Contributions of Mahatma Gandhi to Orissa: A historical Analysis

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It is well known that Gandhi fought not only against colonialism or imperialism, but also against casteism, superstitions, social oppression, economic exploitation, religious hatred etc., with equal vigour and dynamism. The mission of Gandhi i.e. the fight for independence was a part of the struggle of suffering humanity against oppression. To achieve the goal of his mission through mass based support Gandhi paid visits to different parts of the country and Orissa was one such region.

Contributions of Gandhi to Orissa can be studied in its better perspective by analyzing the content and impact of his various visits to Orissa, which started in 1921 and continued as long as 1946. Since his first visit to the last for about seven times (despite his busy involvement in national programmes and problems) he came always with a definite objective and he did not take rest till the purpose was fulfilled. He had a special place and concern for Orissa, because of the special socio-economic political backward condition of the people, which is being reflected in most of his speeches and writings. In this paper an attempt has been made to analyse and highlight the special contributions of Gandhi to Orissa in the light of the then political, socio-economic condition of the province, the response of people and to identify the causes responsible for the success of Gandhi in his mission.

Gandhi and National Movement in Orissa

Gandhi’s role in popularizing the Congress movement in Orissa is quite significant. His contribution to the freedom movement in Orissa can be known in its right perspective in the light of the political situation and activities in Orissa prior to the advent of Gandhi.

Orissa participated actively in the deliberations of the Indian National Congress right from the beginning. But the problems of Orissa never found a place in the Congress agenda for discussion before 1920, i.e. the emergence of Gandhi. During that time the great national leaders of the Congress had no concern for Orissa. This apathy of the Congress was the main reason for which the National Congress could not become popular in Orissa till 1921. The fact that from 1885 to
1900 only a small number of 14 delegates from Orissa attended only 6 sessions of the Congress clearly indicates the lack of interest of the Oriyas in the Congress and the national movement. Of course there is no denying that Orissa played an important role in the Swadeshi Movement (1905-06) under the leadership of Madhusudan Das.

After realizing the futility of the Indian National Congress as a forum, a forum of Oriya under the leadership of Madhusudan Das formed a regional organization known as Utkala Union Conference in 1903. Thereafter the Oriyas diverted their attention to regional problems and tried to seek redressal of their grievances through the goodwill and blessings of the British government instead of the National Congress.

It was again in 1921, with Gandhi's visit (first) to Orissa that the interest of the Oriyas in the National Congress and national movement was revived. His first visit gave a tremendous impetus to the freedom movement in Orissa. It once again stimulated the people's zeal and enthusiasm for the cause of national movement. The Gandhian ideas, programmes and techniques were highly appreciated and widely accepted by the people.

In that context the 'Utkala Dipika' the leading newspaper of that time wrote: "Mahatma Gandhi now stands higher and higher having scored a triumph which was seldom attained by any Indian politician". Further it wrote, "Orissa has accepted the principle of non-violent non-cooperation creed preached by Mahatma Gandhi". It urged the Oriyas therefore to plunge into the national movement without fear.

Gandhi's maiden appearance on the land of Orissa in 1921 drew large crowds, wherever he went. About his first tour the government reported." In this land (Orissa) of Hindus, Mr. Gandhi was considered as an Avatar of the deity and a worker of miracles". In fact the places where he halted and held meetings became places of pilgrimage. He was looked upon by many people as their saviour. After a long time the people of Orissa felt that it was only through Gandhiji that their cause could be projected in the all India level. Therefore all that Gandhi wanted to accomplish relating the freedom struggle were carried on in right earnest by the people who had developed faith and confidence in him.

The Gandhian freedom movement with its political programme of non-cooperation, Civil-Disobedience and Quit India spread far and wide in Orissa. After a lapse of several years Orissa again responded to the call of Indian National Congress. Thus the Congress movement was brought to Orissa by Gandhi and was popularized by his followers like Gopabandhu Das and others*. In fact the advent of Gandhi in Orissa politics in general and freedom movement in particular assumed a kind of dynamism which was not known before.

Gandhi's Response to the Oriya Movement

Though Gandhi brought the Congress Movement to Orissa, he also favoured the movement of the Oriyas for the creation of a separate province. Prior to 1921 there was no place for Orissa and Oriya problems in the Indian National Congress. In 1920 Gandhi reshaped the Congress for the ensuring struggle for independence. Thereafter the Congress accepted the principle of forming provinces on linguistic basis and since then Orissa found a place in the annals of the Congress*.

