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Dharanidhar Nayak

The Forgotten Flame of Kendujhar

Animesh Roul

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Executive Summary

This paper chronicles the life and legacy of Dharanidhar Nayak (1864–1944), a Bhuyan tribal leader from Kendujhar (Keonjhar), Odisha, whose leadership in the Kendujhar Rebellion of 1891, known as the Dharani Meli, represents one of the earliest organised uprisings in Eastern India against princely despotism and British colonial interference. The study positions Nayak as a critical, though often neglected, figure in India's freedom struggle, particularly from the tribal margins that are frequently overlooked in national narratives.

The paper opens with a contextualisation of Nayak's tribal origins and his early exposure to both feudal authority and colonial bureaucracy. Born into the Bhuyan community, he benefited from state-sponsored education and served in the royal administration of Kendujhar. However, caste discrimination, bureaucratic injustice, and the harsh exploitation of tribal communities through forced labour (*Bethi*), exploitative taxes, and forest restrictions radicalised him. His dissent culminated in his leadership of the Dharani Meli. This anti-feudal and anti-colonial uprising was ideologically coherent, strategically organised, and backed by a confederation of Bhuyan Pirh (also known as Pidha or Tract) leaders and peasants.

The rebellion was ignited by the imposition of *bethi* labour for the Machha Kandana Canal project, and it gained rapid traction among tribal populations suffering under multiple

forms of economic, social, and ecological oppression. Nayak, along with fellow leaders like Gopal Nayak and Narendra Mahapatra, mobilised over 1,500 armed villagers. They captured the royal palace, redistributed grain stores, and temporarily assumed popular sovereignty, asserting traditional rights to depose unjust rulers. British forces eventually suppressed this historic uprising, and its leaders, along with Dharanidhar, were imprisoned.

In the aftermath of the rebellion, the British restructured Kendujhar's governance by increasing surveillance of tribal areas, marginalising traditional Pirh institutions, expanding the police presence, dismissing state officials, and regularising land revenue collection to consolidate control.

After his release from prison in 1897, Dharanidhar Nayak renounced political life. He adopted a spiritual path, settling in Aali (Aul) in the present-day Kendrapara district and later lived as an ascetic until his death in 1944. His transformation from rebel to sage had a profound influence on nationalist thinkers like Pandit Nilakantha Das. Despite his major contributions, Nayak's legacy remained confined to oral traditions and local memory until recent state-sponsored initiatives began to revive interest in his life and ideals.

The study reclaims Nayak not merely as a tribal insurgent but as a visionary leader who symbolised indigenous justice, ethical kingship, and spiritual resilience. His story challenges mainstream historiography to recognise subaltern and tribal contributions to India's long and pluralistic struggle for freedom and dignity.

Dharanidhar Nayak:

The Forgotten Flame of Kendujhar

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1. Introduction

In the vast landscape of India's freedom struggle, countless voices, particularly from tribal and forested regions, remain faint echoes in the national memory.^[1] Among these unsung heroes stands Dharanidhar Nayak, a revolutionary tribal leader from Kendujhar, Odisha, whose leadership in the Kendujhar tribal uprising (1891), famously known as the 'Dharani Meli', represents one of the earliest organised resistances against both princely oppression and British colonial rule in Eastern India.

Unlike better-known nationalist and freedom-fighting figures whose stories are widely circulated, Dharanidhar's resistance emerged from the socio-political margins, from the hills and forests of Kendujhar, which are inhabited by the Bhuyan, Juang, Bathudi, Saunti, and Kol tribes. These communities, governed by customary Pirh (tract) systems, enjoyed autonomy until the onset of British colonial interference and princely overreach in the 19th century.^[2] By the late 1800s, British economic policies and administrative centralisation in Kendujhar exacerbated tribal grievances, primarily through the exploitative forced labour and unpaid labour (*bethi and beggary*) systems and arbitrary taxations. Against this backdrop, Dharanidhar Nayak emerged as a charismatic tribal leader who transformed fragmented dissent into organised resistance in 1891. His life and legacy encapsulate the intersection of tribal assertion, anti-feudal mobilisation, and early anti-colonial sentiment. As Odisha reclaims its indigenous legacy through state-sponsored commemorations, such as the Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav and renewed academic interest, it becomes imperative to revisit the contribution of leaders like Dharanidhar, not as footnotes but as foundational figures in the people's movement for justice and dignity.^[3]

