

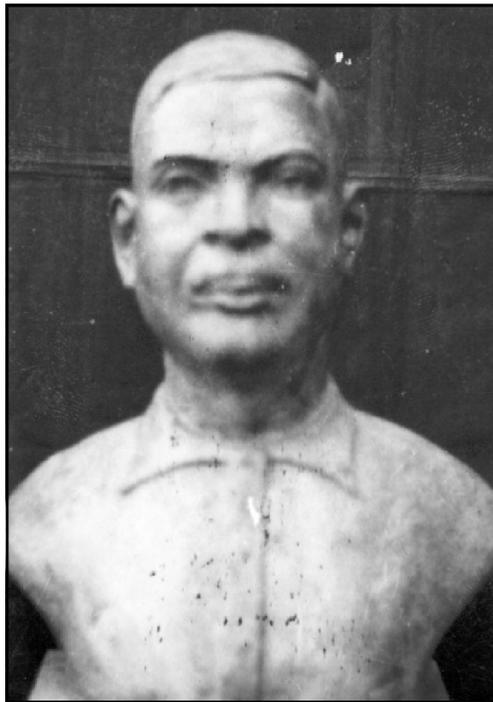
Laxman Naik : The Leader of the Leaders

Dr. N.P. Panigrahi

Tribal resistance movement was an integral part of freedom struggle and the heroic role played by many distinguished tribal leaders like Laxman Naik of Koraput, Ratna Naik of Keonjhar, Surendra Sai of Sambalpur and scores of others. They had identified themselves with the mainstream freedom struggle against heavy odds and at the cost of their lives and princely career.¹

There are few important aspects of the tribal resistance movement which deserve mention. One is that the tribals have their own social, cultural and religious identity, their own taboos, make beliefs and peculiar compulsion of lifestyle and therefore, any attempt of the administration of an alien rule to make an inroad into the tribal society by way of reformatory and correctional changes, however laudable, is bound to be resisted by the tribals with all their individual and collective might.² The most dominant characteristic of the tribal resistance movement

was that it was essentially a movement against the foreign rulers and in that sense could be adjudged to be the precursor of the national liberation movement which took a definite shape and gathered momentum under the inspiring leadership of Mahatma Gandhi nearly one century later.



There is a long and illustrious list of tribal resistance movement took place in different parts of Orissa. But nothing could be more inspiring and edifying than the saga of heroic struggle and sacrifice of one single tribal leader of Koraput whose feats and exploits till today are unparallel.³ This great man is no other than Laxman Naik of Koraput District.

Laxman Naik was born on 22nd November, 1899 in Tentuligumma of Malkangiri. His father was Padlam Naik. He belonged to a Bhuyan tribe. He fought single handed against the oppressive foreign rulers with consummate skill and a rare passion and fervour

of a fighter. He was the very fountain of grit, courage and strength to countless followers and co-workers and shone by rare brilliance. He stood up like a rock with only one supreme truth as his polestar, the freedom of his mother land. He sacrificed all his creature comforts and ultimately consumed himself but did not break or bend a bit before the wily machination of the foreign usurpers.

This innocent tribal hero Laxman Naik was attracted towards the National Movement, when the message of Congress Movement reached Koraput. He became an active member of the Congress in enrolling as⁴ *charanna* member of the Indian National Congress. He received all kinds of physical education and learnt about national integration. He organized the tribal people to fight against old and inhuman practices like bonded labour. He played a key role to popularize Congress programme in Koraput. The tribal people of Koraput and its surrounding like Malkangiri, Tentulipada accepted him as their hero and devoted themselves for the cause of national freedom. He promoted 'Khadi' and made people aware of the Congress plan of action.⁵ He tried to inculcate a sense of unity among people for the freedom. The subaltern perception of people's participation found its subtle manifestation in this part who fought for freedom. It was more insistent in case of the illiterate villagers than that of the elitists of town. The mass participation of tribals in this area took a new dimension in the Congress movement after congress formed ministry in 1937.⁶ They get a sense of fresh courage which led to some minor incident of rioting. The best example is killing of a sub-inspector with an axe when he removed a Congress flag while hoisting. Violence in a non-violent movement like Indian National Movement could be seen from such incidents.

Laxman Naik took the charge of President of the Congress primary committee at Matili in Koraput in 1942.⁷ He managed to mobilise the tribal people for various development works like construction of roads, building bridges and establishing schools. He asked the villagers not to pay any tax. He spearheaded the fight against oppression, sufferings and exploitation. During the Quit India Movement 1942, Laxman Naik was nominated to represent Matili. He used non-violence as a main weapon against colonial power. The tribal people called him "Gandhi of Malkangiri."⁸

The tribal movement created an unprecedented public awakening in Koraput. The message of Quit India Movement was circulated in the whole of Koraput.⁹ The Bonda tribes of this region were violent and belligerent and seized Matili police station under the leadership of Laxman Naik. In 1942, August, Laxman Naik and Congress workers attacked liquor shop at Kongrabeda, Muntipalli, Sindhabela.¹⁰ He led a long procession to Matili police station. It was on August 21, 1942, tribals from different villages moved towards matili, holding a Congress flag and chanted 'Ramdhun' and proceeded towards police station. They entered the compound of police station and tried to hoist the flag at the top of the Police Station.¹² Laxman Naik was not allowed to hoist flag, as the magistrate Mujibur Rahman ordered 'Lathi' charge on the demonstrators.¹³ The angry demonstrators gave patriotic slogans. Two police officials Ram Murty and constable Mohanty were injured. As the police opened firing, 5 died on spot and 17 injured. The injured Laxman was thrown into the ditch near the compound.¹⁴ It was a blessing in disguise for the police to involve Laxman in a murder case of forest guard G. Rammaya. He along with his son and other Congress workers were arrested at Matili police station and were sent to Koraput

jail. The trial of Laxman Naik was made at the Additional session court of Koraput. V. Ramnathan, the Additional Session judge, Koraput sentenced Laxman Naik to death under section 302 of IPS.¹⁵ He was then sent to Berhampur Jail for execution.

Laxman Naik was in the cell since November 16, 1942. When his execution date drew nearer, he wished to see his fellow prisoners and eat what they were given. All the inmates of Berhampur jail offered prayer. His fellow prisoners wept throughout night of March 28, 1943.¹⁶ At the break of dawn on March 29, 1943 by 5.30 a.m., Laxman Naik gallantly marched towards the Gallows. He wished his last. "If the sun is true, and so is the moon, it is then equally true that mother India shall be independent."¹⁷ Rammurty, the Zamadar of jail pulled the lever bringing the iron plate under his feet down.¹⁸ There ended his life, and he was buried inside the jail compound.¹⁹

Though Laxman Naik did not live to see free India, he remained imprinted in the minds of millions of people of India as the leader of leaders.

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10. S.C. Padhy, op.cit., p.72.
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Dr. N.P. Panigrahi is a Lecturer in History at M.K. Degree College, Gurandi, Gajapati, Orissa.