

Bamanda Under Colonial Paramountcy: Negotiated Sovereignty and Dynastic Survival in Western Odisha (1826–1948)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the political transformation of Bamanda, a Garjat state of Western Odisha, under British colonial paramountcy between 1826 and 1948. It analyses how the Later Ganga dynasty sustained political authority through strategies of adaptation, negotiation, and cultural legitimacy rather than open resistance. Following the decline of Maratha influence and the restructuring of tributary administration in Western Odisha, Bamanda became integrated into a system of indirect colonial rule that preserved internal autonomy while subordinating external sovereignty to British control. The study explores the role of hereditary succession, diplomatic loyalty, and administrative continuity in ensuring dynastic survival. Particular attention is given to the political significance of Raja Brajasundar Tribhuvanadev, Bamanda's cooperative relations with colonial authority, and the use of religion, education, language, and print culture as instruments of legitimacy. By situating Bamanda within broader princely-state politics, the article highlights negotiated sovereignty as a central feature of regional governance in colonial Odisha and contributes to understanding adaptive statecraft in tributary polities.

Keywords: Colonial Paramountcy, Bamanda State, Garjat States, Dynastic Adaptation & Negotiated Sovereignty

INTRODUCTION

Bamanda (present-day Deogarh region) emerged as an important Garjat or tributary state of Western Odisha, governed by the Later Ganga rulers who maintained political continuity over several centuries. Situated within the Sambalpur tract, Bamanda occupied a strategic position among the tributary mahals and gradually evolved from a regional polity into a princely state functioning under colonial supervision. During the nineteenth century, especially after the decline of Maratha influence and the expansion of British authority in Western Odisha, Bamanda became integrated into a wider framework of indirect imperial governance. The British restructuring of tributary relations after the Anglo-Maratha conflicts and the subsequent administrative reorganisation of Sambalpur dependencies brought Bamanda under colonial paramountcy while allowing a considerable degree of internal autonomy¹.

Colonial paramountcy refers to the political doctrine through which the British Crown exercised supreme authority over princely or tributary states without directly annexing them. Under this arrangement, rulers retained internal jurisdiction in matters of administration, custom, and succession, while external sovereignty and political allegiance remained under British control. Such a framework shaped princely-state politics across India, where dynasties negotiated power, legitimacy, and survival within a subordinate but semi-autonomous political order. In the case of Bamanda, British intervention altered older patterns of regional allegiance, particularly after the annulment of Sambalpur's feudal supremacy over its dependent states in the early nineteenth century. This change enabled Bamanda to function with enhanced internal authority under colonial oversight.

Bamanda offers a significant case for examining regional political adaptation because its rulers neither openly resisted nor entirely surrendered to colonial

authority. Instead, the dynasty adopted a pragmatic political strategy that combined cooperation, negotiation, and cultural legitimacy. The reign of rulers such as Brajasundar Tribhuvanadev illustrates how alliances with colonial administration strengthened dynastic stability while preserving regional prestige. Bamanda's political survival was reinforced through loyalty to British authority, controlled internal governance, and patronage of religion, language, and education, which enhanced royal legitimacy among subjects. The state's recognition as the "Ujjaini of Utkala" further reflects its cultural and intellectual prominence in nineteenth-century Odisha².

This article seeks to examine the dynamics of political negotiation between the Bamanda rulers and colonial authority during the period 1826–1948. It analyses the adaptive strategies employed by the dynasty to ensure political continuity under British paramountcy and investigates how internal autonomy was preserved despite imperial supervision. By situating Bamanda within the broader framework of princely-state politics, the study aims to contribute to an understanding of regional statecraft, dynastic resilience, and negotiated sovereignty in colonial Odisha.

Historical Background of Bamanda before Colonial Paramountcy:

Before the establishment of colonial paramountcy, Bamanda developed as an important regional polity under the rule of the Later Ganga dynasty, which succeeded the earlier line of Ganga rulers and continued to shape the political and cultural identity of the state. The Later Gangas consolidated their authority from the late eighteenth century onward and maintained dynastic continuity through hereditary succession. Their rule was marked not only by political administration but also by religious patronage, territorial consolidation, and cultural integration within the wider socio-political environment of Western Odisha. The dynasty shifted its political centres over time—from Bamandagad to Suguda and later to Deogarh—reflecting both strategic adaptation and administrative evolution³.

