

Umaji Naik: A Forgotten Hero

Dhanraj Sardar Gusinge*

Corresponding Author's email id. dhanrajcug@gmail.com

Cite as: Gusinge, D., (2024), Umaji Naik: A Forgotten Hero, *The Yore: Research and Review*, 1(1), pg. 25- 31

Abstract

Umaji Naik, a revolutionary figure in India's freedom struggle during the early 19th century, played a significant role in challenging British rule and became a symbol of resistance for the underprivileged. Born into the Ramoshi-Berad community in Maharashtra, Umaji Naik drew inspiration from Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and established a short-lived kingdom, fighting against the British occupation. Despite facing numerous challenges and British attempts to capture him, Umaji Naik remained defiant and continued his struggle for self-rule. Eventually, he was apprehended, sentenced to death, and executed. However, Umaji Naik's courageous contributions have often been overlooked in the broader narrative of Indian history. This article sheds light on Umaji Naik's life and legacy, emphasizing the heroism and sacrifices made by forgotten revolutionaries who fought for India's independence before the widespread uprising of 1857. The Ramoshi/Berad community has preserved his memory and recognized his contributions. Umaji Naik's triumph over the British and the establishment of his small kingdom serve as remarkable achievements in an era of British suppression. Unfortunately, the story of this brave revolutionary, like many others, has been lost and forgotten over time. It reminds us that there are countless untold stories of India's courageous sons and daughters, waiting to be discovered and celebrated in the depths of history.

Keywords: freedom struggle, history, independence, community, contribution, Maharashtra

Introduction

Umaji Naik, an influential figure in India's freedom struggle, played a crucial role in challenging British rule during the early 19th century. Born into the Ramoshi-Berad

* Assistant Professor, Department of History, Guru Ghasidas Central University, Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, India

community in Maharashtra, Umaji Naik emerged as a leader and bravely fought against British occupation. He drew inspiration from the ideals of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and established a short-lived kingdom, becoming a symbol of resistance for the marginalized. Despite facing numerous obstacles and British attempts to capture him, Umaji Naik remained steadfast in his quest for self-rule. His unwavering determination and relentless struggle made him an unsung hero in the annals of Indian history. This article aims to shed light on Umaji Naik's courageous contributions, which have often been overshadowed in the broader narrative of India's independence movement. By delving into his life and legacy, we can acknowledge the heroism and sacrifices of countless forgotten revolutionaries who fought for India's freedom prior to the widespread uprising of 1857.

Umaji Naik's role as a revolutionary figure during British rule in India remains significant. When the British began their rule in the early 19th century, it was met with a mixed response from the Indian population. Some saw British rule as beneficial, while others recognized its oppressive nature and launched a courageous armed struggle against it. The commercial British National Forest Policy particularly affected the Ramoshi community, leading them to rise in revolt. Among them, Umaji Naik of Maharashtra emerged as a prominent leader, driven by the ideals of Shivaji Maharaj. His efforts resulted in the establishment of a small kingdom, albeit for a brief period. Umaji Naik's legacy serves as a testament to the indomitable spirit of resistance and the fight for freedom that reverberated throughout India during that time. Although many heroes of the freedom struggle may have faded into obscurity, their sacrifices and contributions continue to inspire future generations to cherish and uphold the values of independence and sovereignty.

Early Life

Umaji Naik was born on 7 September 1791 in a Ramoshi-Berad family in Bhiwandi village of Purandar taluka of Pune district. Dadoji Khomne and Lakshmibai were his parents. Umaji Naik belonged to the Ramoshi tribe. The Ramoshis lived in dark forests and have a history that dates back to Ramayana. During the 17th century, the Ramoshis were part of the intelligence department in the Maratha army. Ramoshi Bahirji Naik was the head of the intelligence department of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. Umaji's family was respectfully known as Naik as his family was traditionally responsible for the security of Fort Purandar (Lahane). Umaji was a brilliant child. In his early years, he was trained in all contemporary martial arts by his father. He soon became adept at using weapons like swords, spears, bows and arrows. He too grew up with the traditional profession of his community. Those who remain associated with the

community and give intelligence to the ruler. With the help of the Ramoshi community, the ruler kept an eye on the activities of the society.

The community of Berad, also known as Ramoshi, was a nomad who came from South India, particularly Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka and settled in Kolhapur, Satara, Sangli and Solapur districts of Maharashtra. The word 'Berad' is a corrupt form of 'Bedar'. In the Kannada language 'Bedaru' means hunter. Being in the forest, Berad's traditional occupation was hunting. In South India, the Vijayanagar Empire and the Surpur state were founded by Bedar. They were Jahangirdars of Tanjavur and Nayars of Andhra Pradesh (Draxe, 2005, pg. 128). The Bedar community in Maharashtra is commonly known as Berad or Ramoshi. Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and his successors took advantage of the valour of Berad/Ramoshi who were brave, strong, dependable men who were and are ready to defend the kingdom. Berad/Ramoshi were the chief guard of all the forts of Shivaji. In the Maratha period, Berad came to be known as 'Naik', which means 'leader' (Draxe, 2005, pg. 128).

