



# Laxman Naiko: An Unsung Martyr of Odisha

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(Abstract- In India's struggle to achieve independence on 15 August, 1947, from British colonial domination many stalwarts had made supreme sacrifices. In Odisha there were many brave and courageous heroes. Among them all Laxman Naiko a tribal leader of Tentuligumma village, Malkangiri district, known as "*Gandhi of Malkangiri*" in popular thoughts made highest sacrifice and became martyr in 1943. He was a Mustajir by inheritance in Jaypore Zaminadri, became a natural leader of the tribal masses of undivided Koraput district of Odisha. During colonial rule the socio-economic conditions of the tribes in Malkangiri district were exploitative in nature. Normally, the tenants paid as rent a quantity of grain equal to the amount required to sow the land. However, in some inaccessible parts the rent was fixed on the number of ploughs and hoes owned, in grain. The payment of cash rent from the tribal tenants was linked to the evolution of a market and money economy, and emergence of moneylending class in the estates of Jeypore. The system of land revenue thus had adversative effects on the tribal population of undivided Koraput district of Odisha. In many occasions the tribals had protested against the local zamindars as well as against the un-British rule. However during Quit India Movement of 1942, Laxman Naik who was highly influenced by Gandhian ideology mobilised the popular tribal masses and became martyrs in 1943. Therefore, Laxman Naiko an unsung tribal hero of Malkangiri district would remain immortal in the history of India's struggle for independence.)

(Key words- Laxman Naiko, Malkangiri, Koraput, Unsung hero, British colonial rule, Quit India

Movement, martyrs, concluding remarks)

The long drawn-out battle of India's struggle for freedom is a saga of supreme sacrifice made by the great personalities of India. There were several landmarks and incidents in this struggle against the mighty British Empire for the achievement of independence on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1947.<sup>1</sup> The movement for achievement of independence was a consistent against British colonial domination in many parts of the country in various forms. It was neither easy for the country to fight and expel foreign rulers from the country nor easy to unify different princely states, tribes, people of different languages and cultures into the idea of one nation. Many people have played significant part and making supreme sacrifices in raising the national liberation movement. In Odisha there were many brave and courageous heroes who have laid down their lives for India's struggle for independence. Among them all Laxman Naiko a tribal leader of Tentuligumma village, Malkangiri district, known as "*Gandhi of Malkangiri*" in popular imaginations made highest sacrifice and became martyr in 1943. He was a Mustajir by inheritance in Jeypore Zaminadri, paying regular taxes to the Maharaja became a natural leader of the tribal masses of undivided Koraput district.

The present Malkangiri district from where Laxman belonged was part of Koraput district till 1992. During British colonial rule undivided Koraput district was separated from Vizagapatnam district (Madras Presidency) and integrated to Odisha Province on 31<sup>st</sup> March 1936. The area of the undivided Koraput district was about 10,489 sq miles. It consisted of four permanently settled estates; namely Jeypore, Kotpad, Salimi Multha and Pachupanta. They were held by a single Zamindar with title of the Maharaja of Jeypore. The entire district was ruled under Zamindar of Jeypore till December 1952.<sup>2</sup> In 1802 the permanent settlement was introduced throughout Vishakapatnam under Regulation XXV of 1802, and the Jeypore estate was conferred upon Ramachandra Deo. The Maharaja of Jeypore used to pay a little over Rs 16,000/- to the British colonial power in the shape of Peshkush. In 1872 Malkangiri was leased out to Bangara Devi (a koya princess) by the Maharaja of Jeypore for Rs 3500/- was taken

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<sup>1</sup> . P.N. Chopra, Quit India Movement, Publication Division, Government of India,1987, p.1.

<sup>2</sup> . J.K. Samal A History of the Village Police System in the Districts of Sambalpur, Ganjam and Koraput During British Rule, Odisha History Congress Proceedings, Annual Session, Jyoti Vihar, Sambalpur, 1998, pp-95-96.

over by the Raja and to be directly administration under colonial dominions.<sup>3</sup> Bangara Devi put up a brave fight against the combined British and Maharaja of Jeypore troops. Until her death she remained unreconciled to the British colonial domination. She fought her last battle in 1880 and was arrested and succumbed to death in the prison. In the living memory of Malkangiri and particularly in Koya tribes Bangara Devi is worshipped as *Chandi* or the *Goddess Durga* with pride and honour.<sup>4</sup>

In the undivided district of Koraput mostly the Khonds, Bhumiya, Koyas, Parojas and Bondas ethnic tribes and non-tribes prominently inhabited. It was a most backward of all the district of Odisha. During colonial rule Malkangiri was a sub-division and Mustajari system was prevalent in the area. As per records *Mustajari* system was generally the people below the rank of the Zamindars. They acted as village headmen were in possession of hereditary rights of collection of revenue rights from the tenants. The *Mustajirs* held rent-free (hetha-bhumi) and enjoyed other privileges over forest lands. They *Mustajirs* were in actual practice were disposed from their rights if, they failed to deposit taxes on time. The *Mustajirs* enjoyed power and privileges and exploited the tribal tenants by increasing the taxes. Below the *Mustajirs* there were *Inamdars* (occupancy tenants), agrarian labourers and non-agricultural (coolies) labouring classes. Besides that in Malkangiri there were the practices of *goti* and *bethi* labours, serving as labourers on free of cost in 1940's.

