



## PAIKA UPRISING AS THE FIRST WAR OF INDEPENDENCE: ACCEPTANCE AND CHALLENGES



**P**aika Rebellion, colloquially known as 'Paika Vidroha', which broke out in certain parts of Odisha from 1805 to 1836 making Khurdha as the epicentre, summoned the attention of the people as well as the scholars of different backgrounds in recent years, when, in 2018, this celebrated violent outbreak was officially declared as the 'First War of Indian Independence'. Both the State Government of Odisha as well as the Central Government of India has accepted the demand of a group of people who believed that the Odias of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century fought this war as a 'War of Independence' in India against the colonial British. The Great Revolt of 1857 no longer remained the First War of Indian Independence as enunciated by B.D.Savarkar. This incidence pushed back the origin of nationalism into the very first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Odisha, creating many intellectual furores in the region and outside. 'This revolt, which actually was the combination of a series of bloody skirmishes and pitched battles, is also known as 'Khurdha Rebellion', because the king of Khurdha took the leadership of it in its initial periods, making his capital Khurdhagarh the eye of the storm.

### **Importance of Paika Rebellion**

Khurdha Rebellion has been an issue of pride

and glory for the Odias, most particularly to the educated elite nationalists of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, who were in search of such an incident to provoke the inert Odias against immediate political and cultural threats. The men of literature wrote poems and novels, dramas and short-stories taking the incident and the exploits of the leaders of the revolt as subject matters to awaken the people. The elites of Odisha remained almost glory-less in the early modern phase of their history till the arrival of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when a powerful cultural-linguistic movement emerged in the region. The pitiable socio-economic and political conditions and the melancholic weak physical appearances of most of the Odias forced the outsiders to brand the former as a race of inferior 'others'. The British officials often reported Odias of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century as 'stupid's', 'effeminate's', 'not assertive', 'unnecessarily peaceful', 'submissive' etc. The ancient and medieval periods had been swashbucklingly glorious for the elites under absolute monarchies, but unfortunately, they lost the line abruptly since the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when their kings lost paramountcy to the outsiders. Medieval Hindu political ideas became obsolete in face of new advanced techniques of warfare and diplomacy. Once the Odia political

leaders were defeated and divided, others occupied the whole region easily. Another cause of this debacle was the absence of participation of the large sections of people in administration, which ultimately ruined the very foundations of Hindu monarchies. This new pitiable situation, the tenure of which continued for a long 350 years unabatedly, made the natives, mostly the elites, absolutely insignificant, after such glorious feudal periods. The modern elites using the glorious exploits of medieval Hindu period tried to infuse a new sense of belongingness in the locals to support them for a cultural battle. Most of them were infatuated by the newly emerging Bengal Indian nationalism. For the first time in the history their own soil, the commoners were remembered by the elites badly. It was definitely a new development.

The people of Khurda region of Odisha gave a stubborn resistance to the British authority on two occasions- the first, in 1804 A.D. and the second, in 1817 A.D. The history of this resistance movement known as the 'Paika Bidroha' encompassing a large part of Khurdha, therefore, has to be studied in two phases. Jayee Rajguru geared the first phase (1805-1917) of the rebellion and Buxi Jagabandhu led the second phase (1817-1826) of the rebellion. After the victory in the Second Anglo-Maratha War in 1803, British occupied Odisha. But, the traditional militia of Khurda, consisting of different castes and tribes, resisted the foreigners tooth and nail. They wrote a glorious history of their own by displaying their rarest bravery. recently, the Union Government has announced the Paika rebellion as the 'first struggle for freedom against the British'. Jayee Rajguru, who was executed, being the first leader of the revolt, can be called as the first martyr, who sacrificed his life for freedom. There is a folk song about his sacrifice- "Kaau Hela Raau Raau, Phashire Chadhile Jayi Rajguru, Kehi Kahileni Thau, Thau"<sup>2</sup> which for a long period remained popular in the masses.

### **Time Span and Nature of the Revolt**

The time span of 1804 to 1825 should be considered as the period of Paika Rebellion instead of only 1817, because the movement continued till the arrest of Buxi Jagabandhu in 1826. Paika Bidroh was not a revolt of the feudal lords or the traditional feudal as it is believed, rather was a mass movement in which all sections of the society participated similar

to the great uprising of 1857. There is a popular proverb, "Paikara Jaati Nahin – Magur Machhara Kaati Nahin",<sup>3</sup> or "Khandaru Khaddayat Hele, Ashesha Prakare Badhile", which means people from all castes could join the army, anyone who fought to defend the medieval state of the king in Odisha was called a Paika, or soldier. Paika Bidroh was not only a power or leader-centric struggle, but also a protest against economic and social exploitation inflicted by the colonialists. The contribution of the peasants, who were mostly Paikas, and the tribals who were the soldiery of their princely estates, will be properly recognised while evaluating the movement. Buxi Jagabandhu was not a pensioner; he was a popular hero and a benefactor of his own people.<sup>4</sup> He was also kept under house arrest at Cuttack away from his own people. In this respect, he can be compared with the last Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, who was exiled to Rangoon for challenging the imperialists. Noted historian Dr. B.C. Roy remarks, "The Paika rebellion was a more systematic revolt against the British in comparison to other revolt in India."<sup>5</sup> The Britishers didn't learn any lesson from Paika uprising, they committed the same mistake for which after 40 years in 1857, they faced another mighty uprising. It is said that history repeats itself, because people don't learn.

