



Administration of Shri Jagannath Temple under Marathas and British Rule

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Mukunda Harichandan, the last independent Hindu King of Odisha was killed in a battle with the invading Afghan Sultan of Bengal in 1568 A.D. Then Odisha came under the Afghan rule. This rule came to an end when Mansingh, a General of Emperor Akbar came to Odisha in 1590 and defeated the Afghans. Consequently Odisha was included in the Moghul empire. After the death of Mukunda Harichandan, Ramachandra Dev (I) of Bhoi dynasty carved out a small kingdom on the ruins of the Odisha Gajapati empire and made Khurda its Capital. He came under this suzerainty of the Moghul Emperor. The period under the Afghans and the Moghuls was a period of tyranny, especially for Lord Jagannath and the temple.

In 1741, Alivardi Khan, Nazim of Bengal, Bihar and Odisha defeated Murshid Quli-II, Naib Nazim of Odisha. Mir Habib, a trusted officer of Murshid Quli joined the Marathas and persuaded them to attack Bengal. Odisha was finally ceded to the Marathas in 1751 by Alivardi. The Muslim rule ended in Odisha by a treaty of Alivardi with the Marathas.

Marathas Rule :

The first two Governors under Marathas were Muslims. In 1760, Sheo Bhatt Sathe became the first Maratha Subahdar till 1764.

Ramachandra Dev was dethroned by Raja Padmanava Dev of Patia with the help of Mir Habib. Padmanava reigned for 3/4 years and was expelled by Birakeshari Dev-I, son of Ramachandra Dev. Birakeshari's regnal period was from 1736 to 1793 A.D.

When the Marathas under Sheo Bhatt assumed direct administration of Odisha, Jagannath Narayan Dev, the Raja of Parlakhemundi of Odisha claimed to be the legitimate descendent of Imperial Gangas. Birakeshari sought the assistance of the Marathas to drive out the invader and promised to pay them rupees one lakh for such assistance. But Birakeshari failed to pay the stipulated sum and instead, gave four mahals or *pergunahs* to the Marathas. He not only lost four *pergunahs* but also the control over the management of the Jagannath temple, situated in one of such *pergunahs*.

As Mr. Kulke has stated "The Rajas of Khurda seem to have retained only a nominal position as Gajapatis in the Jagannath cult xxxx the control over the Jagannath cult had passed completely into the hands of group of temple administrators which were appointed by the Marathas". During the time of Maratha Subahadar Rajaram Pandit (1778-1793),



Birakeshari Dev became mad and murdered four of his sons. The Subahdar imprisoned him in Barabati fort at Cuttack. His son Dibyasingha Dev-II was made Raja of Khurda on the condition that an annual tribute to the tune of rupees ten thousand would be paid to the Marathas by him.

During the time of Birakeshari many new temples were constructed and old ones renovated in the State. The Jagannath temple was again lime-plastered. The Ratnavedi of the temple was renovated. A small statute of Birakeshari is found in the front side wall of the Ratnavedi. Also his name has been inscribed there. In Birakeshari's time, the Odia literature flourished under royal patronage to such an extent that it would not be an exaggeration to say that it was the golden age of Odia literature. The Raja was himself a poet. Authorship of some famous devotional songs in Odia is attributed to him. The writer of this essay has found an epic in palm-leaf manuscript named as 'Rasataranga' of this Raja and got it edited and printed.

As the Maratha rulers were Hindus, they guarded the interests of the temple. They made good the deficit due to excess of expenditure over income. The main sources of income of the temple during the Maratha rule were (1) Revenue from Sateis Hazari Mahal (2) Sayer or two duties (3) Tax on professions (4) Sale of mahaprasad (5) Kot khanjah or assignment of land revenue. The Maratha Government recouped the money spent on the temple by continuing the pilgrim tax, which was imposed by the Muslims. A tax on Pratiharis was also levied, who were allowed to collect fees from the pilgrims. Certain categories of pilgrims such as sanyasis (mendicants), the deseas (who lived in the holy land between the Baitarani and Rishikulya rivers) and the kangals (paupers) were exempted from payment of the pilgrim tax.

