



Dowagar Maharani and Jagannath Jenamani; The de facto and de jure Superintendent of Sri Mandir

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The paramountcy of the British crown over the Indian states began to be asserted with greater certainty after the revolt of 1857-58. The Company's policy of annexation was reversed, but the paramount power exercised its functions beyond the terms of the treaties in accordance with changing political, social, religious and economic conditions. In 1859 Raja Birakishore Deb, the superintendent of the Jagannath temple died issueless. It was reported that he had adopted as his heir a son of the Raja of Khimedy, a child of four years of age, only a few hours before his death. In his will, he had empowered his wife to adopt another son in the event of that boy's death. The will also declared his wife as the guardian and administration of all property real as well as personal, and empowered her to manage the affairs of the temple as usual. During the minority of the boy, the government did not think it proper to allow the court of wards to interfere in the matter. The superintendence of the temple was also left to the Rani Suryamani Patamahadei in accordance with the terms of the will.¹ Thus from 1860 the administration was headed by Rani, the widow Maharani of Raja Birakishore deb, though according to the traditional system, the minor boy was known as Raja Dibyasingh Deb and the 'anka ganana' began in his name. For about twelve years the temple administration was run



almost without any complaint. Raja Dibyasingh Deb took over the duty of the temple when he came of age.

Soon the attention of the government was drawn to some problem of the temple. In early 1875 four pieces of stone had fallen from inside the temple from a height of 40 feet above the floor level and there were several dangerous cracks on the walls. The assistant engineer, who inspected the damage done to the temple reported on 5 August 1875 as follows: "the temple as it now stands is in my opinion dangerous for pilgrims



and servitors who would constantly resort to the place when the Gods take their seats inside. As there is chance of more stone falling in I would therefore suggest that the temple should be left wholly unused, and the idols removed elsewhere, till the place is made perfectly safe and sound by executing the necessary repairs.” This view was also endorsed by the European executive engineer. It was, of course, not possible to close the temple entirely to the pilgrims. Raja made necessary alternative arrangements and placed the deities in front of the ‘Anasara Pidhi’ adjoining the main temple. The pilgrims, Raja reported, had no difficulty in visiting the temple for performance of ritual ceremonies and daily offerings. As regards the repair of the temple, a three fold scaffold was constructed consisting of large wooden timbers suitable to carry up and down the large stone required for the purpose. By March 1876 the repair works were over.²

In October 1875 the Raja drew the attention of the government to some problems of management of the temple. The income derived from the revenues of the mahals allotted for the purpose was quite insufficient to meet the expenses. The annual net deficit was of about 15,000 rupees and it was recovered from the personal income of the Raja. He suggested some measures to improve the financial condition of the temple³ and probably enforced them to meet the expenses borne by him. A few days later some servitors of the Sri Jagannath temple submitted a petition to the commissioner in order to draw his attention to some instances of the mismanagement of the affairs of the temple by the Raja.⁴ It was alleged that Raja was charging money from pilgrims for witnessing certain ceremonies of the temple. Generally the Sevakas of the temple discharged their duties on the hereditary basis, but it was alleged the Raja had appointed some persons from families not connected with those

works by taking bribes. Such appointments led to endless dimensions among the Sevakas and serious irregularities in the worship of the deities. The petitioners even, complained that the Raja had assaulted and beaten some former Sevakas.⁵ He had also reduced the quantities of their Khei by half and naturally they performed their duties in the temple with much hardship. It was further alleged that money, valuable ornaments etc., offered to the deities by pilgrims were not duly recorded and were being misappropriated. The Sevakas also observed that the general conduct of the Raja had been in variance with the recorded rules and ancient usages and customs connected with the temple. The public looked upon the government as the ‘only saviours of the institution from ruin’.⁶

By 1876, however, the government had repealed section iv of act 10 of 1840 and had transferred full control of the temple affairs to the superintendent. Consequently, T.E. Ravenshaw pleaded his inability to interfere in the matter and the Raja was left to manage the temple as best as he could. But it was obvious that the young Raja had seriously antagonized a section of the priests and attendants of the temple. The situation, as it seemed, was heading towards a crisis.

