



Buxi Jagabandhu and the Paika Rebellion of 1817: Revisiting and Rewriting the Narrative in the Postcolonial Space

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Abstract

This article revisits the Paika Rebellion of 1817 through the twin lenses of political economy and vernacular memory, centring the figure of Buxi Jagabandhu. The rebellion, centred in Khurda and neighboring regions of Odisha, represents one of the earliest significant resistances to the East India Company's administration in eastern India. Traditionally celebrated as the heroic fight led by Buxi Jagabandhu Bidyadhara Mohapatra Bhramarbar Ray, the rebellion is often considered as "India's first war of independence." Yet a closer scholarly inquiry reveals a more complex picture of the event which cannot be reduced to a singular nationalist narrative. The paper argues that while the rebellion has recently been invoked as a proto-nationalist anticolonial uprising, a closer reading shows it was a heterogeneous conflation of military, peasant, tribal, and elite restorative impulses responding to local grievances, notably the disruption of the entitlements of land-tenures (niskar/jagir) and administrative encroachments by the East India Company. By juxtaposing colonial documentation, regional sources, and recent scholarship, the paper reframes the Paika Rebellion of Odisha as a complex historical phenomenon than it has been portrayed for long. The article concludes by suggesting historiographical and methodological moves for future work: integrate micro-archival evidence, oral/vernacular sources, and comparative perspectives on early nineteenth-century insurgencies in eastern India.

Keywords: *Paika Rebellion; Buxi Jagabandhu; Khurda, Historiography; Land Tenure; Memory; Orissa*

Introduction

In March 1817, a large-scale uprising broke out in the Khurda region of Odisha, earlier known as Orissa. Armed Paikas who were the hereditary militia under the Khurda kingdom alongside peasants, tribal groups and other disposed protesters local elites, attacked East India Company establishments, disrupted administrative centers and briefly destabilised colonial control across parts of coastal Odisha. The most prominent leader associated with the rebellion was Buxi Jagabandhu Bidyadhara Mohapatra

Bhramarbar Ray, the commander of Khurda King's forces. In popular discourse today, the Paika Rebellion is often described as "the first war of independence" predating the mutiny of 1857.

This uprising, while undoubtedly a significant resistance, was shaped by very specific political-economic grievances, social disruptions, and cultural symbols that belong to its time. In the recent years the event has received renewed attention in both academic and popular discourses. In 2017, while commemorating the 200 years of the uprising, the government of India and the government of Odisha emphasised the need to revive the event's contemporary implications through fresh looks and perspectives and with renewed intellectual vigor. As a result of these commemorative moves, there has been fueling of new momentum and energy to this historical moment. With the new impetus, fresh responses to the uprising and Buxi Jagabandhu have begun to appear in the scene. In this new engagement, serious critics and scholars, while bringing a paradigm shift in Buxi Jagabandhu research, caution against teleological readings of the event that project later nationalist categories backward.

Re-examination of the Paika Rebellion from postcolonial and new historiographical lens offers new dimensions to examine how local socio-economic changes under the Company rule produced multiple, overlapping registers of resistance and how later historiography and memory politics have reshaped the event's meaning. This article seeks to revisit and rewrite the narrative of the Paika Rebellion by foregrounding three analytical moves; situating the rebellion within the broader history of colonial restructuring in Odisha, re-examining Buxi Jagabandhu not merely as a heroic nationalist figure playing solo but as a historical actor positioned within a range of alliances and third, investigating the afterlives of the rebellion; how it has been remembered, reimagined, and politically deployed over two centuries. By doing so, the paper contributes to a nuanced understanding of early nineteenth-century resistance in India and highlights the importance of interrogating both historical events and their commemorative reinscription.

Historiographical Context of the Uprising

The historiography of the Paika Rebellion reflects three major phases: colonial records, regional/nationalist reinterpretations and critical academic studies. The colonial reports presented the uprising of 1817 as an armed "disturbance" or "insurrection" rather than an organised political rebellion against the British which spread from Banapur and Khurda to Puri to Cuttack and surrounding tracts by the Paikas led by Buxi Jagabandhu, the Commander of the king of Khurda. Colonial response to the movement which included the records of trials, executions, and sustained operations against the fugitives framed the event as a challenge to East India Company authority. A. Sterling in his report described the paikas to be possessing "the most profound barbarism and the blindest devotion to the will of their chiefs, a ferocity and uniqueness of disposition" (Sterling, 1904(1846), p.55). In most of the British India administrative documents portrayed the paikas as discontented militia and unruly mobs. Dr. Subhakanta Behera in his book *The Unfortunate Celebrity* writes: "...it is unfortunate that the colonial historiography recognised the virtues of the paikas, presumably as an offshoot of their barbarism and savagery" (Behera, 2014, 76). These narratives downplayed the grievances of the people who were victims of the administrative reforms by the East India Company.

