languages and Provinces

Oriya–Bengali and Oriya–Telugu skirmishes were among Mahtab’s major identity-related worries, providing another context to the text of the linguistic reorganization of states in India in the mid-1950s (Kudaisya, 2014). The ‘vernacular in the making of modern Orissa’ has had a pre-history (Mishra, 2011) and, from his first letter, Mahtab reported its stoking by some Bengali papers and the consequent looting of Oriyas’ shops, accompanied by assault, in Calcutta. Soon, as incidents of ‘insult towards the Bengalis’ broke out in Orissa, Mahtab responded by ‘posting [a] Bengali District Magistrate’. As for the latter, Mahtab admitted that ‘the controversy between the Telugus and the Oriyas’ was ‘acute’, but blamed ‘some Andhra Congressmen’ for it, who wanted to amalgamate parts of Orissa ‘with the future Andhra Province’. Mahtab was worried that it was providing fodder to the old organization Utkal Sammillani (estd. 1903), as on the border with Madras especially, ‘the feeling between the Telugus and the Oriyas [was] estranged’.28

23 15 July 1949, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
24 1 August 1949, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
25 1 September 1949, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
26 29 February 1952, anonymous letter to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 53, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
27 11 March 1952, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 53, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
28 3 November 1947, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
In early 1948, Orissa’s relations with its neighbours on three sides—Bihar, Bengal and the princely states—worsened, as all were ‘dissatisfied with [their] boundaries’. Following the decision of the rulers of the Seraikela and Kharsawan states to merge with Orissa, an agitation had begun for their amalgamation with Bihar, for geographically these states were located within the former. While deploring this agitation as ‘most un-dignifying’, the prime minister told Mahtab to consider ‘the wishes of the inhabitants …’ (Gopal, 1986, Second Series, Volume IV, p. 542). By February 1948, Mahtab’s correspondence with Dr Rajendra Prasad was indeed taking quarrelsome proportions and Nehru was lamenting this ‘unfortunate provincialism’, disliking the behaviour of Bihar government, and terming some Patna newspapers as ‘peculiarly bad’. But he also urged Mahtab ‘to win over … the Bihar government’ (Gopal, 1987, Second Series, Vol. V, p. 448).

Consequently, Mahtab to Patna to meet the Bihar premier Dr Sri Krishna Sinha in March 1948, where both sides found it impossible ‘to retrace’ their steps, while agreeing that a ‘majority of Adivasis [there] was against amalgamation with Orissa’, but a ‘majority of others was in favour of it’. Mahtab claimed that the Bihar government was ‘making use of the Adibasi agitation’; for the former, the 1947 transition had brought yet more ‘domination’ (Pati, 1993). Bihar’s territorial claims were later supported by the ruler of Kharsawan, however, upon a suggestion from V. P. Menon, secretary in the States Department, the state was to be merged with Orissa. The previous agitation renewed, the resultant ‘chaos’ was quelled by ‘the military police’ and ‘a conference was called in New Delhi’. Eventually, Patel would decide that Seraikela and Kharsawan, ‘being two islands in the district of Singhbhum, should go to Bihar’ (Menon, 1956, p. 173). As for the remaining states, Mahtab sought their ‘legal amalgamation’ with Orissa. He feared ‘fissiparous tendencies’ in these colonial ‘creation of States out of ordinary estates …’, which, unless integrated, would ‘not to be reconciled’. 29

