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ANALYZING ORISSA'S PRE-INDEPENDENCE ECONOMY: IN-DEPTH PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into Orissa's pre-independence economy, highlighting its agricultural dominance, the adverse impacts of British colonial policies, and the decline of traditional industries. Agriculture, particularly rice farming, was the economic mainstay, but British interventions like the zamindari system led to exploitation and frequent famines. Traditional industries such as handicrafts and textiles suffered due to the influx of British goods. Despite these challenges, early infrastructure developments and the discovery of mineral resources signaled potential industrial growth. The socio-economic hardships spurred resistance movements, laying the groundwork for future reforms and contributing to Orissa's post-independence economic evolution.

KEYWORDS: Orissa, pre-independence economy, agriculture, British colonial policies, zamindari system.

I. INTRODUCTION

Orissa, now known as Odisha, situated on India's eastern coast, witnessed significant economic transformations during the period leading up to independence in 1947. At the heart of its economy was agriculture, with rice cultivation dominating the agrarian landscape. The state's fertile plains and favorable climate made it conducive to agricultural activities, sustaining a predominantly agrarian society. However, the agricultural sector faced challenges exacerbated by British colonial policies that profoundly shaped Orissa's economic trajectory.

The British colonial administration introduced policies like the zamindari system, which significantly altered landownership patterns. Under this system, local landlords, or zamindars, were granted substantial control over land, often exploiting tenant farmers through exorbitant rents and taxes. This arrangement not only concentrated land in the hands of a few but also exacerbated rural poverty and inequality. Furthermore, the imposition of heavy land revenue demands, notably through the Permanent Settlement of 1793, further burdened farmers, compelling many to live in perpetual debt and poverty.

Orissa's traditional industries, renowned for their craftsmanship in areas such as textiles, handicrafts, and metalwork, also faced challenges during the colonial era. The British policy of promoting the import of manufactured goods from England dealt a severe blow to these

indigenous industries. Local artisans and weavers struggled to compete with the influx of cheaper British products, leading to the decline of these once-thriving sectors. This economic shift had profound socio-economic consequences, displacing skilled craftsmen and exacerbating unemployment and poverty in rural and urban areas alike.

Despite the economic hardships imposed by colonial rule, the period also witnessed initial signs of industrialization in Orissa. The British colonial administration, albeit primarily for its own economic benefit, invested in infrastructure development such as railways, roads, and ports. These developments aimed to facilitate the extraction and transportation of natural resources, primarily minerals like coal, iron ore, and bauxite, abundant in Orissa's hinterlands. The construction of the East Coast Railway in 1893, connecting Orissa to major trading centers across India, marked a significant milestone in the region's economic integration and potential industrial growth.

Socio-economic disparities and exploitation under colonial rule sparked resistance movements and calls for reform across Orissa. Peasant uprisings, such as the Praja Mandal movements in the early 20th century, underscored the widespread discontent among the rural population. These movements sought to address issues of land rights, fair taxation, and the revival of traditional industries, laying the foundation for broader socio-economic reforms that would unfold in the post-independence era. The legacy of these movements and the enduring impacts of colonial exploitation continue to shape Orissa's socio-economic landscape, highlighting the importance of understanding its pre-independence economic history in the context of broader Indian economic development.

II. AGRICULTURAL ECONOMY

- 1. Dominance of Agriculture** Agriculture was the cornerstone of Orissa's economy during the pre-independence era. The majority of the population was engaged in farming, with rice being the principal crop. Other significant crops included pulses, oilseeds, and vegetables. The agrarian structure was characterized by small-scale subsistence farming, which was vulnerable to the vagaries of nature, leading to frequent famines and food shortages.
- 2. Impact of Colonial Policies** The British colonial administration implemented several policies that had profound impacts on Orissa's agriculture. The introduction of the zamindari system altered traditional land ownership patterns, concentrating land in the hands of a few landlords. This system led to widespread exploitation of peasants, who were burdened with high rents and taxes. The Permanent Settlement of 1793 further exacerbated the plight of the farmers, as it fixed land revenue at a high rate, irrespective of the agricultural yield.
- 3. Famines and Food Insecurity** Orissa was particularly vulnerable to famines, with the Great Famine of 1866 being one of the most devastating events. The famine resulted in the deaths of approximately one-third of the population. The colonial administration's

inability to provide timely relief highlighted the inefficiencies and callousness of British policies. Subsequent famines in the late 19th and early 20th centuries continued to plague the region, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and food insecurity.