Later date regional and nationalist reinterpretations of the event was at another end of the range surrounding the event. In the early twentieth century, with the growth of Odia regional consciousness and Indian nationalism, writers recast the rebellion as a heroic struggle of valiant and courageous Oriya race who fought the British. Jagabandhu was elevated to the height of a symbol of Odia pride and the Paikas as proto-nationalists. New narratives and discourses depicted Buxi and the Rebellious paikas with glory and pride. Historians of sovereign Odisha with the nationalistic fervor, like Harekrushna Mahtab and

Sushil Chandra De, emphasised the Paikas' martial ethos, the apparent reasons of the rebellion and Jagabandhu's leadership.

...it is very doubtful if there would have been any insurrection of the magnitude as it was in 1817 had not Jagabandhu Bidyadhara taken the lead and inspired the paiks. The insurrection, therefore, may be mainly ascribed to the spirit of revenge aflame in Jagabandhu Bidyadhar on account of the wrongs done to him. Other causes were there already; the paiks were seething with discontentment and anger on account of the resumption of their paikan lands; the oppression and extortion of the officials on one hand, and the agents of the new farmers on the other, had embittered their feelings in the extreme and had awakened a feeling of revenge in them (Mahtab and De, p. 120).

Mahtab and De represented the voices of several others who saw the rebellion in the limited triangular form, the three corners joined by the three protagonists; the paikas, Buxi and the new revenue reformatations by the Company.

Present scholarship and research on the Rebellion and Buxi Jagabandhu began to give new directions that unsettle these basic premises of the rebellion's conventional historiography. They have problematised the colonial, nationalistic and popular narratives by highlighting the multiplicity of motives; from tribal autonomy to peasant grievance to elite attempts to reclaim lost privileges by interrogating sources that either sanitised or romanticised the rebellion. Recent comparative and critical works on the Paik Rebellion and Buxi Jagabandhu insist on reading the event as an intersection of heterogeneous genealogies rather than a single unified national revolt (Tanabe, 2020). These studies urge historians to look beyond simplifications and interrogate the many layers of the complex reality. The historiographical debate thus oscillates between nationalist glorification and critical social history. This article aligns with the latter approach, while acknowledging the political significance of memory.

Sources and Methodology

This article synthesises colonial administrative reports, regional historiographies, secondary scholarship such as peer-reviewed articles and university press scholarship and vernacular commemorative material like pamphlets and local histories. Methodologically, it follows a critical-historical approach: close reading of primary documents where available; interrogation of British administrative narratives for their priorities and silences; and cross-comparison with modern historiography that places the rebellion in wider agrarian and tribal contexts. Where archival gaps exist, the paper also draws on studies of oral and folk memory that document how the rebellion persisted in local cultural register.

Discussion

Emerging only fourteen years after the East India Company formally incorporated Odisha into its empire, the rebellion marks the very early beginning of protest against the existence of British in Odisha. In colonial records the uprising was depicted as a "disturbance" against legitimate authority, motivated by local grievances and was quickly suppressed. It was presented as the outcome of one greedy individual fighting for the privileges he enjoyed as the Commander until the land revenue revisions of the Company without any public support. W. Ewer, who was the Commissioner of Cuttack during that period wrote in his famous report dated May 13, 1818 that "the rising in Khoordah [sic] was quite an insulated movement, prompted by despair, hatred, and a thirst for revenge on the part of Jugbundoo [sic] and the misery beyond endurance under which the people of Khoordah were sinking," and that "it is essential to mark

that no one zamindar, ryot, or inhabitant of whatever description of the Mogulbundee¹..., properly so termed, had any concern whatever with the insurrection” (Ewer,1818, p.3.6). Acting Chief Secretary to Government, W. B. Bayley in his report of August 10, 1817, also isolates the paiks and the khandayats to be the participants and says, “In the various reports submitted by the Magistrate regarding these disturbances the Khundytes [sic] and Paiks are alone mentioned as being actively concerned in the outrages” (De 1961, p. 16–17). Thus the imperial perspective on the rebellion took it away both from the actual reasons and its consequences by undermining the importance of the event and downplaying its immediate effects.