The political genealogy of Bamanda formed an essential basis of legitimacy and continuity. Successive rulers traced their authority through dynastic inheritance, ensuring stability in governance despite periods of regional conflict. Following the death of Chandrasekhardev around 1780, Prataprudradev ascended the throne and emerged as a significant ruler during a period of political transition.

He was succeeded by Sarvesvardev, Arjundev, Balunkabrishavadev, Khagesvardev, and later Brajasundar Tribhuvanadev, whose long reign contributed substantially to the consolidation of Bamanda's political identity. The genealogical continuity of rulership enabled Bamanda to maintain institutional cohesion even during external pressures and changing regional power structures⁴.

Geographically, Bamanda occupied a strategic position within the Sambalpur tributary region, linking forested tribal territories with emerging centres of political authority. Its location among neighbouring Garjat states such as Rairakhol, Bonai, Keonjhar, and Pallahara placed it at the centre of inter-state alliances, territorial disputes, and tributary politics. Bamanda exercised influence over adjoining territories and remained deeply connected with the political fortunes of Sambalpur. The state's relations with neighbouring chiefs often reflected broader regional rivalries, including conflicts involving succession, territorial claims, and matrimonial alliances. Such interactions positioned Bamanda as an active participant in the political networks of Western Odisha rather than an isolated frontier kingdom.

The transition from Maratha influence to British control marked a decisive turning point in Bamanda's political history. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Marathas of Nagpur extended influence over Sambalpur and its tributary states following treaty arrangements imposed upon regional rulers. Bamanda, like other Garjat states, came within this shifting sphere of power. However, the Second Anglo-Maratha War (1803–1805) and the subsequent Third Anglo-Maratha War (1817–1818) transformed the political landscape of Western Odisha. British victory over the Marathas resulted in the transfer of Sambalpur and its dependencies into British possession. Though these territories came under British authority after 1818, formal administrative restructuring and tributary arrangements were consolidated by 1826. The British subsequently annulled Sambalpur's feudal supremacy over dependent states and entered into direct engagements with tributary rulers, including Bamanda, thereby redefining regional political relationships⁵.

Thus, prior to colonial paramountcy, Bamanda evolved through dynastic continuity, strategic geography, and shifting imperial influences. The transition from Maratha dominance to British oversight laid the foundation for a new political order in which the Bamanda dynasty

adapted to changing circumstances while preserving its hereditary authority.

Establishment of Colonial Paramountcy (1826 onwards):

The establishment of colonial paramountcy in Western Odisha was closely linked to the British annexation and administrative reorganisation of the Sambalpur region following the Anglo-Maratha conflicts. After the defeat of the Marathas in the Third Anglo-Maratha War (1817–1818), Sambalpur and its dependent territories gradually came under British authority. Although British possession was secured after 1818, a more structured political arrangement emerged by 1826 when the administration of tributary relations was formally reorganised. This transition marked the beginning of a new phase in which local ruling houses operated within an imperial framework shaped by indirect colonial control.

Bamanda was included among the tributary or Garjat states that formed part of the Sambalpur political sphere. Under British administration, these states were no longer treated merely as subordinate dependencies of Sambalpur but as distinct political entities directly linked to colonial authority. Bamanda, along with states such as Patna, Sonapur, Bonai, Gangpur, Rairakhol, and others, became incorporated into a redefined network of tributary administration. This inclusion provided the Bamanda rulers with a recognised political status while simultaneously placing them within a hierarchy governed by British supervision⁶.

An important development in this process was the British annulment of Sambalpur's feudal supremacy over its dependent states. In 1821, the colonial government formally dissolved Sambalpur's traditional authority over seventeen tributary territories, thereby weakening earlier regional hierarchies. This measure significantly altered political relations in Western Odisha by allowing individual tributary rulers to maintain direct engagements with the British administration. The restructuring reduced the intermediary role of Sambalpur and enhanced the political visibility of smaller states such as Bamanda.