Before that could happen, the situation got worse. In April 1948, Sinha complained to Patel that Bihar officials were being denied entry in Seraikela and Kharsawan by Mahtab’s people (Das, 1973, Vol. VII, p. 515). In turn, Mahtab brought up Bihar ministers talking about their ‘temporary’ merger with Orissa thereby causing ‘confusion’ (Das, 1973, Vol. VII, pp. 517–518). When Rajendra Prasad brought up the arrest of two Bihar Congress workers by Orissa police, Mahtab shot back that as the ‘INC president, [Prasad] should listen to the other side’ too, which—for him—was a revival of the Eastern States Union and incitement of the Adivasis (Das, 1973, Vol. VII, pp. 512–513). Always connecting them with the ‘Adibasi Association of Joypal Singh’, Mahtab once related the arrest of 5 Adivasis at Balasore, who, calling themselves ‘Kshetriya aborigines’ and speaking Hindi, ‘did not disclose their identity’. That did not stop Mahtab from suspecting that they had ‘come from the border of Hyderabad’, 30 and insisting—later—that the ‘so-called Aryans belonged to the same race and religion as the so-called ab originals’ because of ‘so much mixture’. He would approach the CA ‘not to call these people as tribes, but [as] backward classes …’. 31

However, for Mahtab, people from Bihar and Bengal and the Adivasis, troublesome as they were, were overtaken by ‘the most communally minded people’—the Andhras. Narrating an incident from Berhampur of June 1949, in which ‘some Andhras were taking out a procession regarding medium of instruction’, Mahtab wrote to Nehru that when ‘some Oriyas objected to it, the police intervened’. Subsequently, the government order was ‘revised’ and Mahtab flashed a warning that ‘the medium of instruction, if it is to be the provincial language, [it] will cause resentment’. This ‘Oriya-Andhra’ pull had an immediate past and Ganjam and Koraput were the districts, where during the 1946 election campaign,...

29 28 March 1948, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
30 3 November 1947, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
31 15 July 1949, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
the Andhra Congressmen had clashed with their Utkal counterparts (Das, 1972, Vol. II). Mahtab was especially irate at the Telugu lawyer Dr Lanka Sundaram and Dr Pattabhi Sitaramayya, founder of Andhra provincial Congress committee (1918) and president of the Congress (1948), for issuing ‘communal statements …’.

Claiming that the ‘Telugu-speaking people in general [were] living peacefully’, except at Berhampur, ‘where there are a few Andhras not belonging to this province’, Mahtab accepted that ‘there are some Oriyas, who are communal minded’. The latter, to him, were ‘always anti-Congress people’, while ‘some of the communal Andhras [were] high-placed Congressmen’.32 In July 1949, Mahtab met a deputation of them and ‘decided to give eight years’ to children in government schools to learn Oriya. With the Bengalis in the province not having a problem with this, Mahtab claimed that ‘the Andhras [too could] have no reasonable complaint’.33 He met ‘hundreds of Telugu-speaking people’ in Berhampur in September 1949 and satisfied himself that ‘whatever may be the relations between the linguistic minority[s] and the majority in Ganjam, the minority has full confidence in the Government’.34

States and Adivasis

From before independence, the most ‘serious problem’ for Mahtab was the ‘problem of [princely] States’. Indeed, achieving their unity with the province was an imperative that conditioned ‘Mahtab’s vision of the future’ (Pati, 2002, pp. 200–201). The ‘Orissa States were 26 in number: 11 A class, 12 B class and 3 C class’ (Menon, 1956, p. 152). Along with the neighbouring Chhattisgarh states, they had formed an Eastern States Union on 1 August 1947, disputed by the local Prajamandals and dissolved by New Delhi (Das, 1973, Vol. VII, p. 508). Mahtab had been pushing for their ‘[joint] administration’, holding that ‘the aborigines’ were ‘being set up by the Rulers’, to which Menon added ‘that the communists were also taking a hand’ (1956, pp. 154–158). While Mahtab ‘publicly advised’ the ‘people … to give an ultimatum’, he was also in communication with those rulers, who were agreeable, for he believed that ‘if some [accede], others [will] follow’.35 This combination of ‘a popular upsurge’ and ‘the ambiguities of the Congress … created confusion’ (Pati, 2002, p. 215).