Two ceremonies, Govinda Dwadasi and Dolajatra, which came in close proximity in early 1877, brought large number of pilgrims to the temple. The crowd was not properly controlled and in the rush which occurred at the Lion's gate at least eleven persons were crushed to death on two occasions. Such a lamentable loss of life aroused much criticism against the management of the temple and especially Raja Divyasingh Dev, the superintendent, was held responsible for the accident. His apathy, neglect and want of control over his subordinates, the Lieutenant-Governor believed, were the main causes of the disaster.



The displeasure of the government was shown in withholding temporarily the title of Maharaja which was to be conferred on him according to the notification issued in January 1877.⁷ The local officers were also blamed for their lack of foresight and unpreparedness. They did not take proper notice of large crowd in Puri and also failed to take sufficient measures for controlling the internal arrangements of the temple which led to the loss of life. The Commissioner of Orissa was required to submit a scheme for regulating the large number of pilgrims to the temple.⁸ But before any scheme for better management of the temple affairs could be fully implemented, Raja Divyasingh Dev was arrested on a criminal charge of murder.

Raja Divyasingh Dev was charged with the murder of Siva Das, an old ascetic in February 1878. Siva Das, the Mahanta of a Math at Damodarapur, 6 miles off from Puri had the reputation of a religious man with a number of disciples. He was asked to come to the Raja's palace in the night of 23 February for treatment of a sick person in the household. Accompanied by four of his disciples he reached the palace in the evening and was admitted alone to the house. His four disciples remained at the gate from 8 P.M until after midnight while an ascetic was being inhumanly tortured inside the palace. His body was thrown into the lane adjacent to the palace and he crawled to the main gate where his four disciples were waiting. They immediately, admitted him to the hospital where, after much suffering, he breathed his last on 10 March 1878. But before his death he had accused the Raja Divyasingh Dev and his servants for inflicting injuries sufficient to cause death.

On 11 March 1878, the Raja and his servants were committed to trial under section 302 of IPC.⁹ The special trial was held at Cuttack by the session judge who sentenced the Raja and four of his servants to transportation for life. The

Calcutta High Court also confirmed the sentence of transportation on the Raja and two of this servants. Thus, Raja Dibyasingh Dev, the superintendent of the temple, became a convict and spent the rest of his life in Andaman. There was a sharp reaction among the god-fearing people of Orissa who regarded Raja of Puri as a part and parcel of the Jagannath cult. Some attempts were made and petitions were submitted to exonerate the Raja from the punishment. But it was of no avail. He was stealthily sent from Cuttack to Andaman. After a few years, he became mad finally breathed his last in that island.¹⁰ Some says that Raja was escaped from Andaman and came to Kendrapara where he lived at Balababa Math in disguise. Before his death in 1904 he disclosed the fact that he was Raja Dibyasingh Dev of Puri. Thus, public addressed him as Rajababa. He constructed a subway from that Balababa Math to Gobari river. Raja constructed that subway for his protection if British force will come to arrest him again. Now his statue is there also.¹¹

The exile of Dibyasingh Dev created immense difficulties for the government regarding the management of the temple. The government failed to find an easy solution and the problem dragged on till 1888 when a settlement was made of disputed claims. The government's intention was to bring about better management of the temple for convenience of large number of pilgrims who visited it throughout the year and especially in times of religious festivals. The process was initiated after the accident of 1877 and in the absence of Raja, the government hoped to mature its plan for better management of the temple. But the Dowagar Rani Suryamani Patamahadei, who had acted as the guardian of the minor Raja Dibyasingh Dev for about 15 years, did not like to hand over the management of the temple to any other authority. Fortunately, her case was



strengthened by the presence of Dibyasingh Dev's infant son who she placed, as the de jure superintendent and carried on the administration of the temple on his behalf.

In June 1878 Joseph Armstrong, the district magistrate of Puri, reported to the Commissioner that there were two courses open to the government for improving the management of the temple. The first course was to treat the infant son as the successor to his father, Dibyasingh Dev, and to recognize him as the future superintendent of the temple. Such a course was unanimously advocated by the Hindus. Armstrong observed that all Hindus wished to see the connection of the royal family maintained with the temple. In that case Armstrong suggested to bring the minor and his property under the court of wards and to appoint a manager to look into the temple affairs. A committee of the five Hindu gentlemen would look into accounts and such a plan, it was hoped, would gratify the Hindu community in general. At the same time Armstrong observed that at present the ceremonies of the temple were being managed by the Dowagar Rani Suryamani Patamahadei and her management was 'good and liberal'.¹² But being a female confined to her dwelling," the magistrate continued, "she could not well be allowed to manage the landed property."