The socio-economic conditions of the tribes in Malkangiri district were exploitative in nature. The system of taxations in the estates was arbitrary and was levied in three ways. Normally, the tenants paid as rent a quantity of grain equal to the amount required to sow the land. However, in some inaccessible parts the rent was fixed on the number of ploughs and hoes owned, in grain. The payment of cash rent from the tribal tenants was linked to the evolution of a market and money economy, and emergence of moneylending class in the estates of Jeypore. The system of land revenue thus had adverse effects on the tribal population of undivided Koraput district of Odisha. In Jeypore Zaminadari the forests were owned by Maharaja and were demarked for profit making motive in 1900's turning to erosion of moral economy. The eagerness of the Maharaja of making profits out of forest lands also led to the enforcement of a forest cess as a regular tax on the tribals of Koraput district. In many occasions the

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<sup>3</sup> . Biswamoy Pati, Strom over Malkangiri: A note on Laxman Naiko's Revolt (1942)\*\* , Social Scientists, Vol-15, No-8&9, August-September, 1987, pp-47-48

<sup>4</sup> . J. K. Baral and B.K. Mishra, The Role of Tribal Women of Koraput District in the Freedom Movement in Reflections on the National Movement in Odisha, Odisha State Archives, BBSR, 1997, p.201.

ethnic tribes who had natural rights on forest lands were arbitrarily fined on false grounds, accusing of stealing wood etc. In an area like Malkangiri the cash fine imposed were unbearable. Further, the rights of the tribal tenants over trees which stood on the holdings of the tenants were also lost. They were forced to make payments when they cut down trees of the reserved forests.<sup>5</sup> During the colonial rule the Jeypore estate was not surveyed and there was no record of rights and the tribal tenants were at the mercy of the estate employees in all important matters of tenancy administration. It was not, therefore surprising that in addition to the legally collected land revenue, the tribal tenants were subjected to a number of un-lawful exactions.<sup>6</sup> All these exploitative features created a sense of socio-economic deprivations and large scale migration of the ethnic tribes of Malkangiri district of Odisha.<sup>7</sup> The economic exploitations, social oppressions and mal-administration subsequently led to frequent tribal uprisings and the growth of new political consciousness amongst the popular tribal masses of Koraput. However the sporadic incidents of popular upheaval were used to be crushed by the combined efforts of the British and the Maharaja's administration.<sup>8</sup>

Against these historical backdrops let us now turn towards Laxman Naiko a gallant freedom fighter of Tentuligumma village of present Malkangiri district. He was born on 22 November 1899 and was a son of Padmalabha Naiko, a Mustajir of Maharaja of Jeypore. Laxman Naiko had two brothers and a sister. As his father was a man of modest means, Laxman had no acute wants. Even then he took the pleasure in working in the field and rearing cattle. He was not mindful in his study and started his education at the late age of twelve. With great difficulty he could only learn the alphabets. He married to Manguli, the daughter of Ghasi Bhumia of Sanagumma village. He was then hardly 19 years old and was blessed with two children, a son and a daughter, named Raghunath and Kausalya respectively.<sup>9</sup>

Laxman Naiko was belonged to a village (Tentuligumma) surrounded by forests and hills on all sides. The ethnic tribes of Maklankiri area were poor and illiterate, freedom loving and yet very simple and loyal in nature. They were became prey of the exploitation of the moneylenders, *Mustajirs* and the

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<sup>5</sup> . Ibid., pp-49-50.

<sup>6</sup> . Asit Kumar Patnaik, Role of Tribals of Koraput District in the Quit India Movement, The Journal of Odishan History, Odisha History Congress, Vol-XV, November 1996, p.136.

<sup>7</sup> . Biswamoy Pati, op.cit., p.51.

<sup>8</sup> Asit Kumar Patnaik, op.cit., pp.136-137.

<sup>9</sup> .Jagannath Pattnaik, Quit India Movement in Odisha, Odisha Review, Vol-XLVI, No-1, August, 1989, p.171.