British Rule and Resistance

The British had started to strengthen their empire in India. They began to acquire parts of the Maratha Empire. Soon they captured Pune, the nerve centre of the Maratha empire. Bajirao II was appointed as the representative of the British in 1803. The local network of the Maratha empire was strong. Thus, the British began to appoint trusted people to the positions responsible for demolishing the local network of the Maratha empire. As a result, the British withdrew from the Ramoshi clan the responsibility of guarding the Purandar Fort. The British also started exploiting the local people. The principles of good governance were being violated by the British (Lahane, 2021).

Umaji Naik was disappointed with British policies. He made a clarion call for self-rule. Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj was his ideal. So, he declared himself as 'Umaji Raja'. He decided that he would never allow foreigners to rule the land of their ancestors. He along with Vithuji Naik, Krushna Naik and Bapu Solaskar took the oath to fight for freedom at the holy temple of Khandoba located in Jejuri town of Maharashtra. Thus, Umaji Naik became the first freedom fighter in India's history of British rule. He started robbing the British and the rich and helped the poor and the downtrodden. He had become a leader of the underprivileged. He did justice to the exploited women and he punished the exploiters (Bhatkal, 1998, pg. 61). His activity spread widely. The British sent him to prison for a year (Mackintosh, 1833, pg. 129). He used the yearlong period as an opportunity to learn to read and write. Umaji Naik was fighting for his people, he had no other motive. Therefore, many people joined his movement against the

British rulers after taking inspiration from him. Umaji's popularity increased with time and the British authorities were working hard to catch him but Umaji manages to escape their attempts.

Conflicts with the British

Captain Alexander Mackintosh was ordered to arrest Umaji Naik. He took responsibility and ordered the local district administrator to catch Umaji. The administrator mobilised his forces to capture Umaji. But Umaji defeated the British soldiers in a brutal war. In this war, Umaji beheaded five soldiers and sent them back to the British. This created fear and panic in the British camp. Since Umaji was a follower of Shivaji Maharaj, he followed his guerrilla warfare. Captain Malcolm, the most capable British officer, was also defeated by Umaji. Thus, many officers failed to capture Umaji.

The Collector of Pune District, H.D. Robertson submitted a report to the British Government, in which he said that the people are waiting for a major political change. He also wrote that the Ramoshis are creating an atmosphere of hatred against the Europeans. They wanted to drive out the British and people were supporting the Ramoshis. According to him, the people there believe that Umaji will defeat the Europeans and restore the Maratha Empire like Chhatrapati Shivaji. Soon the Ramoshi community established a small kingdom under Umaji Naik. After the establishment of the kingdom, Umaji started a daily court where those who supported the British were punished severely. Umaji always supported the common people and also gave money to the poor (Keer, 1997). In 1820, Robert, a British officer, wrote to the East India Company that Umaji Naik belonged to the Ramoshi clan and the community had started outraging against British rule. They were actively working for an alternative political system. People were supporting their purpose.

In February 1824, Umaji, despite being under tight security, plundered the treasury of Bhamburda, a suburb of Pune, from the British. He spent it on the renovation of temples and distributed it among poor people. After this, several revolutions started from Satpura to Sahyadri. Due to the havoc of Umaji, the British government employees stopped their movement in the southeastern part of Pune. The British government was unable to stop the regular looting by Ramoshi (Draxe, 2005, pg. 130). In October 1826, Umaji attacked a police station in Jejuri, killing police officers and looting all arms and ammunition. The British could not accept any challenge, as they could see the roaring presence of Umaji continuously berating them. So, they took strict action against the clans' people of the Ramoshis. Captain Davis was appointed by the British Government to help Captain Spiller for capturing Umaji Naik. He sent an army squad to Jejuri in Kolhapur. The Ramoshi movement spread to the Pune, Satara and

Bhor Presidencies. They kept on looting the government treasury and looted the government revenue. Umaji wrote a letter to the British government and said that the British should make a treaty, otherwise, this rebellion would spread throughout the country. He also warned that thousands of such agitations would emerge from Satpura to Parashuram, which would be helpless for the British to handle. Due to the failure of the treaty proposal, the Ramoshis started a ruckus against the British. The main centres of these riots were Kolhapur and Konkan. Captain Davis and Captain Spiller, who went to capture Umaji, were unsuccessful (Lahane, 2021).

Alliance Attempts and Continued Resistance

In November 1827, the Ramoshis attempted to restore all those who had been removed from the position of Raja by the British. The Raja of Kolhapur extended his support to this mission. But soon the British came to know about this and Ramoshis had to cease this mission. Umaji was trying to forge an alliance with Scindia and Holkar. However, it was unsuccessful as the British officials got to know about it and the alliance could not take place.