The administrative implications of colonial indirect rule were substantial. While the British asserted paramount authority in matters of external relations, defence, and political oversight, Bamanda retained considerable control over internal administration. Local rulers continued to exercise authority in revenue collection, customary law, social regulation, and succession practices,

provided these did not conflict with colonial interests. This arrangement created a system of controlled autonomy in which the dynasty preserved internal legitimacy while acknowledging British supremacy. Such indirect governance enabled colonial stability without the need for direct annexation, while simultaneously ensuring the survival of local ruling structures. By redefining political authority through negotiated subordination, colonial paramountcy transformed Bamanda into a semi-autonomous princely entity operating within the broader imperial order.

Dynastic Adaptation and Political Survival:

The political survival of Bamanda during the nineteenth century depended largely upon the ability of its rulers to adapt to changing regional and imperial realities. Following the decline of Maratha influence and the gradual establishment of British authority in Western Odisha, the Bamanda dynasty avoided confrontation and instead embraced a strategy of political accommodation. This adjustment reflected a pragmatic response to the altered balance of power rather than a surrender of royal identity. The rulers recognised that survival under colonial paramountcy required flexibility, diplomatic engagement, and alignment with the dominant political order. Through such adaptation, Bamanda preserved continuity of governance while navigating a rapidly changing political landscape⁷.

A notable feature of this adaptation was the retention of hereditary authority despite increasing colonial supervision. Although British paramountcy redefined external sovereignty, internal succession in Bamanda continued along dynastic lines. The continuity of the Later Ganga lineage strengthened the legitimacy of rulership and ensured political stability within the state. Successive rulers inherited authority through established genealogical tradition, allowing the dynasty to maintain institutional continuity even as regional power structures shifted. British indirect rule generally permitted such hereditary governance so long as rulers remained politically loyal and administratively cooperative.

Diplomatic loyalty toward the British administration emerged as a key survival strategy. Rather than participating in resistance movements that destabilised neighbouring regions, Bamanda adopted a policy of moderation and calculated cooperation. The rulers understood that political allegiance to colonial authority could secure recognition, protection, and limited

autonomy. Such diplomacy enabled Bamanda to remain an influential tributary state while avoiding punitive intervention. This moderate political posture distinguished Bamanda from territories where anti-colonial resistance invited stricter colonial control.

The reign of Raja Brajasundar Tribhuvanadev offers a significant example of dynastic adaptation under colonial conditions. During the disturbances associated with Angul, the Raja actively cooperated with British authorities in suppressing resistance. Historical records indicate that Somnath Singh of Angul, who had opposed colonial administration and resisted British forces, was ultimately captured “through the instrumentality of the Raja of Bamra”⁸. This phrase directly reflects the recognised role played by the Bamanda ruler in assisting the colonial government. In acknowledgement of his loyalty and service, Brajasundar Tribhuvanadev received the honorific title of *Raibahadur*, together with ceremonial gifts including an elephant and artillery. These rewards symbolised both British approval and the strengthening of Bamanda’s political position within the tributary system⁹.

This cooperation reveals that Bamanda’s rulers pursued a deliberate political alliance with colonial power as a means of dynastic preservation. Rather than relying upon military resistance, the state secured its continuity through diplomatic engagement, strategic loyalty, and careful adjustment to imperial authority. Such adaptation demonstrates how princely states like Bamanda negotiated survival by balancing hereditary legitimacy with colonial expectations.

Political Negotiation and Internal Autonomy:

The relationship between Bamanda and the British administration was shaped by the principles of indirect rule, under which colonial authority operated through local dynasties rather than replacing them through direct annexation. After the restructuring of the Sambalpur tributary system during the early nineteenth century, Bamanda became integrated into a political framework where the British exercised paramount authority while allowing the continuation of indigenous governance. This arrangement reflected a negotiated form of control in which the colonial state supervised external affairs and political allegiance, but refrained from extensive intervention in everyday administration. Such indirect governance enabled Bamanda to retain its institutional identity while adapting to imperial oversight.