After a long debate about the matter at different levels, the Government of India directed the Bengal authorities to submit a draft bill for a new legislation. It was desired that the legislation should be of 'a permanent nature'. But as regards the resumption of the temple lands were concerned, it was directed to abandon the proposals.¹³ Accordingly in 1880 the Commissioner of Orissa prepared a draft bill for better management of the temple of Jagannath which was mainly designed to alter the provisions of the Act X of 1840. It provided: "The

superintendence of the temple and its interior economy, the conduct and management of its affairs and endowments and the control over its priests, officers and servant shall, subject to be other provisions of this Act, vest in a Committee of Management, where of the Raja of Pooree for the time being shall be the Hereditary President." The draft bill further provided that "the committee shall consists of not less than seven, and not more than ten members, exclusive of the Hereditary President, who must all of them be persons professing the Hindoo religion as practiced in the temple." A manager of the temple and its endowment was to be appointed soon after the passing of the Act, subject to the control and orders of the Committee. The manager "shall have the general charge and direction of the temple and all its establishment, and its endowments, receipts and disbursement."

Thus, the local authorities desired to bring temple administration under the supervision of a committee and a manager whereas the office of the hereditary president of the committee was to be left to the Raja of Puri. But the Government of India, in the meanwhile, changed its mind and no legislation was adopted to improve the management of the temple. Instead of making an act of permanent nature, the authorities decided to institute a suit under section 539 of the Code of Civil Procedure for reducing the power and status of the superintendent during the minority of the son of Dibyasingh Dev.¹⁴ As soon as such a decision was taken, there was a storm of protest in Orissa. All section of the people desired that the Govt. should give up the idea of appointing a committee to take over the temple administration. Rani Suryamani, who was managing the temple affairs on behalf of the minor son of Dibyasingh Dev, petitioned the govt. against the proposed step. She said forcefully: "Although my son was unfortunately transported for life, he is living and



his son remains. On his being transported, it is no fault of his heir to be deprived of the ancestral property in as much as a son should not be punished for the offence committed by his father,” “You will be graciously pleased” she implored, “to retain the superintendentship of the holy temple in our family as was heretofore done.”¹⁵

Rani Suryamani Patamahadei now decided to call Jagannath Jenamani, the minor son of Dibyasingh Dev, as Raja Mukunda Dev, probably to strengthen the family claim to superintendentship of the temple administration. The district judge of Cuttack had issued a certificate to the Dowagar Rani to administer the estate of her grandson in August 1879. Subsequently in a note on 14 December 1882, the judge observed “The minor having been since named Rajah Mukunda Dev according to the custom of his family, his guardian Rani’s application for the substitution of the name of Rajah Mukunda Dev in lieu of Jagannath Jenamani is granted for the protection of the minor’s interests in the management of his estate and in the conduct of suits”. The assumption of the title of ‘Raja’ by the minor son of Dibyasingh was at once noticed by the authorities and its property was questioned. Rani defended her action by drawing the attention of the government to the family custom. “We have according to family custom,” She pleaded, “been compelled to put our grandson on the gudgee as Mukunda Dev. If the government does not recognize our grandson, we will be put to shame and the Hindu religion will be undermined.” The government finally accepted her views and decided to recognize the title. It was observed that “the recognition of the title and appellation of Rajah Mukunda Dev assumed by the minor would be an act of grace which would not only be welcome to the family but be appreciated by the Hindoos generally.” The Lieutenant-Governor recommended that the name and title of Raja

Mukunda Dev be conferred as a personal distinction on the minor Raja.¹⁶ Lord Ripon issued the Sanad from Simla on 22nd March 1884 and conferred the title of ‘Raja’ on Jagannath Jenamani as a personal distinction.¹⁷

In spite of the title being vested on the minor Raja, the government was aware that he would not come of age for long 14 years. The Dowagar Rani, it was believed, was incapable of personally superintending the management of the temple and its endowments and hence there was a necessity for appointment of additional trustees. In January 1885, the government of Bengal submitted a scheme to the Governor-General in Council which contemplated to vest the superintendence of the temple in a committee of respectable Hindu gentlemen to be appointed by the civil court, with the Raja of Puri as president. The actual management was to be conducted by a paid manager, who would act under the immediate control and supervision of the committee.¹⁸ The proposals were approved and sanctioned by the Governor-General in Council in February 1885.¹⁹ Thus, the way was paved for legal action on the matter and a suit was instituted in the court of the district judge of Cuttack.