On the other hand, the All-India Adivasi Mahasabha’s president Jaipal Singh Munda’s proposed Jharkhand, on the Chhotanagpur plateau, combined with the ‘contiguous tribal [and princely] areas of Bengal and Orissa [and] covered 48,000 square miles containing 12 million people’ (Guha, 2008, p. 266). In mid-November 1947, this ‘tribal-durbar’ tango saw the ‘taking over’ of the Nilgiri state by Orissa, which ‘frightened the other Rulers’, while ‘in some states, Prajamandals captured the administration’. This was the culmination of the communist mobilization of the Praja Sabha in Nilgiri from April 1946, whose intensity had forced the Mahtab ministry ‘to intervene’ (Pati, 2002, pp. 216–218).

Patel and Menon went to Orissa in mid-December,36 where Ali and Mahtab wanted these ‘states [to] be told that they cannot … swagger about’ (Das, 1973, Vol. V, pp. 494–495). They met B and C class states’ rulers together on 14 December 1947 and A class states’ rulers, separately. The former signed the merger agreement but the latter ‘were not agreeable’. With Patel threatening them with ‘consequences …’, the rulers were prevailed upon (Menon, 1956, pp. 164–168). S. V. Sohoni (ICS, 1936, Bihar), present

32 1 July 1949, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
33 15 July 1949, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
34 3 October 1949, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
35 3 November 1947, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
36 12 December 1947, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
at this meeting, remembered that most rulers were ‘stunned’ at this ‘late-reversal’ of accession into merger. The deed was so hasty that Sohoni recalled ‘the “wet” condition of the agreement, drafted on the spot and printed in the government press…’ (1985, pp. 333–334).

By June 1948, however, the ex-rulers were up in arms for a ‘Union of Eastern States’. Dismissing it as ‘day-dreams’, Mahtab wanted the States Department and the CA to draft a short bill enabling their final merger ‘as quickly as possible’. The related concern for him, ‘the aboriginal population’, persisted and he cited ‘pin-pricks’ from the states. Emphasizing the personal nature of the creation of Orissa state by the then secretary of state post-1857, Mahtab asserted that his ‘successor can cancel the old agreement without any … objection’.37 Far from contemplating any such action, Nehru remained unperturbed that ‘they cannot do anything much’.38

Mahtab, however, started stabilizing states’ administrations and settling rulers’ private properties. The Maharaja of Mayurbhanj, the largest A class state, ‘had kept aloof on the ground that he had granted responsible government’ and was ‘quietly taken over’ in October 1948 (Sohoni, 1985, pp. 333–334). Afterwards, 34 members from these states were to be nominated to the provincial assembly, but Mahtab was keener ‘that the present ratio between the Congress Party and that of the Opposition be kept intact’.39 He would claim that only 2% of the people were affected by the Adivasi agitation and the state’s movement (Das, 1973, Vol. VII, pp. 530–531), and Patel would agree that it was not ‘possible to put the clock backwards because of a sectional clamour’ (Das, 1973, Vol. VII, p. 537). Thus subsumed, ‘subregional sentiments … and stalemated sub-nationalism’ have since remerged, for instance, in the ‘Kosal Movement’ (Mitra, 2014).

On 1 August 1949, the ‘final merging of the States with the province’ took effect and to Mahtab, recently revered as ‘a patron of Odishan Historical Research’ (Mohapatra, 2015), ‘a huge joke in history [was] over’.40 A month later, however, Seraikela and Kharsawan were restive again and Mahtab wanted their ‘delusion’ to be ended forever.41 In mid-September, Governor-General Rajagopalachari issued a notification for the nomination of 31 members from the ex-state areas to Orissa’s legislative assembly. Mahtab had not recommended ‘a single ruler’, claiming that they had ‘made themselves unpopular’, and warning that ‘it is such dispossessed rulers, who were responsible for 1857’.42 This time, the revolt would happen at the ballot box, as premier Sinha from Bihar well-anticipated that this states’ opposition was with an eye on the ‘next election’ (Das, 1973, Vol. VII, p. 522).

