



Rani Suryamani Patamahadei : An Extraordinary Lady In Puri Temple Administration

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Suryamani Patamahadei, the widow of the Gajapati king Birakishore Dev played a crucial role in the Puri Temple Administration at a very critical phase in the history of the Srimandir. She exercised immense control over revolting *Sevayats* and showed keen interest in the Temple Administration. She faced a lot of obstacles and adversities over a long span of time, but by dint of her extraordinary zeal and enthusiasm she prevailed upon them and fought legal battle with the British rulers to win in the long run and protected the temple culture from the alien invasion. Her extraordinary qualities of hand, head and heart won her an enviable position not only within the Temple, but also throughout the Hindu world.

Suryamani Patamahadei born in 1818 at Sonepur was the daughter of Raja Daityari Singh. During her childhood and youth, She was quite intelligent and beautiful. She was efficient in archery and hunting. While royal family from Sonepur were going to Puri, at night Suryamani killed a crocodile with a sword as it was near the camp of their stay and could have devoured them. Her spirit was appreciated by all. Raja of Puri Ramachandra Dev having seen this pretty princess wanted to get his son married with her. The marriage was held without delay and Raja Ram Chandra Dev expired in 1854. His son Birakishore Dev ascended the throne and became

the Superintendent of the Temple. In 1859 Birakishore Dev died after suffering from protracted illness. Before his death he had adopted a son of the Raja of Bada Khemundi. The Rani Patamahadei was extremely shocked at the death of the king, and then she gathered strength to face the crisis.

Rani Suryamani, in spite of the conspiracy of the British government, was successful to make her adopted son Dibyasingha the Superintendent of the Temple. But there was unrest among the *Sevayats* and indiscipline in the entire temple administration. In 1866 the tragic famine took place, on account of which everywhere there was agony, apathy and death. Suryamani in this juncture distributed the cooked *Mahaprasad* among the hungry people and the British Government was happy with her noble gesture. In 1875 on attainment of adulthood of the prince Rani Patamahadei relinquished her duties as Superintendent of the Temple. Raja Didyasingha Deb took over this charge from the Rani. But Dibyasingha was indifferent to the temple administration and insensitive to the people in general and *Sevaks* and priests in particular. In 1878 he was charge sheeted and convicted of killing a Sadhu called Siba Das. He was deported to Andaman on life imprisonment.

Rani was not disturbed so much and tried to maintain the royal prestige and position. She



took control of the temple management as the Superintendent on behalf of Dibyasingh Deb's minor son Jenamani Jagannath. She sent application to the District Judge, Cuttack, who granted the permission. But this time Rani could not properly control the temple administration, particularly at the time of festivals like Rath Yatra, 1879. Due to laxity in administration *Nitis* could not be held in time and the pilgrims from far and near did not get *Mahaprasad* in time. The British Government contemplated to interfere in the temple administration. They passed the Puri Temple Act of 1880 according to which the Superintendent of the Temple was vested in a Committee of Management and the King of Puri would remain a nominal head on hereditary ground.

This raised a mass protest and was taken as an attack of the alien Government on the honour of the Gajapati king or queen as well as the entire Hindu religion. The famous Pundits, Sadhus, Mahants and eminent persons raised a storm of protests and strongly supported the Superintendence of the Puri temple by Suryamani Patamahadei. A very cogent and strong worded petition was prepared under the direction of the outstanding Oriya advocate Madhusudan Das, who also forcefully pleaded the case in the same month. The Statesman of April 5, 1887 reported this as follows: "There is the strongest reason to believe that the Maharani of Khurda who is the guardian of the minor prince is not open to any blame for her management of the shrine and her administration has been marked throughout by great unselfishness, self-sacrifice and devotion."

Sir Stewart Bayley, Lieutenant Governor of Bengal in April 1887 wanted a compromise to save their face in this case and sent for Madhusudan Das, who was the Law agent of the Rani and Metcalfe, the Commissioner of Orissa. It was decided to settle the case amicably. The compromise deed was prepared, which stated that Rani would have the lone of the services of a

Government officer to manage the affairs of the temple till the Raja came of age. Hence Rani Suryamani Patamahadei remained the Superintendent of the Puri Temple during the long period of minority of Raja Mukund Dev. Rani as per compromise appointed Harekrushna Das, *Sheristadar* of the Judge's Court at Cuttack as the Manager of the Temple. The Government's proposal of setting up a Managing Committee was dropped.

Hence the compromise was an historic victory of the Rani as well as for the honour of the Temple and Hindu Community dwindled in the recent past. During her long tenureship as Superintendent, there was peace, order and discipline in the Temple Administration. The relation of Rani with the vast array of Sevaks and Priests was very cordial. In 1897 Raja Mukunda Dev came of age and Rani vested the Superintendence to him. Undoubtedly Rani Patamahadei was extraordinary in her intelligence, disposition and personality. She will be ever remembered and respected by all devotees of Lord Jagannath.

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