Biju Patnaik and National Politics

Prof. Surya Narayan Misra

Late Bijoyananda Patnaik (1916-1997) was born at Cuttack on 5th March, 1916. Both his father late Laxmi Narayan Patnaik and mother late Ashalata Devi were freedom fighters. There was impact of the character and spirit of the father on young Biju Patnaik. He began his education in Mission High School at Cuttack. He passed the entrance examination in 1932 and preferred since study in Ravenshaw College. Besides his interest in studies he exhibited extraordinary capacity in games and sports. He became champion in college meet for consecutive years. After completing I.Sc. he was joining Aeroplane Training College in Delhi. Later he joined Imperial Royal Air Force as a Pilot. He could exhibit both courage and application as Airman.

When young Biju was shaping up, the country was a colony and nationalist struggle under Gandhi's leadership was picking up. Once Gandhi visited Orissa and was scheduled to address at Cuttack. Young Biju was attracted towards the messianic personality of Gandhi and for this he had to incur the wrath of the security personnel at the venue of the meeting. This had a visible impact upon the young mind and he was attracted towards the cause of the freedom fighters. Initially he was in a dilemma as to the path to be followed - a terrorist way or a non-violent path. As a young, dynamic and spirited person he could have chosen the former course for which he had the mentors in his maternal uncles. But he chose the Gandhian way. Even when he was in service in the colonial establishment he could secretly associate himself in air dropping prominent freedom fighters like Jaya Prakash, Ashok Mehta, Rama Manohar Lohia and Aruna Asaf Ali etc. In 1943 Sri Patnaik was arrested due to his anti-British activities and was imprisoned at Red Fort. After serving two years jail term at several places he was freed in 1945. The jail term and his daring activities had already brought him closer to national heroes. His passion to come closer to Gandhi and his political successor Pandit Nehru inducted him into national politics and he associated himself with number of daring acts. During March 1947 when Asian Relations...
Conference was organised at Delhi, the freedom struggle against Dutch in Indonesia was very much in the news. Biju could take a dare devil role in a solo flight to Indonesia along with his wife and could escort the Indonesian leaders to Delhi. The act of associating one risking one's life for one's country was known. But for another country was rarely known. Sri Patnaik by escorting Dr. Md. Hatta and Sultan Sjahir from their place of confinement could exhibit his commitment to the cause of nationalism.

India got independence with a shock. The post-partition Indo-Pak dispute over Kashmir was almost escalated into a war. The initial hesitation of Maharaja of Kashmir delayed military operation. But when the process commenced it was Mr. Patnaik who led the air dropping of our military personnel to the valley. It might have been his first flight to the difficult zone during the tension time. But it was he and his spirit led the way.

When the country began its planned economic development and the process of industrialisation started Biju could think about the future industrial map of Orissa and consequently that of the country. The industries he began at Choudwar was the action of a visionary to develop the zone into a multiplex city with immense possibilities of water and road transport into different destinations.

During the one party dominant era of the Indian National Congress, our State was peculiar in its political reference. There was clear cut division of public opinion in the coastal plain and the western upland. Whereas the public choice in the coastal area was shared among Congress, PSP and CPI, the western upland belonged to Prince group - the Ganatantra Parishad. This political division of 1950s kept our State in low profile and we could not get deserving share out of the national development plan. A State which was having peculiar demographic composition and suffered due to regular natural calamities desired sympathy assistance from the centre. But it was not possible due to political instability. After the elections of 1957 the situation was further deteriorated. The Second Legislature in Orissa was fragile in nature and difficult to run. But Biju helped the political leadership by ensuring outside support of Jharkhand group through personal contact with Jai Pal Singh. When the situation became uncontrollable he could impress upon Pandit Nehru with a novel plan of coalition government between Congress and main opposition Ganatantra Parishad. This could be thought of by a visionary statesman who could think in terms of political stability in the interest of his homestate. Thus he became one of the pioneers of political polarisation in the country as early as 1950s and in fact he played a significant role in combining non-Congress opposition in Orissa in 1970s and later for the country in 1977 and after.

Biju's political leadership gave Orissa the first stable Congress Government. His tenure initiated a number of development projects and some of them were innovative in nature. If we find Sunabeda HAL, Balimela Project, Paradeep Port, Express Highway, Regional Research Laboratory, Regional College of Education, Regional Engineering College and Sainik School in the State, it was due to his national vision and to put Orissa in the national map of India.

Biju Babu was central to the decision on having Paradeep Port when the Central Plan machinery was not positive in its approach. Rightly some one has said that a politician thinks for the next election but a statesman thinks for the next generation. The way Paradeep Port construction started it raised many eyebrows and critics started villifying his image. This could cost him dearly in
the next election. But Paradeep today is the most functional and revenue earning port in the east coast. This port if named after late lamented Biju Patnaik during his centenary will be a fitting tribute to him.

He was a Union Minister under Moraraji Desai in 1977. Whenever Parliamentary debate took place and Government was cornered Biju came to the rescue on number of occasion. His speeches on the floor of the House were full of national flavour and spirit of nationalist statesman. His political opponents feared both his personality and courage of conviction.

In 1989 when Rajiv Gandhi lost the election and V.P. Singh was the hero but political arithmetic was different, it was Orissa Bhawan which became the venue for political consolidation. He helped to arrive at a solution and could prevail upon aspirants like Devilal and Chandrasekhar to accept V.P. Singh as the leader. The way he handled the 1990 Assembly Election alone in the State and provided an all time record vote and seat share could prone his popular support base. During his Chief Ministership both his age and objectives were on the wrong side.

His role as the Chairperson of Austerity Committee and his suggestion for reservation for economically backward irrespective of caste during Mandal agitation gave enough evidence of a visionary Biju. Very few people could up to the level of Biju's level of thinking and expression. But it was also a fact that he was good but his followers were not.

Biju Patnaik was a natural hero and also a national hero. He was popular but not populist. His obsession to see his home state grow in strength to strength confined him to the State since 1985. He did not contest for 1989 election. In post 1996 era there was an opportunity for him to lead the nation but his age and health were on the wrong side. A person who was close associate of the fist Prime Minister and one time adviser on defence matters remained as an idol in the hearts of people but his own class (political circle) had inferiority complex and played negative role whenever an opportunity for him and for his dear home State appeared. He may not be decorated by highest civilian award of the country, but he was really the 'Bharat Ratna'.

Professor Surya Narayan Misra is the Emeritus Professor, KIIT University and lives at 60, Royal Garden, Patia, Bhubaneswar.

Shri Suresh Chandra Mohapatra, Chairman, OCC handing over a cheque of Rs 29 lakh as dividend from OCC to the Hon'ble Chief Minister Sri Naveen Patnaik at Secretariat on 03.03. 2011.