2. Son of the Soil: Bhuyan Heritage and Birth of a Leader

Dharanidhar's biographical roots are more than a prelude to the famous rebellion; they represent a counter-narrative to mainstream historiography, which often sidelines tribal agency in India's freedom struggle. His life compels us to reimagine political awakening not as

the monopoly of urban elites, but as something equally nurtured in the forest villages, in acts of refusal, and quiet moral revolts. The narrative of Dharanidhar Nayak can be seen as a representation of the tribal awakening and early resistance consciousness during the colonial period in Odisha. Born on May 5, 1864, in Kusumita village, Dharanidhar belonged to the Bhuyan tribe, a community with deep historical roots in the forested highlands of Odisha.^[4] The Bhuyans, along with the Juang and Kol tribes, were numerically significant and culturally distinct, forming the socio-political fabric of Kendujhar's rugged terrain.^[5] Their existence was deeply interwoven with land, forests, and indigenous social structures, many of which were gradually eroded under feudal overlordship and the encroaching colonial state.

According to several vernacular and oral accounts, Dharanidhar Nayak belonged to a prominent lineage of Bhuyan tribal leaders. His father, Lachman Nayak, and grandfather, Tikaram Nayak, were both recognised as *Sardars*, hereditary tribal chieftains within the Bhuyan community, who had held influence and maintained close ties with the royal court of Kendujhar since the time of King Gadadhar Bhanja (1838-1861).^[6] The family's elevated status among the tribal elite granted them periodic access to the palace. In particular, childless Queen Bishnupriya Devi is said to have been especially fond of him during his childhood years. Some oral traditions even refer to him as "*Maharani Putra*", literally, the Queen's son, a title reflecting not biological relation, but affectionate adoption and symbolic status within the royal fold.^[7]

However, despite his tribal origins in a humble household nurtured by his parents, Lachman Nayak and Baigani Devi, Dharanidhar received formal education, an uncommon privilege for *adivasis* (literally, the original inhabitants) during the late 19th-century India. His father, Lachman, had connections with the royal household of King Dhanurjay Narayan Bhanja (King Gadadhar Bhanja's son out of wedlock) that gave the family a modest yet respected position within the social hierarchy. This proximity to the royal household enabled Dharanidhar to pursue education under royal patronage. He was sent to study at the Survey School in Cuttack with a state

scholarship and resided in the King's residence at Tulasipur, with the state covering his expenses.^[8]

Regardless of his technical training and royal patronage, upon his return to Kendujhar, Dharanidhar was not treated as an equal within the state administration. He faced caste-based discrimination and exclusion by court officials from higher castes, especially from Assistant Manager Bichitrananda Das. Disillusioned, he left his post and worked as a surveyor in Mayurbhanj for three years, gaining a professional reputation and confidence. He eventually took up employment as a state surveyor (Amin) in the Kendujhar princely administration, where he directly observed the twin oppressions afflicting tribal society: exploitative practices by the native ruler and the growing encroachment of British indirect rule. His position at the intersection of power and oppression afforded him a unique vantage point, situated inside the palace yet aligned with the forest.

As discussed above, in 1889, King Dhanurjay Bhanja requested Dharanidhar's return to help with land settlement. Though reluctant, Dharanidhar agreed. However, his tenure was again marred by conflicts, particularly with Bichitrananda. Their rivalry, rooted in caste prejudice and administrative ethics, escalated during the Machha Kandana Canal project. Dharanidhar opposed the imposition of *bethi*, while Bichitrananda backed coercion and exploitation.^[9] This clash set in motion the events that led to Dharanidhar's dismissal and eventual transformation, ultimately culminating in an armed rebellion against the King and the Colonial administration.

The seeds of rebellion were sown in a context of systematic exploitation. The Bhuyans and Juangs were subjected to arbitrary taxation and forced to contribute to ceremonial levies, including the marriage cess, exhibition cess, and even a tax on their weapons, as well as extractions of forest produce and unpaid but compulsory *bethi and beggary*. These were the most egregious practices Dharanidhar witnessed imposed upon the tribal population by the King. A crippling tax regime on grain compounded this, and land, pushing tribal communities into debt and despair. Forests were increasingly brought under restrictive colonial policies that criminalised shifting

cultivation and denied traditional usufruct rights.^[10] These systemic injustices fuelled discontent and alienation among the tribes, who began to perceive the state machinery not as a protector but as a predatory force.