During the Maratha rule, the day to day administration of the temple was vested in three Parichhas. For some years there were four Parichhas. The names of the Parichhas as per the Grome's report dated 10.06.1805 were Morar Pandit (head Parichha), Jagannath Rajguru (2nd Parichha) and Shewaji Ungits (3rd Parichha).

Gajapati Dibyasingh Dev-II was loyal to the Marathas. During his time, the Jagannath temple was again plastered. Jhulan Yatra was introduced in the temple. The Arun Pillar was brought from Konark and installed in front of main gate of the Jagannath temple.

Dibyasingh Dev was succeeded by his son Mukunda Dev-II (1798-1817).

In 1757, the British East India Company was granted the revenue diwani of Bengal, Bihar, Odisha by the Moghul Emperor Shah Alam. The Company wanted to annex Odisha in order to connect Bengal with their possessions in South India. In 1766, Lord Clive asked the Marathas as to whether they would cede Odisha to the Company for an annual tribute. The Maratha king Januji Bhonsla agreed for ceding on certain conditions. The main condition was that the Jagannath temple and the duties collected from the temple should be with the Marathas. The Company Government did not agree to the conditions and after all attempts failed, they prepared for a war against the Marathas to occupy the province of Cuttack (Odisha). Their attempt to conquest Odisha started from the southern (Ganjam) side under the command of Lt. Col. Campbell. Lord Wellesely, the British Governer-General, issued instructions to Lt.Col.Campbell as to how to deal with the pagoda of Jagannath, the priests and the people. Lord Wellesely had instructed, 'On your arrival at Jaggenaut, you will employ every possible



precautions to preserve the respect due to the Pagoda and to the religious prejudices of the Brahmins and pilgrims. You will furnish the Brahmins with such guards as shall afford perfect security to their persons, rites and ceremonies and to the sanctity of the religious edifices and you will enjoin these under your command to observe your orders on this important subject with the utmost degree of accuracy and vigilance. "The British troops crossed the Odisha borders and entered Puri on the 18th September 1803 without resistance.

British Rule :

After the conquest, the Company was administered by a Board of Commissioners for the affairs of Cuttack (Odisha). The province was divided into two divisions, James Hunter was deputed as the collector of Jagernaut (Puri) or south- division to collect revenue and to superintendent the temple affairs. In September 1805, the two divisions were amalgamated into one district under the charge of one Judge-Magistrate and one collector. Hunter was appointed as the collector of pilgrim tax at Puri. For some years after the conquest, the British managed the temple directly following the same system of management as that of the Marathas. They made good the deficit in the income of the temple. But the pilgrim tax which was abolished soon after the conquest was reintroduced in January, 1806. When Lt. Col. Harcourt, the Commissioner visited the Car festival in July 1804, the priests received him favourably.

Gajapati Mukunda Dev helped the Company and allowed their troops to pass through his territory. The Raja was offered Rupees one lakh by the Company for military cooperation. He had hoped that the Company after their conquest of the province would hand over to him

the four *pergunahs* which were taken by the Marathas. But Harcourt was not willing to spare even "a span of land".

Mukunda Dev and his Dewan Jayi Rajguru were very much disappointed at the dubious role of the British. They made secret negotiations with the Marathas and some tributary Gadjat Chiefs to regain influence in the Puri temple. They strengthened the internal defence of Khurda. The Khurda troops raided the bordering region of Pipili. Mukunda Dev sent his men to collect land revenue from the *mahals* or *pergunahs* which were not restored to him by the Company. The rebellion of Khurda Raja was suppressed by Lt. Col. Harcourt. His army destroyed the Khurda fort. Mukunda Dev was taken prisoner to Cuttack and then Midnapur. Dewan Jayi Rajguru was hanged in full public view. The entire Khurda territory was confiscated by the Company. As per the proclamation dated 7.12.1807 of Harcourt, the Killa and the country of Khurda had, 'come into the possession and enjoyment of the victorious army of the honourable company' and had been included in the moghulbandi. Thus came to an end the glorious tradition of Gajapati Kings of Odisha.