While all this was going on, Mahtab—a proud author whose History of Orissa (Odia ed. 1948) has been lately translated in Hindi and released by the present prime minister (Mohanty, 2021)—had been working on his book manuscript Beginning of End on the merger. When he sought Patel’s foreword for it, the latter obliged but not without asking Mahtab to ‘rectify matters …’ Mahtab had referred to ‘taking over Nilgiri by force’ and Patel wanted him to restate that the States Department ‘went to Nilgiri at the invitation of and with the consent of the ruler’. Mahtab had also written that ‘since Mayurbhanj was a tribal state, Sardar Patel did not put any pressure on it …’ The strongman of Congress politics worried that ‘this might be construed to mean that [he] put pressure on other states and was not above using those tactics’ when the pretence had ‘throughout been that all these mergers [were] voluntary’.43

37 3 June 1948, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
38 8 June 1948, Nehru to Mahtab, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
39 1 July 1949, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
40 1 August 1949, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
41 1 September 1949, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
42 16 September 1949, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
43 11 November 1949, Shankar to Mahtab, Correspondence file, Mahtab Papers (II Instalment).
Projects and Policies

Jawaharlal Nehru had offered Orissa’s governorship to Asaf Ali by terming ‘the problems of Orissa [as] mostly constructive’ (Gopal, 1987, Vol. VI, p. 406). Indeed, over 1946–1950, ‘the Congress in the hands of Mahtab … appeared … destined to … building up Orissa’ (Dash, 1965, p. 89). The major developmental set-piece was the Mahanadi River Valley Project (Hart, 1956). With dams at Hirakud, Machkund and Duduma, it had its foundation stone laid in 1946, with land being acquired since, notwithstanding an agitation in Sambalpur, and the ‘financial adjustments’ finalized in November 1947.44 Mahtab claimed that ‘all efforts [were] being made to persuade [those who were] going to lose their land’.45 With construction beginning in spring 1948, the Hirakud authorities were still issuing eviction notices four summers later. This opposition was due to a variety of reasons:

Fears of the Adivasis whose land was to be taken over … a belief in Sambalpur that power generation would siphon-out water … elite-level political polarization between the coastal tract and western Orissa … the idea of secession of Hirakhand from Orissa … backed by the urban middle classes, landed [and] the business interests … the genuine problem of Sambalpur’s backwardness and the genuine fear of lack of compensation. (Pati, 2002, pp. 205–206)

New research has confirmed that ‘the costs and benefits of the Hirakud dam were shared inequitably’ (Routray et al., 2020, p. 437). As ‘the [ex] rulers in western and southern Odisha’ tried ‘to … create a separate Odia-speaking state, free from the … coastal elite’, utilizing the ‘disaffection with the … dam’ (Routray et al., 2020, p. 437), Mahtab proposed to start an Engineering College near Hirakud, even as ‘departments [were] moving by instalment’ to the new capital Bhubaneswar, and invited David F. Rosen, the American consultant, to visit and report on industrial planning (Das, 1974, Vol. IX, p. 99).

The simultaneous policy challenge was the vexed question of control on essential items. In June 1948, Mahtab requested Nehru to lift control, which had ‘helped the communists …’,46 although in September 1947, none of the provincial ministers had ‘advocated de-control’ (Bakhle, 1965, p. 235). Deferring to Gandhi’s wishes, the government had lifted control and Mahtab had written to Gandhi ‘rationalizing it as a measure meant to benefit the agriculturalist’, meaning ‘the landlords and “rich” peasants [who] having surplus stocks made huge profits’;47 thereby re-wiring the ‘zamindar-sahukar-sarkar nexus’ (Pati, 2002, p. 210). As foreseen by officials, prices rose alarmingly and by September 1948, controls were re-imposed.48