As per colonial records, over 30 villages were required to supply goats, charcoal, fuelwood, and ropes annually without compensation. However, the flashpoint was the Machha Kandana Canal project, launched in 1890. Rather than investing the proposed ₹10,000, the state enforced the system of *bethi*, compelling tribals to excavate the canal in summer heat without food, wages, or rest. Many fell ill; some reportedly died. An oral account recorded in *Dharani Gitika* describes how Dharanidhar witnessed an older man collapse under the weight of a shovel. Supervisors pulled his ears, and he was denied water. These excesses reportedly had a profound impact on Dharanidhar, convincing him that reform from within was futile.^[11]

While archival sources confirm Dharanidhar's resignation from state service before the 1891 uprising, oral narratives preserved in local folklore provide a richer texture. Villagers in Kendujhar recount how Dharanidhar, upon witnessing the condition of a starving village pressed into *bethi*, threw away his survey instruments and pledged not to return to state service. These folk traditions, passed down through generations, transform him into more than a rebel; he becomes a moral redeemer, a figure of justice and empathy. He stands tall not only as a tribal leader but also as a symbol of reawakened dignity among the tribals of Odisha.

His transition from a loyal servant of the state to a liberationist outside it demonstrates a rare fusion of modernity and indigeneity. Unlike the elite nationalist leaders from British universities and city intellectual circles, Dharanidhar's radicalism was grounded in local injustices and shared experiences. His intellectual frameworks are based on tribal ethics of reciprocity, kinship, and autonomy, values deeply embedded in Bhuyan social life.^[12] His reactive responses were consciously political, aiming to restore dignity and traditional sovereignty that had been exploited and disrupted by princely despotism and colonial interference. This ideological clarity,

combined with personal sacrifice and strategic mobilisation, would eventually crystallise into the Dharani Meli rebellion.

3. The Kendujhar Rebellion of 1891

By the late 19th century, although nominally autonomous, the princely state of Kendujhar was deeply enmeshed in the British colonial framework. The local administration enforced a multi-layered regime of extraction, including forced labour, excessive grain levies, forest restrictions, and demeaning social practices, pushing the tribal economy and social life to the brink of collapse. The uprising was not spontaneous but the outcome of deep-seated grievances rooted in feudal exploitation and colonial governance. Three primary systems of oppression served as the catalysts for this tribal and peasant-led revolt in Kendujhar.

First, the *bethi* system (mentioned earlier), an archaic form of forced labour, was perhaps the most immediate and visible form of exploitation. Entire villages were routinely conscripted to provide unpaid labour for royal construction projects, transportation of goods, and other state demands. This exploitative medieval practice, reinforced with colonial precision, was systematically institutionalised under the joint authority of the Kendujhar monarchy and British colonial administrators. The burden of *bethi* fell disproportionately on the tribal population, disrupting agrarian life and breeding intense resentment.

Second, the monopolisation of essential resources exacerbated the suffering of the rural poor. State-appointed grain merchants, operating under royal patronage, took advantage of scarcity conditions, often resembling famine by hoarding food supplies and manipulating prices. This predatory behaviour not only deepened food insecurity but also symbolised the collusion between local elites and exploitative economic structures.

Third, the imposition of colonial forest laws marked a direct attack on tribal autonomy and livelihood systems. These laws, often

implemented with the tacit consent of the princely state, criminalised traditional practices such as shifting cultivation, foraging, hunting and fuelwood collection. Forests, once integral to tribal subsistence and identity, were now declared state property, policed by forest officials and subject to fines and arrests. The resulting alienation of forest-dependent communities triggered widespread resistance, adding another layer of grievance to an already volatile landscape.

Together, these interlocking systems of oppression, forced labour, economic monopolisation, and ecological dispossession ignited the flames of the Kendujhar rebellion of 1891. Thus, the revolt emerged as a multi-dimensional resistance to feudal tyranny and colonial subjugation, grounded in the lived realities of Kendujhar's marginalised tribal communities.



Dharanidhar Statue, Kusumita, Kendujhar.

In this crucible of exploitation, Dharanidhar emerged as a leader, supported by others, including Gopal Nayak and Narendra Mohapatra (discussed in the following sections), who could articulate the grievances of his people in both legal and moral terms. Drawing upon his experience as a former surveyor, he was uniquely equipped to challenge the state's land policies and grain taxation, understanding how land was being weaponised against the very people who lived on it. Before delving further, a brief mention of a previous yet historical precedent, which inspired Dharanidhar in particular and the tribals of the region to the core, marking the valiant and independent nature of the Bhuyan tribes.

4. Historical Precedent: The Legacy of the Ratna Meli (1867-68)

The 1891 rebellion led by Dharanidhar did not emerge in a historical vacuum; it drew inspiration from an earlier uprising known locally as the Ratna Meli, which occurred in 1867 during the contentious accession of Dhanurjay Narayan Bhanja to the throne of Kendujhar. The British played a pivotal role in provoking this first Kendujhar tribal rebellion by manipulating the succession to the Kendujhar throne, imposing Dhanurjay Narayan Bhanj against the will of the Bhuyans. In that episode, the Bhuyans, invoking their customary right to approve or reject rulers, rose in armed protest under the leadership of Ratna Nayak, a respected tribal head or sardar.^[13] Their rebellion was triggered by the perceived illegitimacy and arrogance of the newly crowned King and his interference in tribal Pirh affairs. Ratna Nayak's movement challenged both the feudal authority of the Kendujhar King and the colonial political agents who supported him in this royal adventure.