From 1828 to 1829, Umaji's rule was at its peak in the hills around the fort of Torna. In 1829, Umaji Naik signed a treaty with the British. According to this, the British gave him 120 *bighas* of land in Sakurdi and the Ramoshis were given jobs. After this Umaji became a servant of the government for some time. But a year later, Umaji reorganized his army and started a war against the British. The British were deeply hurt by this and they decided to eliminate Umaji. On 21 December 1830, a skirmish took place between the British officers Boyd and Umaji near Mandharadevi hill, a famous shrine in the Sahyadri Mountains, in which the Boyd-led army was defeated. Umaji and his fighters used catapults and guns against the British unit (Lahane, 2021). Furthermore, Umaji declared a complete revolution on 18 February 1831, encouraging the people all over India to quit government jobs and start a massive protest against the British and create a state of anarchy. He advised people to attack treasuries, not pay any kind of taxes, and end foreign rule. Umaji Naik believed that soon the British rule would come to an end. He also warned those who were working for the British and said that they would be sternly dealt with to help the government if self-rule was established (Anand, 2019).

The common people strongly supported the Ramoshis. The public used to inform Ramoshis about the activities of the British army. They also used to give shelter to the Ramoshi people. The British were warning the public that if anyone helps the Ramoshi, they will have to face dire consequences. To get the support of the farmers against the Ramoshi, the British started giving exemptions in taxes. The British could no longer ignore Umaji's antics because there

was a fear that Umaji's movement would become a mass movement. So, the British announced a huge reward for Umaji's arrest. On the other hand, Umaji Naik punished Kaloji Naik for kidnapping and abusing a woman, who in turn, took his revenge by joining hands with the British. In the greed of ten thousand rupees and four hundred bighas of land, a period of betrayal started in the camp of Umaji Naik. Umaji's confidant Nana Chavan also joined the British contingent. After the announcement of the bounty, many freedom fighters were arrested based on the information of defectors.

Capture and Execution

Umaji Naik finally fall into the trap of the British. On 15th December 1831, Umaji Naik was arrested by Captain Mackintosh in Utroli village in Bhor district. The British interrogated him very strictly, but they could not get any useful information from Umaji Naik. The British decided to end Umaji's mass movement. Umaji was imprisoned in a dark cell for a month while Captain Mackintosh had already interrogated him. Finally, Judge James Taylor sentenced Umaji to death. Umaji Naik voluntarily sacrificed his life for the freedom of the country. He was hanged on 3 February 1832 at the age of forty-one (Draxe, 2005, pg. 130). His body was hanged for three days to create fear and panic in the minds of other freedom fighters. The British could not extinguish the spark that Umaji Naik had planted. Umaji Naik was a brave fighter and even the British officers respected his bravery. The British officer Mr. Robert also wrote that Umaji could be another Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. As Captain Mackintosh famously said, Shivaji Maharaj was an idol of Umaji Naik. The British officials feared that if Umaji was not hanged, he would become another Shivaji.

Conclusion

The history of India's struggle for independence goes far beyond the well-known events of the 1857 Revolution. Numerous individuals, such as Umaji Naik, fought against British oppression and made significant sacrifices long before 1857. Umaji Naik's courageous actions in the Maharashtra region ignited a spark of discontent that would later fuel the flames of the 1857 revolution. While history may have overlooked Umaji Naik and many others like him, the Ramoshi/Berad society has preserved their memory and recognized their contributions. In an era when the British government sought to assert its dominance through suppression, Umaji Naik's triumph over the British and the establishment of his small kingdom stand as remarkable achievements. Sadly, the story of this brave revolutionary, like countless others, has been lost and forgotten over time. It serves as a reminder that there are numerous untold stories of India's

courageous sons and daughters who lie buried in the depths of history, waiting to be discovered and celebrated.

References

- Anand, A. (2019, December 20). *Umaji Naik: A forgotten hero*. The Nationalist View. <https://www.thenationalistview.com/research-and-reference/umaji-naik-a-forgotten-hero/>
- Bhatkal, G. R. (1998). *Contemporary India: G.R. Bhatkal Memorial Lectures, 1975-1995*. Popular Prakashan.
- Draxe, P. B. (2005). A Failed Revolt against the Raj: The Rebellion of the Berad, a Criminal Tribe, Under the Leadership of Umaji Naik. *Social Change*, 35(2), 127-130. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004908570503500209>
- Hebbar, P. (2013, April 7). *The Forgotten Freedom Fighter*. The Indian Express. <https://indianexpress.com/article/news-archive/web/the-forgotten-freedom-fighter/>
- Keer, D. (1997). *Mahatma Jotirao Phooley: Father of the Indian Social Revolution*. Popular Prakashan.
- Lahane, A. S. (2021, April 15). *Umaji Naik is a Freedom Fighter who took on the British*. E-Samskriti: An Online Encyclopedia on Indian Culture, Traditions, Spirituality, History, India Travel, Indian Leaders, Festivals of India, Dharma, Positive India. Retrieved April 10, 2023, from <https://esamskriti.com/e/History/Indian-History/Umaji-Naik-is-a-freedom-fighter-who-took-on-the-British---1.aspx>
- Mackintosh, A. (1833). *An Account of the Origin and Present Condition of the Tribe of Ramoossies: Including the Life of the Chief Oomiah Naik*. American Mission Press.