III. TRADITIONAL INDUSTRIES

During the pre-independence era, Orissa was renowned for its vibrant traditional industries, which played a crucial role in the state's economy and cultural heritage. These industries encompassed a wide range of crafts and artisanal skills, reflecting the region's rich cultural diversity and resourcefulness. Key traditional industries in Orissa included:

1. **Handicrafts:** Orissa was famous for its intricate handicrafts, characterized by exquisite craftsmanship and artistic finesse. Handicrafts such as patta chitra (scroll painting), stone and wood carvings, and appliqué work (chandua) were practiced by skilled artisans across the state. These crafts not only served as sources of livelihood for many communities but also contributed significantly to the cultural identity of Orissa.
2. **Textiles:** Orissa's textile traditions were diverse and vibrant, with distinctive weaving techniques and designs that varied across different regions. One of the most famous textile traditions was ikat weaving, known locally as "bandha" or "bandhani." Ikat textiles from Orissa were prized for their intricate patterns and vibrant colors, crafted using a resist-dyeing technique. Other textiles included cotton and silk weaves, often adorned with traditional motifs and designs that reflected local customs and beliefs.
3. **Metal Crafts:** Orissa was renowned for its metal craftsmanship, particularly in silver filigree work (tarakasi). Artisans meticulously crafted intricate jewelry, utensils, and decorative items using fine silver wires, showcasing their skill in metalworking. Silver filigree work from Cuttack and Tarakasi from Cuttack and nearby areas gained widespread acclaim for their craftsmanship and artistic excellence.
4. **Cottage Industries:** Beyond specific crafts, Orissa's economy also thrived on various cottage industries. These included pottery, terracotta work, basket weaving, and lacquer work, among others. Each of these industries employed local techniques and materials, often passed down through generations, contributing to both economic sustenance and cultural continuity.
5. **Market Influence:** These traditional industries were not only sources of local pride but also important economic contributors, often forming part of a larger regional and transnational trade network. Orissa's traditional crafts found markets within India and beyond, showcasing the region's cultural heritage and artistic prowess on an international stage.

Despite the challenges posed by British colonial policies, which favored imported manufactured goods over indigenous crafts, Orissa's traditional industries persisted, albeit with varying degrees of adaptation and decline. These industries played a vital role in shaping Orissa's socio-economic landscape, providing employment opportunities, preserving cultural heritage, and fostering community cohesion. Today, efforts to revive and sustain these traditional industries continue, recognizing their intrinsic value as custodians of Orissa's cultural legacy and as engines of local economic development.

IV. EARLY SIGNS OF INDUSTRIALIZATION

During the pre-independence era, Orissa showed early signs of industrialization, marked by several key developments:

1. **Infrastructure Development:** The British colonial administration initiated significant infrastructure projects in Orissa, including the construction of railways, roads, and ports. The East Coast Railway, established in 1893, connected the region to major trade routes and facilitated the transport of goods and resources, laying the foundation for future industrial growth.
2. **Mineral Resources:** Orissa's rich mineral deposits, including coal, iron ore, and bauxite, attracted early industrial interest. Coal mining operations in areas like Talcher began during this period, supplying fuel for industrial processes and railways. Similarly, the discovery of iron ore deposits in Sundergarh district provided raw materials essential for the burgeoning iron and steel industry.
3. **Industrial Ventures:** The early 20th century witnessed the establishment of several industrial ventures in Orissa. Industries such as textiles, paper mills, and sugar factories started to emerge, albeit on a smaller scale compared to other regions of British India. These ventures represented initial efforts to diversify Orissa's economy beyond agriculture and traditional crafts.
4. **Labor Migration:** Industrialization in Orissa attracted laborers from rural areas seeking employment in mines and factories. The growth of urban centers like Cuttack and Bhubaneswar, albeit modestly, reflected the influx of workers and the nascent urbanization accompanying industrial development.
5. **Government Initiatives:** Recognizing the region's industrial potential, the colonial government provided incentives and concessions to attract industrial investment. Policies aimed at promoting industries such as mining, manufacturing, and infrastructure development laid the groundwork for Orissa's industrialization, albeit with varying degrees of success and sustainability.

These early signs of industrialization in Orissa during the pre-independence era set the stage for subsequent economic diversification and development strategies in the post-independence period.

V. CONCLUSION

The pre-independence economy of Orissa was marked by a predominantly agrarian base, heavily influenced by British colonial policies. The exploitation and neglect by the colonial administration led to severe economic hardships for the people. However, the period also witnessed the early signs of industrialization and the emergence of resistance movements. Understanding this historical context is crucial for appreciating the socio-economic transformations that Orissa underwent in the post-independence era. The legacy of colonial rule continues to shape the state's economic trajectory, underscoring the importance of addressing historical injustices and fostering inclusive development.

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