In nationalist memory, the rebellion was celebrated as India’s first war of independence, a heroic precursor to the Revolt of 1857. The rebellion, once relegated to the margins of imperial historiography, is now claimed as central to the political and cultural identity of Odisha and to the national narrative of resistance against colonial domination. Yet this transition from “local disturbance” to “national uprising” requires careful unpacking. The task of tracking the transition is to understand the rebellion both as a historically situated event rooted in the disruptions during early colonial rule and as a continually reinterpreted symbol, whose meanings shift according to the contexts in which it is remembered. The rebellion took place against the background of sweeping changes unleashed by the East India Company’s conquest of Odisha in 1803. The fall of the Khurda kingdom marked not merely the replacement of one regime with another but the dismantling of a political order that had structured Odisha society for centuries. The Paikas, who constituted a hereditary militia under the Khurda kings, enjoyed rent-free lands in return for their service. Their position afforded them both economic security and social prestige. Under colonial authority, however, these lands were brought under revenue assessment, and the military functions of the Paikas were rendered redundant. The transformation was deeply disruptive, converting a privileged martial community into impoverished cultivators liable for tax.

At the same time, the agrarian economy was destabilized by the Company’s revenue policies, which emphasized monetized assessment and rigid collection. Peasants, already vulnerable to ecological fluctuations, found themselves crushed under demands they could scarcely meet. Tribal communities such as the Kandhas experienced encroachment on their customary forest rights, while salt monopolies imposed by colonial officials drove up prices and eroded subsistence. Religious institutions, particularly the Jagannath temple at Puri, long supported by vast land endowments, were weakened by loss of revenue and encroachment on their economic autonomy. The combined effect was a society reeling under the weight of multiple dislocations, in which dispossession was shared across classes, castes, and communities.

In this landscape of disruption, Buxi Jagabandhu emerged as a rallying figure. As the commander of the Paikas and one of the foremost nobles of Khurda, Jagabandhu represented both the martial authority of the old order and the anguish of its dispossession. His ancestral estate of Killa Rorang was confiscated, forcing him into debt and stripping him of his status. This personal dispossession mirrored that of the Paikas as a whole and positioned him as a natural leader of resistance. Yet Jagabandhu was not merely the product of grievance but embodied the memory of a political world in which local authority was bound up with service to the king and the temple. His leadership invoked both martial tradition and religious legitimacy, drawing together disparate groups under the banner of rebellion. It is significant that the insurgents marched under the symbol of Lord Jagannath, the deity of Puri, whose sacred authority carried immense weight across Odisha. The rebellion, therefore, was articulated not only as an economic protest but also as a defense of dharma, sovereignty, and community.

¹ Mogulbundee refers to “that portion of Cuttack paying revenue to government” (Hamilton 1820, p. 41).

The outbreak of rebellion in March 1817 was both sudden and coordinated. The rebels first attacked the police station at Banapur, seizing weapons and igniting the conflagration. From there the rebellion spread rapidly through Khurda, Puri, and Cuttack. Company establishments were overrun, treasuries looted, revenue records burned, and officials driven out. The destruction of revenue registers was especially symbolic: it represented an attempt to obliterate the bureaucratic apparatus that embodied colonial exploitation. The rebels declared the restoration of the Khurda king, invoking his name as a rallying cry even though he remained a captive of the British. Jagabandhu's leadership gave coherence to the movement, but it was never a monolithic or centrally directed uprising. Peasants, tribal groups, disaffected zamindars, and temple servitors all joined the rebellion for reasons that were at once convergent and distinct. For peasants, the rebellion promised relief from crushing taxes; for Kandhas, it represented resistance to encroachment on forests; for zamindars, it offered a chance to restore lost authority; for religious devotees, it was a defense of the sanctity of Lord Jagannath's domain. The rebellion, therefore, was heterogeneous in its composition and motives, unified less by a common ideology than by shared opposition to colonial disruption.

The East India Company responded with severity. Troops were dispatched from Bengal, and by April 1817 large detachments were engaged in suppressing the rebels. Villages suspected of harboring insurgents were torched and punitive measures were inflicted on entire communities. Hundreds were arrested, and many were executed after summary trials. By the end of 1817, organised rebellion had been crushed, yet sporadic guerrilla activity continued. Jagabandhu himself evaded capture, moving from village to village under the protection of sympathizers, becoming a fugitive symbol of defiance. His very elusiveness sustained the rebellion's memory, as stories of his resistance circulated in oral traditions. He finally surrendered in 1825 under terms that granted him a modest stipend, marking the effective end of organized resistance. Yet his legacy endured, transmuted into folk memory as the embodiment of sacrifice and honor.

Colonial records said that the insurgents were lawless marauders threatening the stability of revenue collection. Such accounts systematically minimised the structural injustices that fueled the rebellion and instead emphasised the legitimacy of colonial authority. The archival record, dominated by such representations, reveals not only the Company's anxieties about disorder but also its determination to deny political legitimacy to indigenous resistance. For colonial administrators, acknowledging the rebellion as political would have undermined the very foundations of their authority. The narrative of "disturbance" thus became a means of delegitimizing dissent, transforming grievances into criminality.

