

Orissa During the Great Revolt of 1857

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The great Indian Revolt of 1857 is one of the greatest events of modern Indian History. The revolution which broke out against the British rule, for some times gave a feeling that the British empire would disappear from India. First time the people of India raised their strong voice against the mighty Britishers. So the year 1857 is a defining period in Indian History. But the character of the great uprising of 1857 is controversial. The scholars of England called the famous event of 1857 as the Sepoy Mutiny. On the other hand some Indian historians have preferred to portray it as the "First war of Independence." It is not justified to say that the great event was simply a sepoy mutiny. The leaders of that uprising Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi, the Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah of Delhi, Maratha leader Nana Saheb, Tantya Tope, Kunwar Singh of Bihar and Surendra Sai of Sambalpur of Orissa were not sepoys. Another view is that the sepoys as well as the common people both bravely fought against the empire. The common people helped and encouraged the sepoys in many places. The public played a vital role in fighting with British. They were ready to sacrifice their life for the sake of motherland. But unfortunately, prominent persons of that time John Lawrence and Williamkey called it the Revolt of Sepoys. The great Nationalists V.D. Savarkar, Ashok Mehta and other scholars strongly voiced to support it as a National Movement. According to them this revolt was an organised movement. Great Nationalist V.D. Savarkar described the Revolt of 1857 as the "Indian War of

Independence". So many causes were responsible for the outbreak of the Revolt of 1857. They were political, economic, social and even religious. At first the revolt started at Barrackpore and there after immediately brokeout in many parts of India.

In Orissa the impact of the great Revolt was also felt. A great son of Orissa Vir Surendra Sai and his life-long struggle during that revolt is remarkable. Another Nationalist Oriya Rama Krushna Samanta Singhar, the Zamindar of Balia also dedicated his life in the revolt. Raja Arjun Singh of Parhat and his Dewan Jagu also actively participated in the anti-British activities. British authorities in Orissa took steps to prevent disturbance. Special attention was given to sepoys who visited Puri during the car festival of Lord Jagannath. Some of the disbanded sepoys of the 19th and 34th Bengal Native Infantry visited Puri before returning to their homes. The Commissioner advised the Magistrate of Puri to warn the police to be alert and observe the activities of the disbanded sepoys going to Puri. District Magistrate reported that about fifty sepoys came to Puri and most of them had gone away. Cockburn, the Commissioner of Orissa ordered to strictly check the religious persons. The Government of Bengal also directed to all the Magistrates to produce weekly reports regarding the state affair during the revolt. At that time the police officers were given power to arrest any one in case of any suspicion. His name, address, name of the regiment, and the destination of sepoy

were recorded. The Commissioner also ordered the zamindars of Orissa to surrender their arms and ammunitions. Orissa Government took all types of preventive measures in the time of the Revolt of 1857. During the crucial period of the mutiny, some sepoy came from Bengal to Puri. One hundred and sixty-seven sepoy from Jalpaiguri and Berhampur came to Puri during the months of August and November in 1857. All sepoy were thoroughly searched by the police at Puri and their activities were carefully examined. One incident related to Chakhi Khuntia during the great Revolt is remarkable. Chakhi Khuntia's original name was Chandan Hajuri, a sepoy Panda of Puri. He was suspected as a "rebel" as he had good relation with sepoy of Northern India. There were thousands of Panda engaged in Jagannath temple who travelled throughout the country in search of devotees to earn some money. These Pandas used to visit the up-country military stations to induce sepoy to visit the Jagannath temple. When the Revolt broke out Chakhi Khuntia was probably in some northern military station. He remained absent in Puri for a long time which naturally created suspicion in the minds of the British authorities. It was also rumoured that he was directly involved in the Revolt. It is also said that Chakhi Khuntia had kept direct contact with Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhanshi during the mutiny. His property was confiscated. He was arrested at Gaya but was released soon after the Queen of England's Proclamation in 1858. The Tributary Mahals of Orissa became silent during the great Revolt of 1857. The kings of Tributary Mahals rendered their support to the British Government. Rajas of Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar provided good service to British during the mutiny of 1857. The ruling chief of the two native states were rewarded with the title of "Maharaja" by the British Government.

Maharaja Sai, the King of Sambalpur died without leaving any issue. The British Government

allowed his widow Rani Mohan Kumari to succeed him, as a result of which disturbance broke out and conflict increased between the recognised ruler and other claimants for the throne of Sambalpur. The most prominent claimant was Surendra Sai of Khinda who was the descendant from Madhukar Sai, the fourth Chauhan Raja of Sambalpur. In course of time Rani Mohan Kumari became unpopular. Her land revenue policy did not satisfy especially the Gonds and Bhinjal tribal zamindars and subjects. The British authorities removed Rani Mohan Kumari from power. After that British Government did not consider the case of Surendra Sai for succession. They selected Narayan Singh, a descendant of royal family but his mother belonged to an inferior caste. Once again the claim of Surendra Sai was ignored. Rebellion broke out in the regime of Narayan Singh. Gond zamindars, who were supporters of Surendra Sai created much disturbances. In an encounter with the Govt. troops Surendra Sai, his brother Udyanta Sai and uncle Balaram Singh were captured. They were sent to the Hazaribagh Jail as life prisoners. Balaram Singh died in the jail. King of Sambalpur Narayan Singh died in the year 1849. Lord Dalhousie annexed Sambalpur in 1849 by applying Doctrine of Lapse, as Narayan Singh had no male issue to succeed him. During the uprising of 1857 the sepoy broke open the jail and set Surendra Sai and his brother Udyant Sai free. The resistance to British continued in Sambalpur under the leadership of Surendra Sai. He was heartily supported by his brothers, sons, relatives and some Zamindars. Finally Surendra Sai was arrested in 1864. In the year 1884 on 28th February Surendra Sai died in the Asirgarh fort, away from his native land which he loved very much.

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