Referring to the question of amalgamation of Oriya speaking tracts he wrote; "Orissa has a good grievance, the authors of Oriya Movement have described that Orissa has been vivisected for political purposes. As the Telugus in some areas were in majority and the Oriyas were
minority, he advised them that the stronger should accept the claim of the weak. He wrote in that context; "I have ventured to suggest some simple rules for their guidance. One golden rule of universal application that we must learn from our present struggle is that the stronger must yield to the weaker. In case of doubt the weaker. In case of doubt the weaker must have the verdict". It goes without saying that Gandhi was in favour of the union of Oriya speaking tracts and their formation into a separate unit*.

In fact the favourable views of Gandhi on the formation of linguistic province interested the Oriyas all the more in Gandhi. Regarding a separate Orisa he said: "I have always raised the issue in the discussion with the Congress authorities. I shall press for it myself as representative of Oriya at the Round Table Conference".

Gandhi always tried to bring the problems of Orissa to the notice of others. He reflected on the political situation in Orissa by maintaining that much has been left to be done for the region which is exposed to natural calamities causing great disadvantages.

He also made it known that Orissa's feeble voice was got drowned (prior to 1920) in the presence of more influential members inside the Congress organization. In view of that he remarked that the minority opinions should not be ignored. Moreover his recommendation* for the Orissa leaders and Orissa problem helped them win support from various other quarters.

In fact his sympathetic and considerate views and reports on the genuine Orissa problems and grievances proved beyond doubt his concern and commitment for the people of Orissa. All this helped to generate a feeling of goodwill among the Oriyas for him. They rightly realized that through him their cause could be better projected in the all India level. Thus due to the concern of Gandhi for Orissa, the faith in Congress was again generated, and that encouraged the leaders to launch the non-cooperation movement in a big way in Orissa, which was just the beginning of the end.

Social Services and Social Welfare Activities of Gandhi in Orissa

Gandhi's advent brought not only radical change in the political atmosphere and activities of Orissa but also helped in a significant manner the all round development of Orissa. Though he visited Orissa in 1921 with a view to baptizing the people in the new creed of non-cooperation movement but subsequently and consequently he paid many more visits for the love and deep concern which he developed for the poor and suffering masses of the region which he saw personally.

Gandhi was convinced of the need to get familiar with the regional problem and their intricacies, after he took charge the leadership of Congress. In 1918 and 1919 severe drought and flood in Orissa brought great misery and suffering for the masses which Gandhi came to know, and immediately he decided to act. The main purpose for which he visited Orissa in March 1921 was to see the condition of the people and to do something for them. He wrote an article in Navjivan underlying the need for urgent and generous help for the famine stricken people of Orissa. Realizing that the region was unknown to the outside world, he quoted Rabindra Nath Tagore in this write-up to inform the people that 'Utkala' was a famous land and place of great pilgrimage for the Hindus. He deputed one of his associates Thakkar Bapa first to camp in Orissa and conduct relief work there in 1920 with Rs.50000/- collected from the people of Gujarat for the flood affected people of Puri.
After his return from Orissa many a time he narrated "Orissa as the epitome of India's poverty" in his speeches. He also wrote two articles captioned "My Orissa Tour" and Orissa and Andhra" in Navjiban and Young India respectively. Referring to the condition of the peasants he said that the Oriyas were poorer than the peasants of Champaran. At Puri the victims of famine wrung his heart, so much so that he wrote "it was my first visit to Orissa, I would like to put on record some of the ineffaceable scenes and memories of this province". Because of this situation in Orissa he believed and advised those people who wanted to serve the poor to go to Utkala or Orissa. On a number of occasions he said that he felt a deep urge to settle down in Utkala and serve the poor people of the province. He felt and believed that Orissa’s condition could be ameliorated by selfless and full time dedicated workers with missionary zeal and spirit. Therefore whenever any sincere and dedicated person sought his advice as to where to work he advised him to go to Orissa. At his instance the Christian missionary C.F. Andrews stayed in Orissa for some months to render service to the needy, particularly the flood affected and poverty stricken people. Similarly Jivaramji Kalayanji Kothari, a follower of Gandhi dedicated his life and property to the service of Orissa. In 1927 along with his wife he established an Ashram at Bhadrak. Ishwarlal Vyas and his wife Purubai being inspired by Gandhi set up an Ashram at Soro. As has already been mentioned, at the root of Thakkar Bapa's dedication and commitment to Orissa, it was only Gandhi's inspiration, that guided them.

Not only that he was worried about the flood or other problems of Orissa, but also he was equally bothered as to how to seek solution for the same. To control the flood problem in Orissa, he invited Vishweshraiya, the most famous engineer of that time to come to Orissa. At his instance he came and stayed for about 12 days, made intensive investigation of the problem by touring extensively. Though at that time his fees per day was Rs.1000/- he did not take a single pie not even his travelling expenses because of Gandhi's special love for Orissa.