In contrast, vernacular traditions preserved a different memory. Folk songs, ballads, and temple narratives celebrated the Paikas as defenders of dharma and of the sanctity of Odisha. Jagabandhu was remembered not as a rebel against lawful authority but as a protector of Lord Jagannath and the oppressed as well a loyalist. These oral traditions circulated across generations, embedding the rebellion in the cultural memory of Odisha. The sanctity of Jagannath's domain lent divine legitimacy to the uprising, transforming it into a struggle for the preservation of cosmic order as much as for material survival. This divergence between colonial record and vernacular memory underscores the contested terrain of historical narrative. Where the archive silenced dissent, oral tradition valorised it, keeping alive a memory that would later be mobilised by nationalist historiography.

The rise of nationalism in the twentieth century made the Odia intellectuals, writers, and political leaders reframe the event. Buxi Jagabandhu was recast as a proto-nationalist hero, whose leadership symbolized the indomitable spirit of Odisha against foreign rule. The rebellion was woven into the fabric of national history, serving both as regional pride and as national inspiration. This reinterpretation was not merely academic; it was political. In a context where the nationalist movement sought to construct a continuous tradition of resistance, the Paika Rebellion provided a vital link. Its elevation to national prominence reflected the needs of a movement that required historical legitimacy as much as political

mobilization. In post-independence India, this nationalist reading was institutionalized. Government publications, school textbooks, and commemorative events celebrated the rebellion as a foundational moment in the freedom struggle.

Recent scholarship has complicated this nationalist teleology. Historians such as Yaaminey Mubayi emphasised that the memory of the rebellion influenced the “popular consciousness and the formation of a regional ethnic identity” looking forward to a constructive approach to the rebellion. Her ideas suggest that the rebellion was rooted in specific social and economic grievances rather than in a fully developed nationalist consciousness (Mubayi, 1999, p.45). It was, she argues, an uprising of dispossessed groups defending status and livelihood against colonial disruption, rather than a movement animated by the idea of a nation. Others, such as Akio Tanabe, have underscored the heterogeneity of the rebellion, pointing out that its participants drew upon different genealogies of resistance—elite, peasant, tribal, and religious—that coexisted without being subsumed under a single unifying ideology (Tanabe). From this perspective, Jagabandhu appears less as a nationalist visionary and more as a complex historical actor negotiating the contradictions of his time. He embodied both elite dispossession and popular defiance, symbolising continuity with the old order while catalysing new forms of resistance.

The bicentenary celebrations of 2017–18 marked a new phase in the rewriting of the rebellion’s narrative. The Government of India officially recognized the rebellion as an important precursor to the independence movement, organizing national-level commemorations and academic conferences. Political leaders invoked the rebellion as evidence of Odisha’s centrality to the national struggle, while cultural programs celebrated Jagabandhu as a timeless hero. These commemorations reveal the continuing political utility of the rebellion. By inscribing it into the national pantheon of resistance, the bicentenary reaffirmed the capacity of historical memory to serve contemporary identity politics. Yet such commemorations also risk flattening the rebellion’s complexity, reducing it to a symbolic harbinger of nationalism and obscuring its specific historical dynamics. The task of scholarship, therefore, is to hold together both dimensions: to acknowledge the rebellion’s afterlife in memory and commemoration, while insisting on the importance of situating it within the material and political contexts of early nineteenth-century Odisha.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Paika Rebellion of 1817 was neither a mere local disturbance nor a fully-fledged nationalist revolution. It was a layered and heterogeneous resistance born of the disruptions of colonial rule in Odisha. Buxi Jagabandhu, at once dispossessed noble, military commander, and symbolic leader, stood at the intersection of these forces, transforming dispersed grievances into insurgency. The rebellion’s significance lies not only in its immediate impact but also in its long afterlife, in the ways it has been remembered, reinterpreted, and politicized. To revisit and rewrite its narrative is to do justice both to the complexity of the event itself and to the evolving meanings it has carried over two centuries. The rebellion demands to be read not only as history but also as historiography, as an event that continues to live in the contest between archive, memory, and nation. Moreover, revisiting the Paika Rebellion through the figure of Buxi Jagabandhu opens a corrective to both romanticized popular memory and narrow colonial accounts. The event’s explanatory power lies not in a single causality but in its ability to expose how colonial administrative reordering, especially the disruption of hereditary military-grants and customary land rights, created a shared but uneven field of grievance that brought together diverse social actors. To rewrite the narrative responsibly is to embrace complexity: recover local voices, question retrospective nationalism, and read both rebellion and commemoration as historically situated phenomena.

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