Soon, Orissa reported a ‘grave deterioration’ in its financial position due to a reduction in central grants and a deficit in revenue collection from its states area.49 The year 1949 added a spiralling inflation, mounting dollar deficit and increasing food imports to Nehru’s lament.50 As premier of a rare surplus province, Mahtab’s updates on food were crucial. The target for Orissa for the kharif year 1948–1949 was 129,510 tons of rice, out of which 74,751 tons had been exported by May. To give it a spur, Mahtab promised to investigate abolition of zamindari,51 but came up with ‘a ceiling on the agricultural tax for

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44 3 November 1947, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
45 12 December 1947, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
46 3 June 1948, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
47 31 December 1947, Mahtab to Gandhi, Subject File Serial No. 7, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
48 21 September 1948, Nehru to provincial premiers, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
49 30 December 1948, Nehru to John Matthai, JN (SG) Papers, File No. 17.
50 7 January 1949, Nehru to provincial premiers, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
51 1 July 1949, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
incomes [above] Rs. 5000 annually’ (Pati, 2002, pp. 202–203). Alongside, he was excited ‘to note that some underground constructions’ were emerging at the site for the new capital and decided ‘to preserve [its] remains … for the public to know and feel’ the older connection.\textsuperscript{52} Bhubaneswar was on its way to become a capitalist city from being a temple town (Kalia, 1994) and, always keen on the origins of his region, Mahtab would organize the 12th session of the Indian History Congress in December 1949.

Meanwhile, by July 1949, there had emerged a ‘slackness in the Hirakud construction’, and Mahtab voiced his concern about ‘a lack of sense of duty … amongst the services’. His government undertook ‘a drive against corruption’, following from 1946 to 1947, when ‘47,500 cases were detected’ (Pati, 2002, p. 204). By now, he also had other bad news for Nehru; with irregular rains, he feared a failure of crops, with ‘its [country-wide] effect’.\textsuperscript{53} In September, Mahtab confirmed that crops had been damaged, and Orissa was ‘not able to export as expected’.\textsuperscript{54} Simultaneously though, he exuded confidence that ‘if everything goes on normally [Hirakud] will be completed in five years …’.\textsuperscript{55}

Mahtab’s ’Bijoya greetings’ of 1949 to Nehru were blighted by ‘devaluation’ but, he agreed that ‘the present should be sacrificed [for] the future’.\textsuperscript{56} The prime minister’s problem was that he needed ‘a hopeful atmosphere … from the political point of view’ and, if Mahtab would not restructure the cultivable lands of the princes, feudals and the big farmers, then developmental loans would have to be issued to ‘the peasantry’.\textsuperscript{57} For Mahtab, the future in Orissa clustered around Hirakud, Bhubaneswar and minor irrigation works; not major land reforms. Given ‘the congestion at Cuttack, attempt [was] being made to move to Bhubaneswar even at inconvenience’. Regarding Hirakud, ‘resettlement’ was being taken up as a ‘war measure’. The dam was expected to submerge ‘only’ 95 villages but, by the end, it had submerged ‘more than 200’ (Routray et al., 2020, p. 438). Industrialist K. C. Mahindra, who visited America and Canada in July 1951, to discuss their interest in the aluminium industry in India, noted that with the Hirakud report ‘not [being] very encouraging’, doubt was ‘expressed about [its] completion [by 1954]’.\textsuperscript{58}

Perhaps this played a role in Mahtab’s unsuccessful bid with Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the minister concerned, in the summer of 1949 to get a steel plant located in Orissa, though Nehru was ‘inclined to agree’ (Gopal, 1991, Vol. XI, p. 54). By autumn, Mahtab had heard that the first steel plant was to be located in Bhilai, given the easier availability of raw materials, and this news was ‘rather disquieting …’.\textsuperscript{59} Orissa waited till 1955 for the sanction of its steel plant at Rourkela. By the time both Bhilai and Rourkela were functional, Mahtab was back in the province, having been rendered ‘at large’ for a while (Dash, 1965, p. 91).