The uprising ended in brutal suppression. Ratna Nayak and six of his associates were hanged outside Cuttack Jail in a public display of British retribution to make an example to deter future revolts.^[14] Although the Ratna Meli was ultimately crushed, it etched a powerful memory of defiance in the collective consciousness of the Bhuiyan community. Commissioner T.E. Ravenshaw acknowledged that the

crisis had persisted for eight years, perpetuating a chronic state of unrest.^[14] However, British forces quelled only the surface; they failed to address the root causes: feudal tyranny, economic exploitation, and torture of tribal communities. That injustice continued to fester, inspiring a second, larger rebellion under Dharanidhar Nayak, with broader support and sharper political articulation. In this sense, the Dharani Meli of 1891 was a political uprising and a revival of tribal self-determination, reaffirming the Bhuiyans' historical ethos of valour, independence, and ethical kingship grounded in consent and accountability.

5. Dharani Meli: The Uprising That Awakened the British

The 1891 tribal revolt, the second within three decades, is a testament to the transformation of fragmented tribal discontent into a cohesive and politically conscious insurgency. It began with a grand council at Pawari village on December 29, 1890, attended by representatives from 60 Bhuiyan Pirhs and over 800 sardars.^[15] This council invoked customary law, affirming their right to depose a tyrannical ruler.

Leadership and Strategy of Collective Resistance

The success and reach of the 1891 Kendujhar uprising can be attributed to a decentralised yet remarkably coordinated leadership structure, rooted in the federated ethos of the Bhuiyan socio-political organisation. The movement was far from a spontaneous tribal outburst; it was a strategically planned campaign with clear roles, coherent ideological framing, and synchronised action across Pirh territories. Drawing from the traditional Pirh system, a confederation of semi-autonomous tribal tracts, and adapting to the political exigencies of princely despotism and colonial complicity, the revolt represented a rare articulation of tribal agency in eastern India.

At the apex stood Dharanidhar, the rebellion's supreme commander and ideological architect. One of the earliest and most powerful catalysts for the revolt was his elder brother, Gopal Nayak, whose foundational role in the resistance is often overshadowed. Gopal was

among the first to openly challenge the feudal authority of King Dhanurjay, particularly before the enforcement of the *bethi* system in the Machha Kandana Canal project. His courageous defiance led to his arrest and custodial torture by state police, a repressive act that not only galvanised Dharanidhar but also awakened widespread indignation across the Bhuiyan community. Though Gopal did not assume a battlefield role during the armed phase of the rebellion, his



The legendary well at Dharani's home, Kusumita

early sacrifice became a potent symbol of tribal anguish and a rallying point for collective action.

Another key figure in the uprising was Narendra Mahapatra, Dharanidhar's brother-in-law from Padampur village in Jayantigarh (now in Singhbhum, Jharkhand). Considered the second most influential leader in the movement, Narendra functioned as legal advisor and strategic coordinator. With a working knowledge of

administrative protocols and deep ties to the tribal leadership across Singhbhum and Bonai, he played a pivotal role in extending the rebellion's reach. After Gopal's arrest, Dharanidhar regrouped at Narendra's home in Padampur, drafted petitions to British authorities, and forged alliances. Narendra's efforts in mobilising local sardars, fundraising, and ensuring safe passage for rebel communications were instrumental.^[16] In a final attempt to seek peaceful redressal, Dharanidhar submitted a formal petition on January 23, 1891, to the Superintendent of the Tributary Mahals of Odisha, detailing the King's exploitative practices, including forced labour, excessive taxation, and punitive control of grain stocks and appealing for administrative intervention. When his representation was met with silence, and the King retaliated by issuing arrest warrants against him, Dharanidhar chose to initiate open rebellion.^[17] Though arrest warrants were issued against both leaders, sympathetic officials in Chotanagpur and Mayurbhanj reportedly refused to enforce them due to procedural irregularities, giving the insurgents crucial time to build momentum.