British colonial administrators.<sup>10</sup> Laxman Naiko though inherited the post of *Mustajir* from his father he had a deep sympathy and love his fellow tribesmen. As per custom Laxman as the Naiko (i.e. *Mustajir*) was in charge of paying the taxes to the Jeypore estate. Till he came to get actively involved in politics he worked on this 'joint land' like his relatives. The close link between Laxman and his relatives can in no way be equated to an affluent *Mustajir*, exploiting the village folks, extracting a surplus and surrendering a major portion of it to the estate. However, it could be made clear that Laxman's exploitation may have been mitigated by kinship ties even he never used to appoint goti or bethi. However this generalization many not correct to the *Mustajirs* who were from plains of Odisha. In such cases the contradictions tended to be felt sharply since they were not veiled by kinship ties. Here reference could be made to Keshab Patro, a *Mustajir* of Badhigar, who was opposed in the course of the revolt of 1942. The contradictions thus existed between the Maharaja of Jeypore estates as well as the *Mustajirs* in one hand and colonial state on the other.<sup>11</sup> With the dawn of the Gandhian era this scenario was significantly changed and Koraput came into the mainstream political movement.<sup>12</sup>

The ethnic tribes of Malkangiri however, had the rich tradition popular protests during colonial regime. During anti-colonial movement, the Koya revolt (1879-80) and Rampa rebellion (1920-24) had considerable impact on the tribal peasants of Malkangiri sub-divisions. The Maharaja of Jeypore did played a part by siding with the colonial state in helping to crush the Rampa rebellion. Laxman Naiko who played an active in August Movement of 1942 in Malkangiri was highly influenced by Rampa rebellion. In 1942 he came in contact with Ramachandra Kutia, a Koya youth and learnt to use a gun. He then had the opportunity of going around this place and understanding the problems which affected the tribals. His subsequent interest in astrology and medicine explains his contact with the Rampa rebellion and his understanding that this could help him to strike roots among the ethnic tribes of Malkangiri, very much like Alluri Sitaram Raju, the leader of of Rampa rebellion.<sup>13</sup>

Laxman Naiko however was deeply influenced by Gandhian ideology and attempted to inculcate it among the tribals of Maklangiri. He became a primary member of Tentuligumma Primary Congress Committee and later in the District Congress Committee of Koraput. In 1936 he was arrested for the first

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<sup>10</sup> . Jagannat Pattnaik, *Struggle for Freedom in Odisha (A Souvenir)*, Prajatantra Press, Cuttack, 1989, pp.115-116.

<sup>11</sup> . Biswamoy Pati, *op.cit.*, p.51.

<sup>12</sup> . Asit Kumar Patnaik, *op.cit.*, p-137.

<sup>13</sup> . Biswamoy Pati, *op.cit.*, pp-51-52.

time for launching of no-tax campaign in Maithili . In the year 1940-41 he was arrested twice for offering individual Satyagraha and sentenced to undergo R.I. for nine months. He attended last meeting of Congress Karmis at Jeypore on 31 July 1942 where the “Quit India” resolution was reiterated and instructions were given to implement the Congress resolution. Laxman Naiko accordingly, mobilised the tribal masses to participate in the movement and said “*We are warriors, British Government is gone. Mahatma Gandhi is our king. Maharaja of Jeypore is dead. The British Government is dead. The Country is ours. We have got independence. All of you take part in the war; Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai*”. Thus Laxman Naiko was emerged as a natural leader and attempted to mobilise the popular tribal masses against the British Raj during Quit India movement in 1942.<sup>14</sup>

### **August Movement 1942 and Laxman Naiko**

In Koraput district, however, the anti-colonial mass movements started little later compared to other parts of Odisha. It was only in 1929 that the recruitment of Congress workers in the district began and some of them were selected to participate in the salt satyagraha.<sup>15</sup> During salt movement Radhakrushna Biswas Roy (1930), and later Radha Mohan Sahu and Sadasiv Tripathy did played a significant part in freedom movement in Koraput district. These Congress leaders in Koraput district organised the popular masses against the age-long illegal practices of *bethi* and *beggar* system. In Koraput district the popular masses once initiated into Congress activities became staunch workers and they spread the message of the Congress far and wide. Gradually the Congress organisation became popular within a short time in the district Koraput.<sup>16</sup>

From 1937-39, the popular consciousness of *Swaraj* was entirely radicalised amongst tribal peasants of Koraput This accelerating phenomenon was further reinforced by the call of Quit India or with the spread of the Gandhian call of ‘do or die’ or the August Movement in 1942 .<sup>17</sup> It took a very remarkable form in the district of Koraput. In August 1942, the District Congress Committee of Koraput met in full session and decided to start a movement along the lines of Civil Disobedience, under the guidance of Mahatma Gandhi. But the Government declared the Congress an unlawful organization and arrested all

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<sup>14</sup> .H. K. Mahtab, History of Freedom Movement in Odisha, Vol-IV (1930-47), Cuttack, 1957, p.93.