The British thought of managing the temple directly with a committee of Pandits or Parichhas. But the internal affairs of the temple could not be managed effectively and the Parichhas were reported to be unfit for such responsibility. As the Company Government was a Christian government, they experienced practical difficulties in managing the internal affairs of the temple. The Christian officers were prohibited entry into the temple. After a prolonged contemplation for an alternative arrangement, the ultimate choice fell upon Raja Mukunda Dev who was under confinement at Midnapur. The Raja was released and ordered to stay at Puri. The



Raja, in the meantime had expressed his loyalty to the British. By regulation IV of 1809, the Raja was appointed as the Superintendent of the temple and thereby the direct administration of the temple by the East India Company came to an end. Certain restrictions were imposed on the authority of the Raja. He and his successors were to hold the position so long as they conducted themselves with integrity, diligence and propriety and were liable to removal by the Government on the ground of misconduct. But the Government retained the power of appointing and dismissing the temple Parichhas. The Government realised money from the pilgrims and paid money for the establishment charges of the temple and scrutinized the accounts. Thus, a diarchy in the administration of the temple was introduced.

In early 1817, the Paikas (landed militia) of the former Khurda state under the leadership of the Khandaitas revolted against the British for the ruthless character of the British revenue system. They had been allowed to enjoy hereditary 'Jagirs' during the Muslim and Maratha rule. The Company deprived their privileges in their service lands by assessing them at the same rate as the other tillers of the land. The Khandaitas lost the 'haupani tax' which they were entitled to collect from the inhabitants in their 'mahals' for maintaining law and order. They fell into arrears of unpaid revenue owing to increase in assessment. It is stated that the invariable result of this mortgaging was the loss of the land which was auctioned in Cuttack and Calcutta where Odisha soon had become a favourite ground for speculators.

Buxi Jagabandhu, a General of Raja Mukunda Dev, who lost his valuable Rorang estate and privileges, organized an open revolt which spread over soon in Khurda, Banapur and Puri. These places were conquered and the British

offices looted. The insurgents declared the Raja of Khurda as their ruler. The revolt was suppressed in April 1817 by Capt. Le Fabre. The Raja and his son were arrested and were kept as prisoners in the Barabati fort of Cuttack. Buxi Jagabandhu surrendered after eight years and was kept confined at Cuttack on a monthly pension. There he died in January, 1829. Mukunda Dev died in November, 1817 at Cuttack.

Ramachandra Dev-III succeeded his father Mukunda Dev-II. He was instructed to stay at Puri and was appointed as the Temple Superintendent. With a view to compensating the Raja for his loss of the Khurda estate, the British Government paid him an allowance of Rs.25,600/- per annum for his maintenance. The allowance was called 'malikana', but subsequently phrased as 'political pension'. Each successive Puri Raja had been getting that political pension, but the amount of pension had not been enhanced since 1819.

Despite vesting in the Raja the power of superintendence, the propaganda of the Christian missionaries and their supporters in Britain and India continued against the British Government's "connections with idolatry" and imposition of pilgrim tax- an "official sanction of superstition". The critics succeeded at last.

The Act-X of 1840, passed on 20.4.1840 abolished the pilgrim tax. By order of the Collector of Puri, collection of any tax from the pilgrims was prohibited with effect from the 3rd May, 1840. The Act also provided that the superintendence of the temple of Jagannath and its interior economy, the conduct and the management of its affairs and the control over the priests, officers and servants attached to the temple, should continue to be vested in the Raja of Khurda (i.e. Puri) for the time being.