Under this system, the rulers of Bamanda preserved considerable authority over internal administration. The hereditary chiefs continued to function as the principal source of governance within the state, exercising control over local institutions and maintaining traditional patterns of rule. British policy toward tributary states generally favoured administrative continuity, particularly in regions where local rulers possessed established legitimacy among tribal and rural populations. Consequently, Bamanda retained the ability to regulate its domestic affairs without constant colonial interference, provided political loyalty to the British government remained intact¹⁰.

Internal governance included authority over revenue administration, judicial practices, and customary regulation. The rulers supervised land revenue collection and maintained customary rights linked to agrarian and tribal communities. Judicial authority largely remained embedded in traditional institutions where disputes were settled according to local norms and royal discretion. In frontier societies such as Bamanda, customary law held particular importance because governance depended not merely upon formal administration but also upon social legitimacy rooted in regional traditions. Colonial authorities often preferred to preserve such systems since they reduced administrative burden and strengthened political stability. The continuation of customary authority thus reinforced the ruler’s position as both political head and cultural guardian¹¹.

British reliance on local rulers formed another important dimension of political negotiation. In the forested and tribal regions of Western Odisha, direct administration was difficult due to geographical barriers and complex social structures. As a result, colonial officials depended upon loyal tributary chiefs to maintain order, secure communication routes, and ensure frontier stability. Bamanda’s rulers fulfilled this intermediary role by acting as political allies who could mediate between imperial interests and local society. Their cooperation helped the British maintain control without extensive military or bureaucratic intervention. This relationship reveals that authority within Bamanda was not imposed solely from above but negotiated through mutual dependence.

Therefore, Bamanda functioned not merely as a subordinate tributary state but as a negotiated political entity balancing colonial pressure and regional sovereignty. While British paramountcy limited external independence, internal autonomy remained significant. Through political negotiation, hereditary governance, and

administrative continuity, Bamanda retained a measure of sovereignty that enabled the dynasty to survive within the broader framework of colonial rule.

Cultural Legitimacy as a Tool of Survival:

Alongside political negotiation, the rulers of Bamanda employed cultural patronage as an important mechanism for sustaining dynastic legitimacy under changing political circumstances. The Later Ganga dynasty strengthened its authority not merely through administration but through the cultivation of religious identity, linguistic patronage, and intellectual activity. In a period when colonial paramountcy restricted external sovereignty, cultural leadership enabled the rulers to preserve symbolic authority and maintain loyalty among their subjects. The use of religion and education as instruments of legitimacy allowed Bamanda to project continuity between traditional kingship and regional cultural identity¹².

One of the most significant aspects of this cultural strategy was the patronage of Vaishnavism and the Jagannath cult. Unlike the earlier rulers who were largely associated with Saiva and Sakta traditions, the Later Gangas introduced and popularised Vaishnavism within Bamanda. Prataprudradev is credited with promoting this religious shift and constructing the Jagannath Temple at Purunagad, which became an important centre of devotion and royal symbolism. The temple complex, surrounded by shrines dedicated to Ganesha, Kartikeya, Bhairavi, and Kali, reflected both religious inclusiveness and dynastic patronage. Through association with Jagannath worship, the rulers aligned themselves with a broader Odishan sacred tradition, thereby reinforcing their legitimacy within regional society¹³.

Temple-building traditions further contributed to the projection of royal authority. Religious architecture served not only devotional purposes but also political ones, as temples acted as visible symbols of dynastic presence and sacred kingship. The establishment of shrines, patronage of Brahmins, and encouragement of ritual activity created a sacred geography linked to royal identity. Such acts enabled the rulers to present themselves as protectors of religion and custodians of social order. In tribal and frontier regions like Bamanda, temple patronage also facilitated cultural integration by connecting local traditions with broader Hindu practices.

Cultural authority became increasingly important in legitimising political power during the colonial period. The Later Ganga rulers promoted Odia and Sanskrit learning

through the establishment of educational institutions at Deogarh and the appointment of competent teachers. These initiatives enhanced Bamanda's reputation as a centre of literary and intellectual life¹⁴. Royal patronage of language and education extended beyond local administration and contributed to wider cultural movements within Odisha. Significantly, Basudev Sudhaldev established a printing press at Deogarh and supported the weekly newspaper *Sambalpur Hitaisini*, which played a role in the Odia language movement. Such patronage linked Bamanda to emerging regional consciousness and strengthened its cultural prestige.