By early May 1891, Dharanidhar and Narendra advanced toward Kendujhar with a formidable tribal coalition. Estimates suggest that between 1,500 and 2,000 armed Bhuiyan and Juang volunteers participated in the uprising. Armed with traditional weapons, bows, arrows, spears, and axes, they launched a coordinated offensive on the royal palace and administrative outposts.^[18] At Raisuan, near the palace, the rebellion reached its climax. The King fled to Cuttack, and the insurgents seized the treasury, looted armouries, destroyed land and tax records, and liberated prisoners detained for resisting forced labour.^[19]

A brief yet profound moment followed. Dharanidhar convened a symbolic *darbar*, where he presided over community deliberations, a powerful assertion of popular sovereignty, that branded him as 'Maharani Putra'.^[20] This act invoked Bhuiyan's customary rights to install or depose kings, reimagining kingship as a social contract grounded in accountability. For a brief yet extraordinary period, the palace, long a symbol of royal tyranny, was transformed into a court

of justice under tribal authority. Supporting the core leadership were several seasoned commanders and organisers.

The rebellion was memorialised as the Dharani Meli (People's Assembly around Dharanidhar), a term that connotes spiritual renewal and political revolution led by a tribal saradr. Thousands of tribal men and women participated in this insurrection, blending age-old war cries and ritual mobilisation with a lucid political message: rejection of princely tyranny and assertion of indigenous justice. However, the uprising was eventually overwhelmed in late May 1891 when combined British and princely police forces launched several counter-offensives. Dharanidhar was imprisoned after his voluntary surrender, while Narendra Mahapatra, initially in hiding, was arrested soon after in Chaibasa and incarcerated in jail too, among other Meli leaders. Both Dharanidhar and Narendra Mahapatra embodied a rare instance of kinship-driven, ideologically coherent insurgent leadership in colonial Odisha. Their movement was more than a localised rebellion; it was a bold confrontation with the structures of oppression imposed by both princely feudalism and colonial authority. The memory of their resistance continues to inspire narratives of tribal dignity, justice, and self-rule.

Key Events of the Kendujhar Uprising

The uprising of 1891 unfolded through a series of critical events that underscored the growing anger of the Bhuiyan community against forced labour and administrative oppression. One of the first major actions undertaken by the rebels was the seizure of the state's grain depots, particularly those stockpiled during the *bethi*-driven Machha Kandana Canal project. Initially filled to sustain court and construction operations, these granaries were forcibly opened by villagers under the direction of rebel leadership. The grain was then redistributed among the starving population, reflecting the rebellion's ethical stance against hoarding and exploitation during agrarian distress.

In another major development, the rebels captured Fakir Mohan Senapati, the then Manager of the Kendujhar state, who is remembered today as a pioneer of modern Odia literature. He had been stationed in Anandpur at the time and was taken captive when the rebels asserted control over parts of the state. His brief detention by the insurgents became significant in later colonial reports and his autobiographical writings. While held in captivity, Senapati is believed to have aided British counter-insurgency efforts and sent coded messages to the British administration using metaphoric language, such as requests for "betel leaves" and "areca nuts", to signal the need for military reinforcement. While critics later viewed these accounts as possibly self-aggrandising and inspired by Bhuyan folksongs, contemporary reports backing Senapati's account corroborated the incident.^[21]

As the rebellion gathered momentum, King Dhanurjay Bhanja fled Kendujhar, seeking refuge and assistance in Anandpur and Cuttack. This act marked an extraordinary moment in the political history of Odisha's princely states, a reigning monarch abandoning his capital in the face of internal rebellion. His departure left a temporary vacuum in governance, during which the rebels reportedly exercised local administrative control in and around the palace premises. Alarmed by the scale and coordination of the uprising, the British administration deployed troops from the Bengal Presidency to suppress the revolt. A campaign of military containment followed. A combined force of 300 armed sepoys from the Singhbhum and Balasore districts, led by Superintendent R. T. Dundas, was dispatched to restore order.^[22] Although the Bhuiyan insurgents offered weeks of resistance, utilising their familiarity with the forested terrain and support from local communities, the superior firepower and logistical strength of the colonial forces eventually led to their defeat.

By late May 1891, following several skirmishes near the palace's outskirts, British-led forces had succeeded in reoccupying Kendujhar. Recognising the futility of continued resistance and to avoid further bloodshed, Dharanidhar Nayak surrendered voluntarily to the Assistant Superintendent of Police, H. Dawson, on May 29, 1891.

Mounted on an elephant, he is said to have declared his farewell in a line immortalised by Bhuiyan folk ballads by Poet Rasanand: "*Kenjirire na piebi pani re*" – "I will no longer drink the waters of Kendujhar."^[23] This parting statement became a powerful symbol of dignity in defeat, reflecting not surrender in shame, but withdrawal with honour. By late June 1891, Dharanidhar was tried and sentenced to seven years of rigorous imprisonment in Cuttack. The rebels were tried by George Toynbee, Superintendent of the Tributary Mahals. Upon hearing his sentence, Dharanidhar reportedly remarked: "I am not sorry for my seven years' imprisonment, but I am happy that the people will be relieved of oppression."^[24]

The rebellion was effectively suppressed, but it remained etched in the memory of the Bhuiyans as the Dharani Meli, a collective uprising born of long-standing injustice fought in defence of community autonomy and dignity.

