



## Jagannath Temple Administration During the British Rule

*Prafulla Pattnaik*



With the British occupation of Orissa in 1803 the management of the Jagannath temple was taken over by the East India Company. The Marquis of Wellesley in his dispatches to Lt. Col. Campbell, the Commander of the Southern forces, had particularly stressed the need for respecting the great sanctity attached to the temple of Jagannath at Puri. Before the British army marched into Orissa Wellesley had instructed that " no part of the property, treasure, or valuable articles of any kind, contained in the Pagoda of Jagernaut, or in any religious edifice, or possessed the priests or Brahmins, or persons of any description attached to the temples or religious institutions is to be considered as prize to any army ." For the first few years the East India Company managed the day to day administration of the temple through the Parichhas and annually made up the differences between the receipts and the expenditures of the temple as their predecessor and Marathas had done. Gradually the Christian Government endeavoured to get rid of the minute supervision of idolatrous rites, which this system involved, and in 1806 the Superintendence of the temple was vested in an assembly of three Pundits. In 1809 the assembly of Pundits was abolished, and the management was transferred to the Raja of

Khurda (now known as the Raja of Puri), who was appointed as hereditary Superintendent of the temple subject to the control and supervision of the British Government. With a view to give up all connections with the management of a Hindu temple the British Government in 1840 vested the Raja of Puri with full and absolute authority in regard to the management of the temple and its property, and in the same year abolished the pilgrim tax which was considered to be a State sanction to idolatry.

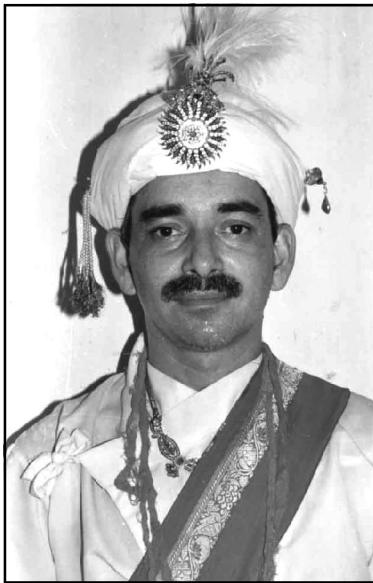
The Britishers after their conquest of Orissa in 1803 A.D. had gradually resumed the endowments of the temple of Jagannath and were making a cash payment of about Rs.53,000/- per annum for the management of the temple. With a view to sever all connections with the temple the British Government in 1843 released to the Raja of Puri the last resumed endowment, viz., the Satais Hazari Mahal yielding a revenue of Rs.17,420.00. In 1858 and 1863 some villages, which constituted the Ekhrayat Mahal, were transferred to the Raja for the maintenance of the temple and all future cash payments by the Government were stopped. The Raja was also held responsible for the preservation of peace inside the temple and for maintaining such extra police as may



be necessary outside the temple on the occasion of the great festivals.

Raja Birakishore Dev of Puri died in 1859 and his widow Suryamani Pattamahadei was empowered by his will to manage the affairs of the temple during the minority of his adopted heir Dibyasingh Dev. During the Superintendence of Ranees there was a marked deterioration in the management of the temple and its properties. "She was entirely inaccessible and was neither seen nor spoken by her people of business. Even her native agents never heard her voice. Her wishes were known only at third hand. She spoke only to her maids who reported her commands to a set of male servants called Bisois through whom the Mukhtars or the agents learned her pleasure and informed the world without."

Corruption was rampant among the employees of the temple estates and the tenants were worst affected. Things did not improve when Raja Dibyasingh Dev came of age. In 1878 Dibyasingh Dev was implicated in murder and was punished with transportation for life. The management of the temple was in utter confusion. This led the Government to institute a suit in 1885 for the purpose of declaring vacant the office of the Superintendent, which was nominally held by the convict Raja, and of obtaining a decree to appoint new trustees for the management of the temple. This suit was hotly contested in which Utkal Gourab Madhusudan Das, the renowned lawyer of Orissa championed the cause of Ranees Suryamani Pattamahadei. The



cry that religion was in danger was raised in the vernacular press and the public mind was considerably agitated over the issue. The Government finally decided to abandon the case under a deed of compromise. According to this compromise the Ranees had to engage a competent manager to manage the affairs of the temple till her grandson Mukunda Dev attained maturity. Complaints of negligence and mismanagement continued even after the

Raja came of age. So a Deputy Magistrate during the lifetime of Mukunda Dev and on his death in 1926, the management of the temple was transferred to his successor Raja Rama Chandra Dev.

With the removal of senior government officers of gazetted rank from the management of the temple the administration of the temple fast deteriorated. After the achievement of independence it was felt necessary to take legislative measures to save this unique religious institution of all India fame from utter confusion and ruin.

While introducing the Shri Jagannath Temple (Administration) Bill in Orissa Legislative Assembly, the then Minister of Law and Home observed, "In the absence of any guidance from the Raja and sufficient contribution from him for the regular expenses of the temple, the scheduled and disciplined performance of the nitis has suffered beyond imagination and the Raja has practically lost all control over the different sebakas and other temple servants. Economic rivalry and moral degeneration of the servants and sevaks has



divested them all sense of duty and co-operation. Specific endowments are regularly misapplied and misappropriated. Strikes amongst various classes are of common occurrence. The non-availability of the Mahaprasad, coveted and adored by millions of pilgrims, at the appointed hours is always there in these days. The lapses into unorthodoxy has resulted in extremely unhygienic conditions inside the temple and commissions of heinous crimes even within the temple precincts is not rare, even the image of the deity has been at times defiled and its precious jewellery removed." For better administration of the temple and its properties the Government of Orissa as a preliminary step towards undertaking a comprehensive legislation passed "the Puri Shri Jagannath Temple (Administration) Act, 1952, providing for the appointment of a Special Officer to consolidate and prepare a record of right and duties of Sevaks, Pujaris and such other persons connected with the seva, puja and management of the temple and also to prepare a record of rights for the endowments of the temple. A Special Officer of the rank of a District Judge was accordingly appointed who submitted his report on the 15th March 1954, which disclosed serious mismanagement of the affairs of the Temple and in consequence Shri Jagannath Temple Act, 1954 was passed.

Shri Jagannath Temple Act, 1954 (Orissa Act II of 1955) forms the basis of the existing administration pattern of the temple and its endowments. Section 5 of the Act states that "the administration and the governance of the

Temple and its endowments shall vest in a committee called Shri Jagannath Temple Managing Committee constituted as such by the State Government. It shall be a body corporate, having perpetual succession and a common seal, and by the said name sue and be sued". Section 6 provides for the constitution of the committee with the Raja of Puri as the Chairman. No person who does not profess the Hindu religion shall be eligible for membership. The Collector of the District of Puri is an ex-officio member and is designated as the Vice-Chairman of the committee. Section 19 and 21 deal with the appointment, powers, and functions of the Administrator of the temple who shall be the Secretary of the Committee and its chief executive officer and shall, subject to the control of the Committee, have powers to carry out the decisions in accordance with the provisions of the Act. The Administrator shall be responsible for the custody of all records and properties of the temple.

#### ***Referred Records/Books***

1. Krupasindhu Mishra, Utkal Itihas
2. L.S.S.O Malley Puri District Gazetter
3. Final Report on Ekharajat Mahal (1953-1965)
4. Statement of Objects and Reasons, The Orissa Gazette

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Prafulla Pattnaik lives at Guru Nilay, Balabhadra Lane, Puri.