The Government continued to contribute annually on an average of Rs.53,000/- to meet the expenses of the temple. The Government handed over to the Raja some estates in lieu of annual payments. In 1843 the estate, Sateis Hazari Mahal comprising 90 villages and yielding an annual rental of Rs.17,420/- was made over. In 1858 and 1863, some villages (156) constituting the Ekharajat Mahal were transferred to the Raja for maintenance of the temple, peace and order. All future cash payments were stopped.

By 1840, the annual money payments were fixed at Rs.23,321/-. In 1856, the cost of maintenance of police force within and around the temple amounting to Rs.6,804/- was deducted and the allowance, otherwise known as Khairat allowance was fixed at Rs.16,517/-. In 1859 the Court of Directors decided that the Superintendent (i.e. the Raja) should also be responsible for preservation of peace inside the temple and a sum of Rs.6,804/- then paid directly to the police should be paid to the Superintendent until such time as a transfer of lands yielding an equivalent sum could be effected. By the deeds dated 3.4.1858 and 26/30.3.1863, lands were transferred to the temple, which yielded Rs.23,321/-.

Ramachandra Dev-III who died in 1854, was succeeded by his son Birakeshari Dev-II (also called Birakishore). Birakeshari passed away untimely in November 1859, leaving behind his widow Rani Suryamani Patmahadei and an adopted son (a child of about four years). He was the first child of the Zamindar of Bada Khemundi. By a will, Rani Suryamani was made the guardian of all properties and was empowered to conduct the affairs of the temple during the minority of her adopted son. She was authorized to adopt another son in the event of the death of the adopted son. She obtained a certificate from

the Civil Court appointing her the guardian of the minor and his estates, under Act XL of 1858.

The management of the temple during the superintendence of the Rani was reportedly not satisfactory. The situation went from bad to worse when the minor son Dibyasingh Dev-II came of age and became the Superintendent. He grew up wayward and was addicted to drugs. He neglected his duties in the temple and did not pull on well with the priests and the attendants. For the mismanagement of the temple, eleven persons were crushed to death during the Dola and Govinda Dwadasi festivals in February, 1877. In 1878 on the charge of murdering a Sadhu, Dibyasingh Dev was convicted and sentenced to transportation for life to Andaman Jail. He died there. Dibyasingh Dev who received the title of "Maharaja" from the British Government in 1877, became an Andaman convict next year !

As evident from the official records of that time, the transportation of the Raja brought about a very anomalous state of things in as much as under Act X of 1840, the superintendence of the temple remained with the Raja, even after his transportation. The Government desired to recover a portion of the Khurda Estate with a rental of Rs.23,716/- which was made over to the Raja as Superintendent giving in exchange of Rs.30,000/- a year, the object of the proposed commutation being to save the raiyats from oppression and to facilitate management of the Government property at Khurda. Keeping this in view, it was proposed to the Government of India that an Act should be passed vesting the management in an honorary committee associated with a Manager appointed by the Government. After prolonged discussions it was decided by the Government of India to repeal Act X of 1840, and to amend section 539 of the Civil Procedure Code, so as to bring any trust created for religious purposes within the purview of that section. A suit



was ordered to be instituted for the purpose of declaring vacant the office of Superintendent of the temple and its interior economy held by the convict Raja and to get a decree to appoint new trustees under the Trust and to settle a scheme for its management. Accordingly, a scheme of management was prepared by Mr. K.G. Gupta, acting Collector of Puri in 1883 and submitted to the Government for approval.