Administrative Changes by the British Post-1891 Uprising

Following the suppression of the 1891 tribal uprising in Kendujhar, the British administration undertook several changes to tighten control over the region and prevent further unrest. The immediate step involved reinforcing the authority of the Superintendent of the Orissa Tributary Mahals, George Toynbee, who was made more directly responsible for monitoring the political affairs of princely states, such as Kendujhar. Increased correspondence and administrative reporting from local officers were mandated, and the frequency of official visits was raised to maintain a closer watch on internal developments.

The British also restructured aspects of local governance. The traditional Bhuiyan Pirh councils, which had historically exercised a degree of autonomy, were sidelined. In their place, the princely administration, already dependent on colonial approval, was made more centralised and subject to external oversight. This was intended

to curtail tribal influence over political decisions, particularly the Bhuiyans' customary claim to depose unjust rulers, which had been asserted during the revolt.

Contrary to claims of elevation, Fakir Mohan Senapati was dismissed following the rebellion. Though he aided the King and the British by sending coded messages during his captivity, colonial authorities later removed him, possibly due to perceived administrative failures or loss of confidence.^[25] In the aftermath, the British appointed new, carefully vetted officials to oversee the state's civil and revenue administration, ensuring loyalty and reducing the risk of future insubordination.

A new focus was placed on land revenue settlement in the economic sphere. The administration emphasised systematic surveys, formal landholding documentation, and the collection of fixed revenue, thereby reducing the scope for customary claims over land by tribal communities. This shift undermined traditional communal land rights and deeply integrated Kendujhar into the colonial revenue system.

To maintain law and order, the government expanded the police presence in the region. New police outposts were established in sensitive areas, including those near the Singhbhum and Telkoi frontiers. The aim was to deter future uprisings through a visible display of state power and to ensure rapid deployment in the event of any disturbance.

Finally, the British began collecting more detailed administrative intelligence on the social composition, leadership networks, and grievances of the tribal population. These efforts included formal reports, confidential memos, and district-level inquiries designed to pre-empt dissent and monitor any reorganisation of tribal leadership.



Dharanidhar Memorial Statue, Demal, Aul (Kendrapada).

6. From Rebel to Ascetic: Dharanidhar's Final Journey

The arrest and imprisonment of Dharanidhar Nayak in May and June 1891 did not mark the end of his resistance, but rather the beginning of a deeper transformation. Released in 1897 after serving six years (out of a seven-year sentence), he chose not to return to Kendujhar. Upon his release, Nayak refused the state pension offered jointly by the King of Kendujhar and British authorities as an act of reconciliation. This rejection was a powerful assertion of his moral independence and a symbolic repudiation of both feudal patronage and colonial co-option. After rejecting material comforts, Dharanidhar embarked on an extended phase of spiritual self-exile, travelling widely across Odisha and neighbouring Bengal. Oral histories from Kendujhar, Puri, and Kendrapara districts refer to his presence in remote places, often described as "Dharani Baba", a mystic figure who lived a minimal life and counselled freedom fighters, peasants, and the general public on dignity, justice, and moral courage.

During this post-rebellion phase, Dharanidhar encountered King Braja Sundar Deb of the Aali (Aul, Odisha) Zamindari in Kolkata, who was drawn to his reputed spiritual aura. The King invited him to Aul, where Dharanidhar settled in quiet austerity, living at the palace and later in a small hermitage near Demal village at Aali until he died in May 1944.^[26] Although often overlooked, this period reveals the psychological and moral aftermath of rebellion. Dharanidhar's withdrawal was not a resignation but a conscious rejection of power and materialism. Disturbed by the loss of life and the resilience of oppressive systems, he redirected his energy toward inner reform and service. Local oral traditions suggest that his renunciation was shaped by remorse, introspection, and a renewed sense of spiritual duty.

Pandit Nilakantha Das once recounted a formative encounter from his school days, when he and Gopabandhu Das visited Dharanidhar Nayak near the Daria Mahavir temple at Banki Muhana in Puri. During their conversation, they asked him, "When will India gain freedom from British rule?" Dharanidhar's response was terse yet powerful: "When you people are man enough, India will get her freedom."^[27] Nilakantha, who would later become a key figure in India's independence movement and a principal architect of the formation of Odisha as a separate province in 1936, described that meeting with Dharanidhar as his first moment of genuine political awakening, an early inspiration that left a lasting impression on his life and ideals.