**Conclusion**

In mid-May 1950, approving Harekrushna Mahtab’s elevation to the union cabinet, Vallabhbhai Patel wrote to Jawaharlal Nehru that he was ‘a steady, sincere, and earnest type who should be a success [with] a little guidance’ (Das, 1974, Vol. X, pp. 264–265). Back in 1948, Nehru had thought of Mahtab

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\textsuperscript{52} 15 July 1949, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).

\textsuperscript{53} 1 August 1949, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).

\textsuperscript{54} 1 September 1949, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).

\textsuperscript{55} 16 September 1949, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).

\textsuperscript{56} 3 October 1949, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).

\textsuperscript{57} 3 October 1949, Nehru to Matthai, JN (SG) Papers, File No. 30.

\textsuperscript{58} 22 July 1951, Mahindra (New York) to G. L. Mehta (Planning Commission), JN (SG) Papers, File No. 95-I.

\textsuperscript{59} 3 October 1949, Mahtab to Nehru, Subject File Serial No. 11, Mahtab Papers (I Instalment).
for the agriculture portfolio, but Patel had demurred, terming his absence from Orissa to be a ‘great blow’ (Gopal, 1990, Vol. IX, p. 72). Now, for the remaining 7 months that his backer was alive, Mahtab would emulate him in attempting to set up an industrial committee to keep in ‘direct touch’ with the Bombay barons and in setting up an experts committee for a ‘survey of needs and means’ in the wake of the Korean war (Das, 1974, Vol. X, pp. 126, 195, 362–363). Alongside, he would be a participant in the Tandon–Kripalani election for Congress presidency in September 1950, in the lead-up to which he would caution general secretary Shankarrao Deo that for nomination in the upcoming general elections, the ‘rank and file [would] be foisted’ on the leaders, unless they created ‘a supreme high command’.

But before all this, Mahtab personified a kind of federal nationalism from Orissa vis-à-vis New Delhi, as this foray into his papers has presented. It also illustrates the ‘Congress System’ in that his was the regional satrap’s role of putting ‘pressure’ on the centre, while projecting its control. Third, his thoughts and actions provide another example of the provincial roots, often at odds with national proclamations. Mahtab’s ‘monocratic tinge’ held in check the intra-party tussles, contained the Prajamandal politics, and smothered the Sambalpur agitation against Hirakud (Dash, 1965, p. 90). After all, he was ‘the proprietor of two dailies … and of a monthly paper’ (Dash, 1953, p. 243), in the province.

Along the way though, Jawaharlal Nehru’s liberal humanism, secularism and socialism appear dimmed in Harekrushna Mahtab’s responses. If Nehru oversaw the political relationship between ‘the nation and its citizenry’, then it was premiers like Mahtab, who formed the pivotal intervening state layer. On law and order, Nehru’s identification of the RSS as the biggest danger, was replaced by Mahtab’s Patelite emphasis on the socialists and the communists. Next, between the citizen and the state came the party organization and here, the Congress’s provincial choice was at variance from its meta-narratives about its associations. Third, narrower than the narrow nationalism that Nehru was fond of deploring, was the reality of linguistic and provincial categories. It was not those issues that were reduced to identities, often, it was the identity that was the issue. These divides within and among provinces forced New Delhi’s hands, while princely states and Adivasis were merged, notwithstanding any retrospective unease. As for the Nehruvian projects, they took off on an Oriya ‘terra irredenta’ (Mohanty, 1982, pp. 94–182). Jawaharlal Nehru might have been overtaken by a poetic spirit during Hirakud Dam’s inauguration in 1957, but its building was undertaken rather prosaically by Harekrushna Mahtab, as seen in these vignettes.

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60 10 July 1950, Mahtab to Deo, JN (SG) Papers, File No. 48 (Part I).
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