MODERN ODISHA

Bhuyan Rising Under Ratna Naik

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta** • July 21, 2017 • Updated February 28, 2023 • 4 min read

The Bhuyan uprising of Ratna Naik of Keonjhar was one of the most notable tribal uprisings in Odisha history. Ratna Naik organised the Keonjhar tribals to fight the British government.

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Conflict over the succession to the throne

In 1861, following the demise of Maharaja Gadadhar Bhanja of Keonjhar, his eldest son Dhanurjay succeeded him as king. He was a minor at the time. He was the son of his concubine wife, phulabivahi. Pattamahadei (chief queen) Bishnupriya took this with a grain of salt. She presented a petition to T.E. Ravenshaw stating that the king of Keonjhar had proposed accepting Brundaban Bhanja as the legal heir apparent to the throne of Keonjhar prior to his demise.

British stance on the subject

T.E. Ravenshaw examined queen Bishnupriya’s petition and rejected it. The queen also filed a petition with the Calcutta High Court, which was denied. Due to her depression, the queen approached the Privy Council in London. Additionally, it went unheard. Following this incident, the queen became enraged.

The Queen’s appeal to tribal leaders

Disgusted, the queen pleaded with Ratna Naik to take appropriate action. The Bhuyans and Juangs were now willing to fight for the queen’s cause. This posed a significant obstacle for the British authorities. The queen’s appeal received a favourable response.

Ratna Naik’s Leadership

Ratna Naik was born in 1820 in Tarpur village, Keonjhar district. He was courageous from the start. He was well aware of Dhanurjay’s autocratic rule. As the Bhuyans’ leader, he organised and raised them to fight Dhanurjay. Their rights and privileges had been revoked by the new king. The king was unconcerned about their plight. They bore a great deal of suffering under the new regime. T.E. Ravenshaw was fearless because he had performed Dhanurjay’s coronation ceremony. Ratna Naik arose to bring an end to Dhanurjay’s regime.

Bhuyans’ Strategy

The Bhuyans were organised by Ratna Naik. All of them, including the queen Bishnupriya, desired to devise a strategy. As a result, the queen left Keonjhargarh’s palace and travelled to Basantpur. She became acquainted with Ratna Naik and several other Bhuyans and Juangs. They all pledged to depose Dhanurjay Bhanja from the throne of Keonjhar. They braced themselves for a savage duel with the king.

T.E. Ravenshaw’s mediation for negotiation

The informers informed T.E. Ravenshaw of the impending meli against Dhanurjay. T.E. Ravenshaw was a very astute individual. He desired a peaceful resolution to the royal family’s conflict. He convinced the king and queen to enter into negotiations. As a result, the queen arrived at Keonjhargarh palace. Dhanurjay was re-crowned and blessed by the queen.

Ratna Naik’s Revolt

The queen’s behaviour appeared to be a betrayal of Ratna Naik. He organised the Bhuyans, Juangs, and Kohlas and declared that they would remain in the fight until King Brundaban Bhanj was defeated. Other leaders such as Nanda Naik, Nanda Pradhan, Babu Naik, Dasarathi Kuanr, and Padu Naik assisted him in his venture. On 28 April 1868, he and his supporters stormed the palace and abducted the Dewan and a large number of officers from the Court of Dhanurjay Bhanja.

British counter-rebellion measures

The British government took action to quell the uprising. On 7 May 1768, Dr. W. Hayes, the Deputy Governor of Singhbhum, paid a visit to Keonjhargarh with a contingent of armed forces. Ratna Naik’s followers assassinated the Dewan. Dr. Hayes cried out for the rebels to surrender. Ratna Naik was unconcerned about this and slipped past the Deputy Commissioner’s notice. On the other hand, they apprehended several police officers. They severed communication between Chaibasa and Cuttack. This action by the rebellious leader created havoc for the British administration. Colonel E.T. Dalton, Chhotnagpur’s Commissioner, marched with a contingent to Keonjhargarh palace. He encountered opposition along the way, and it became increasingly difficult for him to reach Keonjhargarh in June. Dalton then unlocked Pandora’s box. Houses in Bhuyan were set on fire. The British Government requested that the kings of Bonai, Mayurbhanj, Pal Lahara, and Dhenkanal send their Paiks to assist Dalton. The Bhuyans, led by Ratna Naik, fought back to the bitter end. T.E. Ravenshaw also made the journey to Keonjhargarh. Ratna Naik and Nanda Naik both surrendered, bringing the ‘Ratna meli’ to a close.

As a result of Ratna’s rebellion

The rebellion of Ratna Naik had far-reaching consequences. It infuriated the Keonjhar Bhuyans. Queen Bishnupriya spent the remainder of her life in Cuttack. Ratna Naik, along with six others, was sentenced to death. Thus concluded Ratna meli. Thus, the Bhuyans under Ratna Naik presented the British regime with a toe-to-toe challenge. Although Ratna

Naik’s rebellion was put down, the Bhuyans did not abandon their cause. They rebelled more vehemently against British authority under the leadership of Dharani Naik.

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