As a result of these activities, Bamanda came to be celebrated as the "Ujjaini of Utkala," a title reflecting its status as a centre of culture, scholarship, and religious patronage. This image enhanced the symbolic capital of the ruling dynasty and elevated Bamanda beyond its political size. Cultural legitimacy thus became a powerful tool of survival, enabling the rulers to preserve influence despite colonial limitations. Through religious patronage, educational advancement, and linguistic promotion, the dynasty transformed cultural authority into a durable foundation of political endurance.

Education, Language, and Statecraft:

The rulers of Bamanda recognised that political authority in the colonial period could no longer depend solely upon hereditary legitimacy or territorial control. As colonial modernity introduced new forms of administration, communication, and public discourse, the Bamanda dynasty responded by investing in education, language, and intellectual culture. These initiatives were not merely philanthropic acts but formed part of a broader strategy of statecraft through which the rulers strengthened their social influence and enhanced their relevance within a changing political environment. Educational and linguistic patronage thus emerged as important instruments for sustaining authority under colonial paramountcy.

One of the major developments during the Later Ganga period was the establishment of schools and intellectual institutions in Bamanda, particularly at Deogarh. The rulers encouraged the spread of formal learning by appointing competent teachers and supporting institutions dedicated to Odia and Sanskrit education. Such efforts contributed to the growth of a learned class within the state and helped position Bamanda as a centre of scholarship in Western Odisha. Educational patronage

also reflected a conscious attempt to align traditional kingship with emerging modern values associated with literacy and intellectual refinement.

The promotion of Odia identity formed another important aspect of royal statecraft. At a time when linguistic consciousness was becoming increasingly significant in Odisha, the Bamanda rulers actively supported the preservation and expansion of the Odia language. Their patronage strengthened regional identity and linked the state to broader cultural movements taking place across colonial Odisha. By encouraging Odia learning and literary activity, the rulers positioned themselves as defenders of regional culture and custodians of linguistic heritage. Such cultural engagement enhanced dynastic legitimacy by connecting royal authority with the aspirations of educated society¹⁵.

The establishment of a printing press at Deogarh under Raja Basudev Sudhaldev marked a significant moment in Bamanda's cultural history. Printing technology facilitated the circulation of ideas and expanded the reach of regional intellectual discourse. The ruler's support for the weekly newspaper *Sambalpur Hitaisini* contributed to the Odia language movement and promoted public awareness within the region. Through journalism and print culture, Bamanda entered a wider network of communication that linked local governance with emerging regional consciousness. Royal patronage of the press therefore functioned as a means of cultural influence and political visibility¹⁶.

These developments illustrate how Bamanda engaged with colonial modernity through cultural diplomacy rather than confrontation. The rulers selectively adopted modern institutions—such as schools, printing presses, and literary patronage—without abandoning traditional authority. This synthesis of cultural modernization and dynastic continuity enabled Bamanda to maintain relevance in a period of political transition. Rather than relying upon military resistance, the state reinforced its survival through educational advancement, linguistic patronage, and intellectual engagement, thereby transforming culture into an enduring instrument of governance and legitimacy.

Bamanda and Colonial Political Stability:

Among the Garjat states of Western Odisha, Bamanda occupied a relatively stable political position during the colonial period. While several neighbouring tributary states experienced internal disputes, succession

struggles, or direct confrontation with colonial authority, Bamanda largely avoided prolonged political instability. Its location within the Sambalpur tributary network placed it in close interaction with states such as Rairakhol, Bonai, Gangpur, Keonjhar, and Angul, many of which faced episodes of rebellion, territorial tension, or strained relations with the British administration. In contrast, Bamanda maintained a comparatively balanced relationship with colonial power through cooperation and negotiated authority.

A comparison with neighbouring Garjat states highlights this distinction. Angul, for instance, became a centre of resistance under Somnath Singh, whose conflict with British authority invited military intervention and eventual suppression. Similarly, disturbances associated with Sambalpur politics and the wider tribal uprisings linked to Surendra Sai created instability across the region during the nineteenth century. Bamanda, however, did not emerge as a centre of anti-colonial rebellion. Instead, its rulers positioned themselves as mediators and collaborators, thereby avoiding punitive measures that often followed resistance in neighbouring territories.