### **Government Response**

After 200 years on the occasion, Sri Arun Jattly, during his budget speech in the parliament, talked about this great revolt. Soon after, on 20<sup>th</sup> July, 2017 in a dignified ceremony in the prestigious Vigyan Bhawan, the President of India, Sri Pranab Mukherjee announced, "I would not like to call it a "Vidroha" or rebellion, it was India's First War of Independence against the British colonialism." He also advised the researchers to study this event and recognise the sacrifices of the real heroes in history.

The Union Minister of Human Resources, Sri Prakash Javadekar, during his visit to Bhubaneswar 23 October, 2017, announced that Paika rebellion would be placed in the education curriculum as India's First War of Independence. The historians accept that it was Jayee Rajguru who had organised the Paikas as the representative of the minor king of the then Khurdha, Mukunda Deva II.

The movement failed in its mission because

of the highly superior military strength of the British. Jayee was charged with treason and was brutally executed in 1806. A lifelong bachelor and a scholar turned commander; his sacrifice had inspired Buxi Jagabandhu to lead the Paika Revolt in 1817.

It is a matter of happiness that with the collaboration of centre and State a commemorative postage stamp and a coin releasing on the occasion of bicentenary celebration of the Paika Rebellion and inaugurating a chair on the Paika Rebellion in the Utkal University. Recently to inaugurating the Paika Rebellion memorial at Barunei the then President of India declared that Paika Rebellion was “Prathma mukti Sangram” in Indian colonial history. The Chief Minister of Odisha Mr.Patnaik demands before the Prime minister that a new train from Odisha in the name of Bakshi Jagabandhu be started.

### **Challenges**

There are other scholars who questioned the primacy of the Paika Revolt over other anti-colonial resistances in India against the foreigners. Historian K.N. Ganesh questioned, “How can a government decide the merit and significance of revolts, struggles and agitations in history without consulting with Historians”.<sup>6</sup> The Kerala historian argues that the 'Attingal Revolt' of 1721 was Indians' first freedom struggle. An agitation by the locals in the then princely state of Venad took place against the English East India Company in 1721 over the arrogant approach of the latter. As many as 133 English East India Company soldiers were killed, which was the first organized uprising against the foreign power in the country. He also supports the '*Colachel War*' which took place between the then Travancore King Marthanda Varma and the Dutch East India Company in the year 1741 as the first ever victory of a princely state against an European power in Asia. Almost a decade ago, some scholars from Tamil Nadu had made a similar demand to the centre to declare the *Poligar* rebellion of 1799 as the first war of Independence. The Vellore mutiny on 10 July 1806 was the first instance of a large-scale and violent mutiny by Indian sepoys against the East India Company, by half a century before the Indian Rebellion of 1857. The *Vellor* movement was brief, lasting only one full day, but brutal as mutineers seized the Vellore fort and killed or wounded 200

British troops.<sup>7</sup>

### **'Nationalism' in the early Part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Odisha?**

It is also argued that nationalism as a concept, as generally understood now a day was not evolved in India when Paika Revolt broke out. Modern sense of nationalism is a very different and much wider concept. Patriotism of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century cannot be compared with the nationalism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. There were many rebellions which broke out before the Great Uprising of 1857, but they lacked the felling of Indianness. They were mostly local in nature and broke out for the causes which had no relationship with the modern sense of Nation or nationalism. So, the Paika rebellion of Odisha was limited in nature and cannot be accepted as a national struggle.<sup>8</sup>

The Chuar Uprising of Bengal and Bihar 1766, the risings of the Taluqdars of Aligarh 1814 and many more examples which could be cited to show that there were daring resistances in different parts of India against the British and other European powers since their appearance on the soil.<sup>9</sup> Professor Pritish Acharya remarks, “A more nuanced approach would be not to make any gradation or ranking of such revolts in hierarchical 'greater 'or 'lesser' degree locating the revolt of Paikas at a higher historical pedestal than the other anti-British rebels would be, probably, an injustice to the great and long tradition of struggle against the alien colonial rule in the country.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Conclusion**

After all, Odisha will have its simultaneous Assembly as well as Lok Sabha elections in 2019. By declaring the Paika revolt as India's first war of Independence, both the center and state governments seek to fan the pride the people of Odisha of which the socially and educationally backward castes are principal repositories. It would help them in the vote politics. History is not what euphoria creates; history is a scientific and impartial study of the peoples' activities in its rue sense. Power politics and 'History' should not go together.

### **References and Footnotes**

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