

## Biju and the Media

*Guru Kalyan Mohapatra*

The Indian press has a long history of more than two hundred years. Look at the history: an Anglo Indian James Augustus Hicky brought out the first newspaper in India in 1780, known as 'Bengal Gazette', also known as 'Hicky's Gazette'. The history of journalism in Orissa has also got a glorious and meaningful past. The Christian missionaries have been bragging as they launched the first Oriya 'Gyanaruna' in 1849. In the year 1837, the missionaries established the 'Mission Press' (first printing press) in Balasore and Cuttack. Really, Reverend Lacey brought out this first magazine 'Gyanaruna' for propagating Christian ideas, but this could not survive long. Again Lacey brought out another Oriya magazine 'Prabodh Chandrika' in 1856. Of course, the Oriya stalwarts like Biswanath Kar (the editor of 'Utkal Dipika'), Nilamani Bidyaratna (the editor of 'Sambalpur Hetaisaani'), Brajabandhu Mishra, Damodar Mishra Padyalankar took the reins and played the meaningful role in nourishing and nurturing the press during its infancy. Raja Sudhala Deb and Krishna Chandra Gajapati also proved to be zealous patrons during that period. After enjoying a halcyon period since independence, journalism in Orissa had to pass through a critical juncture in the eighties in the last century.

When I entered into journalism in that critical phase, the Congress was ruling both at

the centre and the state. I vividly marked during the Congress regime that slanderous stories, suspecting Biju Patnaik's loyalty to Orissa were sent to the press. He seemed never puzzled at it. In 1980, I joined the 'Eastern Times', an English Weekly at the behest of Bhartruhari Mahatab and Dr. Harekrushna Mahatab. No doubt, I was a student leader, known for my writings during those days.

Dr. Mahatab's literary personality and Biju Babu's invincible spirit inspired me to choose the profession, inevitably the source of my bread and butter now.

In an article Dr. Mahatab once wrote: "I mention all these factors which are overlooked when comparison is made between Orissa and other states on an all-India level not only with regard to the profession of journalism, but to other professions as well. The scope of journalism as a profession is limited in Orissa. Even then news papers have to be run as they are now a part of the life of the society. All the limitations of the economic and social conditions have to be overcome. In fact, they are being overcome by those who are on the field. But it is gradually becoming difficult to overcome the difficulties created by political considerations of the ruling authorities."

The aforesaid statement of Dr. Mahatab enthused me. I was equally curious to see through the slanderous stories against Biju.

Dr. Mahatab's words and Biju's enigmatic and adventurous spirit influenced me a lot and I jumped at the offer from 'Eastern Times'. I came to the limelight when one of my investigative news stories appeared in the 'Eastern Times'. This front-page story : "Untold story of Indira Gram, Is Prime Minister Taking for a Ride ?" attracted everyone's attention. Indira Gandhi was the Prime Minister and she was coming to Orissa to inaugurate the Indira Gram near Ollatpur in Cuttack district.

J.B. Patnaik was then the Chief Minister who was looking after the Prime Minister's programme in Orissa. The Chief Minister seemed flummoxed in my story, but, on the contrary, as heard from others, Biju Patnaik spoke highly of my attempt.

By and by I came in contact with Biju Babu, who was a towering personality in opposition in the State. I observed him thoroughly from close quarters. His style of functioning was intriguing : he would ask you the news first, if the news annoys him he would rebuke you. I was well aware of his approach and, therefore, never took his spankings seriously. Those were rather blessings in my long way to journalism.

My close observation of Biju Babu puts me in a fix, whether he was a friend or a foe to the press. We all know that he had established one Oriya news paper called 'Kalinga'. Rebel poet late Manmohan Mishra was its first editor and the writer late Surendra Mohanty was his successor. Surendra Mohanty admitted time and again (I have heard him speaking many a time) that Biju had never interfered in editorial freedom. However, he was reluctant to patronise the said newspaper, which met a premature end, in spite

of the fact that it was in popular demand. Many eminent persons of the state insisted upon him not to discontinue the newspaper, but he never listened to them and stood firm in his own decision.

I take this opportunity to corroborate some interesting facts that I have heard from my uncle Nityananda Mohapatra. In 1961 Biju headed the state of Orissa as the Chief Minister and at that time, he had some misgivings against the then newspapers. It was because he had the feeling that some newspapers of the state were misusing their power and freedom. Thus, the 'Press Bill' (1962) was tabled in the Legislative Assembly. Nityananda Mohapatra (an independent member of Orissa Legislative Assembly, then and a minister, later) objected to the Bill with the argument that the Bill once made an Act would be misused and it would also snatch away the freedom of the press. The Bill was, of course, passed smoothly because of the majority game on the floors of the Assembly. But one thing to be noted is that Biju had duly honoured the opinion of the opposition and he had never applied such an act against anybody; no news paper had been penalised so far on the basis of such an act. This is, perhaps, Biju's philosophy of life. He had stood non-committal; accolades and slanders could not affect his long innings in public life. He was a man of action-a 'Karma Yogi'. In his obsession for a clean, responsive polity tuned towards rapid development, he had given many remarks, unpalatable and also, at times, funny. The press was always after him, but he was not. It has been observed for long that the leaders across the world have remained very cautious, measured and, at times, tight-lipped in their interaction with the press. On the contrary, Biju had always been his natural self all through his public life, spanning almost six decades. When the newspapers had come forward to write about him or about his style of functioning, he had shown

no inclination to go through and record his reaction. To sum up, he was never publicity-conscious.

In our quantum jump from print media to the electronic media, there had been a sea-change in our modes and manners. But Biju has remained undeterred - as if the earlier conviction predominated in his psyche. I vividly recollect a TV programme that came my way a few years back. Biju was found narrating his life-story to a group of young school-going kids. In the said programme he was found to be very humorous, vivacious and lively. Anyone, who has an

opportunity to view the programme, must be forced to enjoy the programme vicariously.

In fine, Biju's relationship with the press is typical, which owes our interest. It is to be analysed with care. Biju has remained enigmatic, and so is his relationship with others, especially with the media.

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