**Gandhi's Role in improving the Economic Condition of Orissa**

Gandhi rightly realized that in Orissa apart from natural causes there is a human factor, i.e. the indolent habit of the people responsible for their poverty. He severely criticized the people and seriously thought of how to deal with this problem. His feeling was that the only remedy for eradication of poverty lay in the promotion of Charkha and Khadi work in the villages. His strong conviction was that the spinning wheel is the only means that can provide food and work to the poverty-stricken people.

Therefore on his advice hundreds of Charkha centres were poened in Orissa. He exhorted the Congress workers and leaders to make Orissa "the Khadi store of India". Accordingly Gopabandhu Das, Niranjan Pattanayak and some other leaders tried their best to make Khadi an efficient vehicle for the relief of poverty and flood-stricken people of Orissa. The extension of Charakha centres, production and sale of Khadi undoubtedly helped to solve the problem of unemployment and improve the economic condition of the people. To some extent it also taught the people the ideas of Swadeshi, self-reliance and self-confidence.

In accordance with the instruction of Gandhi a scheme was drawn up to start centres to promote self-sufficiency in Khadi. Spinning wheels were distributed*. With this the Congress workers were able to create love for Swadeshi among the Oriyas. That was a great achievement
of Gandhi. Apart from all this in meetings in his speeches time and again he said; "Orissa is the poorest province in India and this can be easily removed if evenly one uses Khadi." Wherever he went he exhorted his audience to use Khadi only, instead of mill made cloth. At his instance Khadi and spinning exhibitions were organized at different places. During his visits he devoted specific time for the propagation and popularization of Khadi and Charakha.

Not only he professed, propagated, popularized, exhorted and appealed for the use of Khadi to improve the economic condition of the people, but also he arranged funds for the same. The amount which was raised for the All India Spinners' Association in Utkala was quite inadequate. Moreover sometimes Khadi work in Orissa suffered losses. As per rules laid down by the Central Organization such centres were to be closed down. However, the rule was was relaxed in case of Utkala on the advice of Gandhi. At the instance of Gandhi Jivaramji Kalyanji Kothari also contributed one lakh rupees to Gandhi Seva Sangha for Khadi work.

Thus his programme of Charkha and Khadi implemented for the purpose of economic salvation of the province deserves praise and appreciation. It was meant for the employment and general welfare of the masses. Moreover due to his efforts the village industries and handicrafts were revived and developed through the support of the Orissa Government (Congress Ministry).

**Gandhi’s efforts for the removal of untouchability**

Gandhi's relation with Orissa deepened gradually because of his emphasis on his constructive work. He launched his constructive Programme for the socio-economic regeneration of the country. Though Gandhi was an astute politician, he was a social reformer too. At times he remained aloof from politics and preached the idea of eradication of untouchability, emancipation of women, elimination of drink, protection of cow, popularization of cottage industry, promotion of Charakha Khadi etc.

The Harijan movement which he started in Orissa occupies a special place in the social history of modern India. His contributions for the uplift of women and other depressed classes in Orissa was also quite noteworthy.

During the freedom struggle the people of Orissa accepted the Gandhian ideal of social reform. The Harijan movement was one such ideal which helped in the transformation of the Orissa society during the first half of the 20th century. During his third visit to Orissa in 1927 he spoke highly in favour of temple entry of the so called untouchables. He made a settlement with the trustees of the Raghunath temple and entered into it with the untouchables. Earlier in 1925 during his second visit to Orissa at the Utkala Tannery of Madhusudan das, in order to make Gandhi feel happy, the address was presented by the untouchables. As desired by Gandhi during his visit to different places and meetings, he was mostly garlanded by untouchables. At several places he invited the untouchables to dine with him and engaged the Congress and Harijan workers in taking classes and cleaning the Harijan colonies. He personally went to the Harijan colonies and interacted with them. He instructed the upper caste Hindus to maintain contact with the Harijans at personal level. At his instance there were intercaste marriages between the Brahmans and Harijans.

His fifth visit to Orissa in 1934 is most memorable as at that time he undertook the main mission of his life, i.e. Harijan uplift and removal of untouchability. Incidentally this mission was meant for the whole of the country which he
started from the holy land Jagannath Dham Puri in Orissa. This sacred mission he started through Padajatra or foot march with two fold objectives, i.e. (1) removal of Untouchability, (2) collecting money for the Harijan fund. Addressing a big gathering at Kabirpur during the foot march he said that God could not live in a temple where Harijans were not allowed to enter. On another occasion when he was invited to visit the famous Sakhigopal temple where Khadi was exclusively used by the deities, though he was impressed but he declined to go as free access to the temple was not given to the untouchables. However at Balianta he was able to open the Kunjabihari temple to the Harijans. Being inspired by him many Congress workers and leaders opened some temples in their respective areas for the Harijans.