At that time, Dharanidhar lived in a modest, well-like shelter near the seashore, emblematic of his austere lifestyle. Family members also recount that he had a large well near his ancestral home in Kusumita, where he often spent long hours in solitude and reflection.^[28] In his later years, Dharanidhar embraced a life of minimalism, living simply, guiding youth, and serving the community. One of his often-quoted teachings, 'Serve the people, for the people are the face of God,' reflected his tribal roots and Bhakti-inspired ethical worldview. By then, Mahapurusha Dharanidhar, as Pandit Nilakantha called him or Dharani Baba, as he was fondly known in Aali, had transcended

his identity as a rebel. He came to be revered as a spiritual guide who, having once taken up arms, now led by moral example.

7. Conclusion

Despite the richness of this phase, mainstream historiography often reduces Dharanidhar's ascetic life to a footnote, focusing instead on his militant phase. Yet, in this second act of his life, he completes his journey, from rebellion to reconciliation, from flame to light. His death in 1944, at the age of 80, was marked not by national mourning but by quiet remembrance in the tribal communities he served. Only in recent years, through initiatives such as Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav and the Odisha Freedom Fighters Project, as well as grassroots commemorations in Kendujhar, his spiritual legacy is being reclaimed as part of India's plural struggle for dignity and justice.

Despite his pivotal role in leading one of Odisha's earliest organised tribal rebellions against feudal and colonial rule, Dharanidhar Nayak's place in India's national historiography has remained curiously subdued. While freedom fighter personalities like Surendra Sai and Bakshi Jagabandhu receive periodic attention in school curricula and commemorative functions, Dharanidhar's legacy lived primarily through oral history, village-level tributes, and regional memory, until recently.

NOTES

[1] Scheduled Castes & Scheduled Tribes Research and Training Institute (SCSTRTI), *Tribal Movement & Freedom Fighters of Odisha*, Bhubaneswar, June 2022, https://repository.tribal.gov.in/bitstream/123456789/75254/1/SCST_2022_book_0500.pdf

[2] For a detailed historical profile of the tribal Pirh System, see Champak Kumar Sahu, "Bhuyan and Juang Rebellion during British Rule", *European Academic Research*, Vol. II, Issue 8, November 2014. Accessible at <https://www.euacademic.org/UploadArticle/1124.pdf>

[3] Amrit Mahotsav Portal, "Dharanidhar Nayak", (Unsung Heroes Detail: Paying tribute to India's freedom fighters), Government of India, (Undated). <https://amritmahotsav.nic.in/unsung-heroes-detail.htm?6888>

[4] Jaishankar Nayak, "Biplabi Dharanidhar," *Utkal Prasanga*, 2012, pp. 7-9.

[5] The name 'Bhuyan' is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Bhumi', meaning land. The Bhuyans traditionally regard themselves as the 'Sons of the Soil,' or Bhumiputra, emphasising their status as the region's original inhabitants and custodians of the land.

[6] Jagannath Patnaik, *Biplabi Dharanidhar*, Academy of Tribal dialects and Culture, Bhubaneswar, 1992. p.12.

[7] Haladhar Panda, *Aranyar Anban*, Pratibha Prakash, 1997. pp.25-26.

[8] Ibid. p.33.

[9] Tarun Kumar Dey, *Biplabi Dharanidhar*, Bidya Bharati, Balasore, 2007. pp.11-13. For a brief account on Bichitrnanda and his evil conspiracies, see Prasanna Kumar Mishra, "Political Economy of Tribal Uprisings in Kendujhar in 1891-93." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 48, 1987, pp. 383-89. JSTOR, Accessible at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44141713>.

[10] The trials and tribulations of the Bhuyan tribes, including tax exploitation at the hands of the King at that time, were lyrically presented by Godabarish Mishra in one of the oldest Odia periodicals, Mukura. See Godabarish Mishra, "Dharanidhar", *Mukura*, Vol. 6 (Nos. X, XI, XII), 1911-12. pp. 251-54. Accessible at <https://odiabibhaba.in/>

[11] Dharani Gitika is a collection of folk poems on Dharanidhar and the Kendujhar uprising of 1891, written by Bhuiyan poet Rasanand Nayak, a resident of the Patamunda village in the then-Bonai State. For an in-depth study on the Gitika, see Lalatendu Das Mohapatra, "Dharani Gitika: A Bhuiyan Folk Song as a Source of History," in Syed Ejaz Hussain & Sanjay Garg (Eds.), *Alternative Arguments: Essays in Honour of Surendra Gopal*, Primus Books, Delhi, 2020.

[12] K. C. Misra, *Bhuyan Jati*, US Press, Cuttack, 1925.

[13] Kalayan Kumar Panda, "Early Phase of Freedom Movement in Orissa", *Orissa Review*, August 2010, pp. 70-73.

