Paika Rebellion of 1817

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Paika Rebellion of 1817: Odisha's Forgotten Uprising

Context

The **Paika Rebellion of 1817**, a major armed uprising against British rule in Odisha, has been at the center of recent debate. Former Odisha Chief Minister **Naveen Patnaik** objected to its exclusion from the newly released **NCERT Class VIII history textbook**, calling it a "huge dishonour" to the Paikas. In response, **NCERT clarified** that the event would be featured in the **second volume**, expected later this year.

Introduction

The **Paika Rebellion**, which erupted in **1817** in the Khurda region of present-day Odisha, was one of the earliest expressions of public resistance against colonial rule. It was led by **Bakshi Jagabandhu**, the former commander-in-chief of the Khurda king's army, and involved the **Paikas**—a traditional warrior-peasant class who had long served Odisha's rulers.

This uprising reflected the growing **political marginalisation**, **economic exploitation**, and **social disruption** caused by the expansionist policies of the British East India Company.

Who Were the Paikas?

- The **Paikas** (literally "foot soldiers") were military retainers under the **Gajapati rulers** of Odisha since the **16th century**.
- They came from various social groups and provided **martial services** in return for **hereditary rent-free lands** known as **nish-kar jagirs**.
- During times of peace, they cultivated these lands, forming a key link between agrarian life and regional military defence.

Background: British Betrayal in Khurda

- In **1803**, **Colonel Harcourt** led British forces from Madras to capture **Puri** and **Cuttack**.
- A deal was struck with **Mukunda Deva II** of Khurda: ₹**1 lakh** and **four parganas** were promised in return for safe passage.
- Only ₹**40,000** was paid, and the promised land was withheld.
- **Jayee Rajguru**, the king's custodian, mobilised **2,000 Paikas** against the British.
- The rebellion was crushed; **Rajguru was executed** on **December 6, 1806**.
- The British then **dethroned** the king, **destroyed Barunei Fort**, and **exiled** him to **Puri**.

Causes of the Paika Rebellion

Political Causes

- **Loss of royal patronage** following the dethronement of the Khurda king.
- **Abolition of traditional administrative structures**, weakening native authority.

Economic Causes

- **Confiscation of rent-free lands** previously held by the Paikas.
- Imposition of **taxes in silver currency**, replacing earlier systems.
- Sale of local lands to **absentee Bengali landlords** due to revenue pressure.
- British **salt taxation** affected hill communities after its extension in **1814**.

Social Causes

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- **Disruption of tribal and peasant economies** due to new policies.
- **Over-exploitation** and cultural disregard by colonial authorities.

Events of the Rebellion (1817)

- In **March 1817**, **400 Kondhs** from Ghumusar marched towards Khurda with traditional arms.
- They were joined by **Bakshi Jagabandhu**, a dispossessed estate holder and military leader.
- The rebels attacked the **Banpur police station**, looted the **government treasury**, burned **colonial offices**, and killed British personnel.
- The uprising **spread across multiple regions**, resulting in bloody confrontations.
- Eventually, the rebellion was **crushed by Company forces**.
- Jagabandhu remained in hiding till **1825**, when he surrendered under **negotiated terms**.

Aftermath and Legacy

- The rebellion's suppression led to further **centralisation of British power** in Odisha.
- Despite being crushed, the revolt became a **symbol of resistance** and a rallying point for **Odia identity**.
- In **2017**, during its **bicentenary**, the Odisha government demanded its recognition as **India's first war of independence**.
- The Union Government, while not according it that status, acknowledged it as an **early popular uprising**.
- In 2019, **President Ram Nath Kovind** laid the **foundation stone** for the **Paika Memorial**.
- **PM Modi** also honoured descendants of the Paikas in the same year.

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Conclusion

The **Paika Rebellion of 1817** stands as a significant episode in the early resistance against colonial rule. Rooted in **local socio-political structures** and led by a traditional warrior class, it challenged the emerging colonial state long before 1857. Its **delayed recognition** reflects the ongoing need to decentralise the narrative of India's freedom struggle and give space to regional movements of historical importance.

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