Through various means and methods he collected money for the Harijan Fund. It was because of Gandhi's interest and insistence that Utkala got the larger share than the normal quota from the central fund for the Harijan Sevak Sangha. It was in the interest of Gandhi that the First and Second Congress Ministry in Orissa passed Various Acts for the welfare of the Harijans and removal of untouchability.

The Harijan movement of Gandhi in Orissa was the first step in his programme of breaking down all barriers whatever which divided and distanced man from man.

Gandhi's Impact on Women

Gandhi's visits and contacts in Orissa had tremendous impact on the female community also. A good number of women being influenced by him and his programmes gave up purdah and their secluded life and not only they actively participated in the political programmes and movements but also dedicated their lives to social work in the villages. There was remarkable degree of awakening among them. The most noteworthy among them were Rama Devi, Sarala Devi, Malati Devi who took the lead role under the guidance of Gandhi for the mass awakening of women in Orissa.

There is no denying that Gandhi succeeded to some extent in bringing the problems of Orissa to the attention of others and in generating their goodwill and support for the Oriya people. His considerate and sympathetic views on the Orissa problems, i.e. socio-economic and political proved beyond doubt his genuine concern for Orissa. It was out of his genuine love and sympathetic sympathy for the poverty-stricken people of Orissa, which he described as "the land of sorrows and tears" that he made trip after trip to the land that was "dearest to him in the whole of India". During his several trips to Orissa Gandhi undertook extensive tours even long padajatras, held numerous public and private meetings. At that time apart from explaining the people and convincing them about his programmes and ideologies, his objective was to know and comprehend the grievances of the common people. Moreover through his writings, his speeches, contacts and example of his personal life he won the hearts of the people of Orissa.

Conclusion

Gandhi because of his special concern for Orissa received tremendous support and cooperation from the masses in his political programme of national liberation and his constructive programme for socio-economic regeneration. More particularly the first and second Congress Ministry (1937-1939 / 1946-47) initiated and implemented a number of social and educational welfare programmes according to the ideals of Gandhi and as desired by Gandhi. These programmes included the removal of
untouchability, prohibition scheme and uplift of backward classes, and women and development of basic education. In the light of the above mentioned discussion it may be concluded that Gandhian Contributions to Orissa's socio-economic and political life was immense and most remarkable. It was due to his inspiration that there was general awakening social and political among the masses. It was due to him that the Orissa people began to take greater interest in national problems in politics. Under his leadership Orissa played a vigorous role in the national movement. He made the problems and genuine grievances of Orissa people known to others at various forums and quarters. Through various means and methods he tried to solve the linguistic, cultural and economic problems of Orissa. His leadership qualities and techniques brought the Oriya women from Purdah to public platform. In course of time women played an effective role in the social and political movements of contemporary India.

Notes and References :
2. Utkala Dipika, 18 September 1920
   * On the success of the Salt Satyagraha Movement in Orissa guided by Gandhi Jawaharial Nehru wrote: "My greetings to the people of Utkala. I have heard of their sacrifice and sufferings in the national struggle for freedom. I congratulate them and trust they will carry on the good fight till our motherland is free". Samaj, 4 March 1931.
   * In the Nagpur Congress Session it was agreed to have a separate Congress Committee known as the Uktala Pradesh Congress Committee (at that time when Utkala or Orissa was not a separate province).
5. Young India, 26 December 1928.
   * When Gandhi visited Rangoon, there also he was presented a memorandum by the Oriyas residing there. He justified the faith expressed in him by his remark that "like the head of king Charles I the Oriya problem reappears before me and haunts me in my sleep". Asa, 7 January 1931.
7. Asa, 7 June 1929.
8. Samaj, 8 April 1931.
   * On his recommendation Nilakantha Das was considered to be a member of the Parliamentary Board of the Swaraj Party.
15. Young India, 16 May 1920.
16. Ibid., 26 January 1928.
18. Ibid., pp. 6-17.
   * At the instance of Gandhi by 30 June 1921 Utkala P.C.C. collected Rs.21,000/- for the Tilak Swaraj fund; 39,000 people as Congress members and introduced 16,000 spinning wheels in Orissa. Samaj, 16 July 1921.
19. Young India, 12 May 1920.
   Also in CWMG, Vol.XVII, pp.403-405.
23. Harijan, 2 June 1940.

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