<sup>15</sup> . J.K. Baral and B.K. Mishra, The Role of Tribal Women of Koraput District in the Freedom Movement in Reflections of The National Movement in Odisha, Orissa State Archieves, BBSR, 1997, p.201.

<sup>16</sup> . Who’s Who, Koraput, Ganjam and Baud-Phulbani Districts, Cuttack, 1969, pp-i-iii.

<sup>17</sup> Nanda, Chandi Prasad, *Mapping the Mahatma: Literary Tracts and Rumours in Late Colonial Orissa* in Martin Brandtner and Shishir Kumar Panda (ed), *Interrogating History: Essays for Hermann Kulke*, New Delhi, 2006, p.301.

the Congress leaders. This led to a popular outburst in the district, as in other parts of India. The Congress workers went into the interior of the district and inspired the tribal-tenants to rise against the authorities. The movement started by the tribal tenants' refusal to pay 'one-paisa tax' on head-load of articles and very soon took the form of mob fury against the British Raj. Police stations at Lakshmipur, Maithili and Dusmantpur were attacked and sabotage activities like cutting of telegraph wires, cutting down trees in reserved forests, destruction of railway sleepers *etc.*, continued. The tribal-tenants also resented the odious tax, and so, they gladly joined against the 'no-tax campaign'. The colonial police authorities, as well the Zamindari officials, wielded rigorous oppression and arrested Congress workers in batches and perpetuated various kinds of atrocities. The situation gradually worsened. Authorities started their campaign of terror and oppression with all vigour and zeal. However, the tribal-tenants did not bow down which resulted in a firing of police, which took away many lives.<sup>18</sup>

### **Firing at Maithili Police Station (Malkangiri)**

The colonial police force undertook strong repressive measures to suppress the Quit India Movement in Koraput district. On 21<sup>st</sup> August, 1942 about two thousand aboriginal tribal-peasants, under their popular leader Laxman Naiko proceeded to Maithili, where they held a public meeting at the weekly hat (market place), about a half a mile away from the police station. Laxman Naiko exhorted the tribal tenants to establish 'Peoples Raj' and not to co-operate with the colonial Government.<sup>19</sup> Although, the colonial police force asked the crowd to disperse peacefully, the tribals were in a violent mode and offered a stiff resistance to the police force. The crowd raided the police station. According to the police report, one forest guard G. Ramaya, was brutally assaulted by Laxman Naiko, and fell down dead. Some of the police men also received injuries. The police force started firing killing five and injuring seventeen others. Laxman Naiko received a gunshot wound. Finally, Laxman Naiko and fifty-three of his associates were arrested on 2 September 1942. Subsequently, the Additional Session Judges tried them on different charges.<sup>20</sup> Laxman Naiko was sentenced to death. On 29<sup>th</sup> March, 1943 at 5.30 AM he was

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<sup>18</sup>. N.K. Sahu and Sushil Chandra De,eds, *Who's Who Freedom Works in Orissa*, Koraput District, Cuttack, 1969, p.iii.

<sup>19</sup>. Nilamani Senapati, *Odisha District Gazetteers: Koraput District*, Cuttack, 1966, p.76.

<sup>20</sup>. N.K. Sahu and Sushil Chandra De,eds, *op.cit.*, p. iv.

hanged to till death in Berhampur Jail. He died a martyr's death at the hands of the colonial administration and became a legend.<sup>21</sup>

On the previous night before his death sentence he told his fellow convicts that "I know *Swaraj* will come, but I feel sorry that I shall not be able to see *Swaraj*".<sup>22</sup>

However, it has been studied that the death sentence of Laxman Naiko was weak and it was open to go for higher appeal in court of law because he always declared that he was innocent and went to the gallows cheerfully. But no significant steps were taken in this regard by any of the famous personalities of that time. Even it is most unfortunate that people involved in the entire process of Laxman Naiko's arrest and death penalty were able to get all government facilities, employment and promotion during the post-independent period.<sup>23</sup>

**Conclusion-** It has been seventy-five years since India gained independence and the country has progressed at a faster pace. The nation has been growing economically and socially and is heading towards development. If the great personality like Laxman Naiko had not contributed in the freedom struggle, the present situation of the country would have been different today. India, the democratic republic, might not have been headed for success. We are independent and free today only because of the efforts and sacrifices made by personality like Laxman Naiko. Therefore, Laxman Naiko an unsung tribal hero of Malkangiri district would remain immortal and deserves a proper place in the history of India's struggle for independence.

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<sup>21</sup> Patnaik, Nihar Ranjan, "National Movement in Koraput District" in *Reflections on the National Movement in Orissa*, Orissa State Achieves, Cuttack, 1997, p.222.

<sup>22</sup> Asit Patnaik, op.cit., p. 139.

<sup>23</sup> <http://malkangiri.nic.in>