But before the final disposal of the case, the government applied for an interim order for the appointment of a receiver, an assistant receiver and a tahasildar to take charge of the temple properties. In early 1887 Raghunandan Ramanuj Das, the Mahant of Emar Math, was appointed honorary receiver by the court. One assistant receiver and a tahasildar were also appointed at the same time to look after the temple properties. Such a measure led to hue and cry in different quarters of Orissa. Protest meetings were organized at different places and people decried the interference of the government in their famous and most sacred religious institution like the



Jagannath temple. Rani filed a writ petition in the Calcutta High court on the legal advice of Madhusudan Das and fortunately the court decreed the appeal against the government order towards the end of March 1887. The decision was widely welcomed by the people in Orissa.²⁰ After the court decree in favor of Rani, the government desired to make a compromise in the original suit for appointment of a committee to manage the temple affairs. After prolonged negotiation, the parties agreed to move a compromise petition in the court of judge of Cuttack on 3^d October 1888. The most important provisions of the compromise petition were as follows-

“That the right of superintendence over the Jagannath temple at Puri which formerly vested under Regulation IX of 1809 and Act X of 1840 in the Rajah of Khurda for the time being, continues in Rajah Mukunda Dev but during the minority of the Rajah his grandmother and guardian Rani shall exercise on behalf of the minor the right of superintendence over the temple till minor comes of age.

“That during such minority i.e., the period during which the Rani acts as the de facto superintendent of the temple, she shall appoint a competent manager to manage the affairs of the temple. That she shall delegate to such Manager all the powers which she exercises over the Sevaks of the temple, provided that the manager shall not be competent to dismiss any Sevak from his office without the sanction of the Rani.

“That in case the Rani dismisses the Manager, she should appoint another within a reasonable time failing which the Civil Court shall appoint a competent person to the vacant office.

“The duties of such manager shall be :

(i) To see the due performance of their respective duties by the Sevaks of the temple.

(ii) To make proper arrangements for the ingress and egress of the pilgrims at all times and for the comfort and safety of life and property of the pilgrims and particularly on the occasion of the great festivals when there is a large concourse of people and for this end to regulate the closing and opening of the temple gates.

(iii) “To see that the offerings made to the idols, and offered for sale within the Temple precincts are wholesome food, and to prosecute or otherwise punish such persons who offer for sale any unwholesome food within the precincts of the Temple.

(iv) “To carry out all lawful and proper orders issued by the Magistrate of Pooree for the preservation of public health, safety of the public and for the conservancy of the interior and exterior of the temple.

“That all the decree which the petitioners ask the court to pass shall cease to have force on the minor Rajah coming of age.”

After the compromise petition was moved, the court passed the decree on 15 December 1888.²¹ Thus, Rani continued to administer the affairs of the temple with the help of a competent manager. The compromise was a victory for her claim to retain the effective control of the temple administration in the family of the Raja. Such an arrangement continued till 1897 when Raja Mukunda Dev attained his majority and took over the management of the temple.

In 1889 the Collector had reported about the young Raja as follows: “..... all attempts to improve the young Raja’s condition are frustrated by the action of the menials surrounding him, who, while addressing him as God incarnate, do their best to reduce his intelligence to that of the wooden image which adorns the temple of Jagannath.”²² He could read



a little from a very easy Oriya primer at the age of thirteen. Naturally Mukunda Dev failed to become a competent administrator. Complaints of negligence continued and the problems became acute with the opening of the railways by the end of the 19th century. It resulted in a constant flow of pilgrims to Puri at all seasons instead of some great festivals as before. The Raja did not strengthen the temple staff to meet the new influx of pilgrims and consequently an accident occurred in the temple on 20 October 1901 during Durga Puja days. Two persons died on the spot and five others were severely injured in the rush of the crowd inside the innermost sanctuary of the temple.²³ Eventually, Raja Mukunda Dev was persuaded to improve the management and with his consent a senior deputy magistrate was appointed in 1902 to conduct the administration properly. Thus, by the beginning of the 20th century, once again the government was bound to interfere in the temple administration by appointing a competent officer, though the hereditary royal control remained stable.

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