[14] For detailed information and analysis on the Ratna Meli, see Pravat Mallick, The Raz, the Rajas and the Bhuiyans: Revisiting the Kenonjhar Rebellion of 1867 and Its Impact on Bonai, in M. C. Behera (Ed.), *Tribes-British Relations in India*, Springer, Singapore, 2021. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-3424-6_10

[15] Prasanna Kumar Mishra, "Political Economy of Tribal Uprisings in Kendujhar in 1891-93." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 48, 1987, pp. 383–89. JSTOR, Accessible at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44141713>.

[16] Lalatendu Das Mohapatra, "Keonjhar Uprisings, 1867 & 1891," in B.C. Ray (et.al), *Freedom Struggle in Orissa*, Vol 1, 2004, Orissa State Archives, pp. 200–235.

[17] Ibid. For a vivid narrative on the rebellion, see Haladhar Panda, *Aranyar Amban*, Pratibha Prakash, 1997. pp.57-64.

[18] This pivotal event in Odisha's history was often compared with the 'Storming of the Bastille' (French Revolution, July 1789) by historians. For example, see Pranath Patnaik, "Kendujhar Bhuyan Meli and Dharanidhar", *Nabajivan* Vol. 5 (7), September-October 1960. pp. 453-471. Accessible at <https://odiabibhaba.in/>

[19] K Naik, *Kendujhar Darpan*, Arun-Tarun, Kendujhar, 1997, pp. 51-52.

[20] A historical novel titled 'Maharani Putra' by Dr. Pratibha Ray fictionalises the Kendujhar rebellion and the events surrounding Dharanidhar Nayak's revolt against the King, and his encounters with Fakir Mohan Senapati, who served as the Dewan of Kendujhar. The novel also includes the author's visit to Dharanidhar's ancestral home, offering a vivid portrayal of his socio-economic background and cultural milieu, thus blending historical imagination with grounded regional memory of this

"great son of the soil." See, Pratibha Ray, *Maharani Putra*, Adya Prakashani, Bhubaneswar, 2008.

[21] K.C. Pradhan and Lalatendu Das Mohapatra (Eds.), *Fakir Mohan: Tarka Bitarka*, Vidyapuri, Cuttack, 2003. This volume is a comprehensive compilation of essays and critical discourses examining the contentious role of Fakir Mohan Senapati in the Dharani Meli uprising. The contributions particularly explore the allegation that Fakir Mohan aligned with the British authorities and the local king, rather than supporting the anti-colonial rebellion. The book provides diverse perspectives on this historical debate.

[22] J K Samal, *Orissa Under The British Crown 1858-1905*, S. Chand & Company Ltd, New Delhi. 1977.

[23] Lalatendu Das Mohapatra, "Dharani Gitika: A Bhuiyan Folk Song as a Source of History, Alternative Arguments-Essays," in Syed Ejaz Hussain & Sanjay Garg (Eds.), *Alternative Arguments: Essays in Honour of Surendra Gopal*, Primus Books, Delhi, 2020. pp.15-16.

[24] J K Samal, *Orissa Under The British Crown 1858-1905*, Op.cit., pp. 350-351.

[25] Fakir Mohan Senapati was forced to resign at the behest of a royal court official named Nandlal and ordered to move out of Ananadpur. He later reached Bhadrak with the help of a family friend in Basantia village. This account is narrated in Jadunath Jena, *Kendujhar Bhuyan Bidroh*, Taratarini Bookstore, Cuttack, 1984, p. 35.

[26] The inconsistency surrounding the year of Dharanidhar Nayak's death in academic and popular literature is striking. While some sources claim he died in May 1914 (e.g. Jagannath Patnaik, 1992, p.23), interviews conducted by the author (February 25, 2025) with several octogenarians in Aali (Aul) consistently point to May 1944 as the most credible date. This is further supported by his tombstone in Aul, Kendrapara, which records his death as May 16, 1944. Again, another historical account suggests he died in October 1943, over a year after the Quit India movement of 1942. This inconsistency reflects the broader marginalization of grassroots resistance figures, especially those operating outside formal state and elite structures, who are often excluded from institutional documentation and denied the historical clarity typically afforded to regional and national political leaders.

For reference to his demise in October 1943, see D. J. Paikray, *Kendujharare Adibasi Andolanara Itibas*, Chitrotpala Publication, Saelpur, 2009, pp.170-181.

[27] Pandit Nilakantha Das, *Atma Jibani*, Cuttack Student Store, Cuttack (4th Edition), 2014, p. 156.

[28] Author's interview with elder members of his family in Kusumita, Kendujhar, February 16, 2025.



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