One of the principal reasons Bamanda avoided severe conflict was the continuity of dynastic authority. The hereditary succession of the Later Ganga rulers created institutional stability and reduced internal disputes over legitimacy. Unlike states where succession controversies weakened political order, Bamanda retained a consistent line of rulership that reinforced administrative continuity. This dynastic coherence enabled rulers to respond effectively to external pressures while preserving internal confidence among local elites and subjects. Political continuity thus functioned as an important stabilising factor during periods of colonial transformation.

Administrative pragmatism further contributed to Bamanda's stability. The rulers adopted a flexible approach that balanced loyalty to British authority with the preservation of internal autonomy. Rather than resisting colonial intervention through armed conflict, they pursued cooperation in matters that ensured political security. This pragmatism allowed Bamanda to benefit from British recognition while maintaining authority over revenue, customary law, and local governance. The dynasty's willingness to engage diplomatically with colonial administration reduced the likelihood of direct intervention and strengthened the state's political resilience.

Thus, Bamanda's colonial stability emerged from a combination of dynastic continuity, administrative moderation, and strategic cooperation. Compared to neighbouring Garjat states affected by rebellion or political fragmentation, Bamanda demonstrated a model of negotiated stability in which survival depended upon adaptability rather than confrontation. This stability not only preserved the ruling dynasty but also enabled the state to sustain its cultural and political identity within the wider framework of colonial rule.

Transition to Merger (1948):

The political trajectory of Bamanda reached its final phase with the end of British colonial rule and the integration of princely states into the Indian Union. The withdrawal of British authority in 1947 dismantled the system of colonial paramountcy that had governed relations between the imperial state and tributary polities for more than a century. Under this framework, Bamanda had retained internal autonomy while acknowledging British supremacy in external affairs. Independence fundamentally altered this arrangement, bringing an end to the political conditions that had sustained princely authority and hereditary governance.

In the postcolonial context, the Government of India initiated a programme of territorial consolidation aimed at integrating princely states into a unified administrative structure. Within Odisha, the Garjat states were merged to establish a coherent provincial framework capable of ensuring political integration and administrative uniformity. Bamanda formally acceded to Odisha in January 1948, marking the termination of its separate political existence as a tributary state. This transition represented more than an administrative reorganisation; it signified the replacement of dynastic sovereignty with democratic governance and modern state institutions. The merger completed the long process of political transformation initiated under colonial indirect rule.

Despite the dissolution of princely authority, the historical legacy of Bamanda endured beyond political integration. The contributions of the Later Ganga rulers to religious patronage, Odia language development, education, and print culture continued to shape regional identity in Western Odisha. Bamanda's reputation as the "Ujjaini of Utkala" reflected its enduring cultural significance. Thus, while merger ended hereditary sovereignty, it preserved a historical memory rooted in adaptive governance, cultural patronage, and regional

influence¹⁷.

Conclusion:

The history of Bamanda under colonial paramountcy demonstrates how a small tributary state sustained political continuity through adaptation rather than resistance. Faced with the expansion of British authority in Western Odisha, the rulers of Bamanda adopted pragmatic strategies of accommodation, negotiation, and cultural patronage that enabled them to preserve dynastic legitimacy and internal authority. Instead of confronting colonial power militarily, they engaged with the imperial system in ways that secured recognition, political stability, and limited autonomy.

Colonial paramountcy in Bamanda functioned through indirect rule, where British supremacy in external affairs coexisted with substantial local control over internal administration. This arrangement allowed the Bamanda dynasty to retain hereditary succession, regulate revenue and customary governance, and maintain social legitimacy among its subjects. The rulers' diplomatic loyalty, combined with their patronage of religion, education, language, and print culture, strengthened both political authority and regional identity.

Bamanda's experience highlights the negotiated nature of princely-state politics in colonial India. It illustrates that smaller Garjat states were not passive recipients of imperial control but active participants in shaping their survival within changing political structures. As a regional case study, Bamanda contributes to a broader understanding of adaptive kingship, negotiated sovereignty, and the transformation of political authority in colonial Odisha.

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