On the institution of the suit, a number of memorials were sent to the Government for its withdrawal. The “cry of religion in danger”, was so successfully raised in the vernacular press that the suit was abandoned under certain terms of compromise. Mr. Madhusudan Das, a great Odia Advocate, appeared for the Rani. According to the terms of the compromise, ‘the right of superintendence of the temple continues in Raja Mukunda Deva but during his minority, his grandmother and guardian, Rani Suryamani shall exercise the rights of superintendence on behalf of the minor till the minor comes of age. During the period of her management, 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 without the sanction of the Rani. In case the Rani dismisses a Manager, she should appoint another within a reasonable time, failing which the Civil Court shall appoint a competent Manager to the said vacancy. The duties of the Manager were specified in the compromise. The decree shall cease to have force on the minor Raja’s coming of age’.

The compromise was made in 1888 and ceased to have any force in 1897, when Raja Mukunda Dev attained his majority.

The following persons worked as Manager of the temple during the period 1889 to 1926.

1889 to 1890 - Harekrushna Das
 1890 to 1893 - Krushnachandra Mohanty
 1893 - R.K. Kundu (for a short time)
 1893 to 1895 - J.N. Chaudhury
 1895 - Nityananda Das (for a short time)
 1898 - Mr. Price (Ex-LC.S.) (for a short time)
 1900 - Mr. Price (Ex-LC.S.) again for a short time.
 1900 (May) to 1900 (October) - Chintamani Patnaik
 1900 (October) - Rasbihari Naik (for a short time)
 1903 (May) to 1913 (May) - Rajkishore Das
 1913 (May) to 1917 (May) - Gourshyam Moharthy
 1917 (May) to 1921 (May) - Balamukunda Kanoongo
 1921 (May) to 1925 (May) - Sakhi Chand
 1925 (May) to 1926 (August) - Lala Asutosh

The compromise was a victory of Rani Suryamani. As stated by Prof. P. Mukherjee “Rani Suryamani was undoubtedly a woman of keen intelligence and strong personality. Though a purdha lady, she revived the prestige of the Puri Raja family. She practically forced the government of India to confer the title of Raja on Mukunda Dev, during the life time of his father. She united all sections of people to rally round the cause of Raja of Puri xxxx”. She became widow at an early age. “She was expected to live sixty years in recluse, but destiny ordained otherwise. She became the custodian of the Jagannath temple and of the Puri Raj estates from 1860 to 1897, except for the brief period 1875 to 1878, when Dibyasingh Deva took charge.”

“She learnt from experience. During the long minority of Mukunda Deva, there was not much complaint regarding the temple administration.” Her Advocate Mr. Madhusudan Das thwarted the attempt of the Government to reduce the power and prestige of the Superintendent of the temple by bringing the temple administration under a committee. Though a Christian by choice, he became a spokesman of the Odia-Hindus and helped the Rani and her



grandson to a great extent in management of the temple affairs.

After Mukunda Dev came of age, Rani Suryamani “faded away from the pages of history”. She passed away in 1926.

Mukunda Dev proved to be inefficient. He took little interest in the temple affairs. On Mahastami day, the 20th October 1901, in the Pokharia of the temple, a fatal accident occurred resulting in two persons being trampled to death and several others being seriously injured. This accident was attributed to the incompetence, apathy and mismanagement of the Superintendent of the temple. As stated by Mr. Garret (Jt. Magistrate) in his report dt. 30.12.1901, the Raja became a prey in the hands of a low caste married and maimed woman, nick named ‘Khandi’. He donated her a lot of property.

To check the mismanagement of the temple, a senior Deputy Magistrate Rai Bahadur Rajkishore Das was appointed as Manager during the time of Mukunda Dev. Mukunda Dev died on 11.2.1926. His adopted son Ramachandra Dev-IV became the Superintendent of the temple. Birakishore Dev succeeded his father Ramachandra Dev in 1956.

Ramachandra Dev was the last superintendent of the temple during the British rule and the first after the independence. During his incumbency, Government of Odisha enacted the Puri Shri Jagannath Temple (Administration) Act,

1952 and Shri Jagannath Temple Act, 1955 to avert abject mismanagement of the temple.

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