In September 1931, Mahatma Gandhi had attended the Second Round Table Conference held in London. In the Conference he spoke eloquently in favour of granting ‘dominion status’. But the session was soon deadlocked on the minorities issue. The main purpose of his visit – Indian freedom- was pushed to the background. Gandhi reached Bombay on 28 December 1931 and the Congress Working Committee with no option but to make token revival of Civil Disobedience Movement.\(^1\) In response to the call of Gandhiji and the Congress Working Committee, the Civil Disobedience Movement was resumed vigorously in Orissa.\(^2\) When the movement was continuing with a downward tempo, there came a mischievous proposal, Macdoland’s Communal Award of August 1932 for the creation of separate electorates for the untouchables. Gandhiji began a fast unto death on this issue of separate electorate’ on 20\(^{th}\) September, and was able to secure an agreement between caste Hindu and untouchable leader (Poona Pact) by which the Award was modified. In the meanwhile Gandhi was turning the country’s attention to the Harijan cause and this ‘new emphasis’ also made adverse effect on the Civil Disobedience Movement. Even the token revival of Civil Disobedience (Individual Satyagraha) since July 1933 without any attractive programme failed to pick up momentum.\(^3\) Congress of Orissa in August 1932, made all out effort to recover the Congress office from the control of the Government and they were successful in reoccupying Swaraj Ashram at Cuttack and Nari Ashram at Baleshwar. The effort of Mahatab to start no-tax campaign through Krushak Sangh could not be fruitful. But under his stewardship Khadar and spinning centres were organized at different places of Orissa and the Congress activities centered round Gandhian constructive programme till Gandhiji’s advent in Orissa for his Harijan Upliftment campaign.

At the end of Civil Disobedience movement, the Harijan movement had started in right earnest in the country. It had a special

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Gandhi's Padayatra in Orissa and Upliftment of Harijans

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significance for Orissa as Gandhiji began his first famous Padayatra to fulfill the mission in the province. One of the major tasks to which Gandhiji was devoted heart and soul was the removal of untouchability - upliftment of the so-called Harijans, the children of God. Special attention was given to the problem from the time of Communal Award of the British Prime Minister. On this issue, Gandhi undertook fast unto death on 9th September 1932 in the jail and created sensation throughout the country. Many Indian leaders rushed to Pune and finally arrived at a settlement of the communal problem. That was known as the Poona Pact and the British Government also accepted its terms. Gandhiji broke his fast, but decided to pursue the programmes of uplifting the Harijans in right earnest. He started an All India Anti-Untouchability League in September 1932 and the weekly 'Harijan' in January 1933. The week following the end of his 'fast unto death' was celebrated throughout India as Untouchability Abolition Week. On 8 May 1933, Gandhiji began a twenty-one day fast for 'September Purification' on Harijan cause. Sabarmati Ashram was handed over to Harijan Sevak Sangha. In order to promote the Harijan cause Gandhiji covered 12,500 miles in his all-India tour between November 1933 and August 1934. But radical nationalists were not happy as Gandhiji shifted his attention from the main issue like anti-imperialist struggle to Harijan work. So also orthodox Hindus within the Congress did not like his utmost concern for the Harijans. However, Gandhiji's programme of Harijan upliftment while consolidating the socio-political solidarity created a vast base for popular response to the future nationalist cause. His involvement with the cause of the untouchables whom he called Harijans was rooted in deep humanitarianism, planted in him from the very childhood. Gandhiji confessed, "My mother said; you must not touch this boy, he is an untouchable. Why not? I questioned back, and from that day my revolt began. His fight against untouchability was a fight against the impure in humanity."

Gandhiji's fast unto death aroused great anxiety in the millions in Orissa and they breathed a sigh of relief when his 'fast' ended. His total emphasis was to remove all social disabilities of Harijans. All India Harijan Sevak Sangha was formed with G.D. Birla as its President and A.V. Thakar as Secretary. A branch of Harijan Sevak Sangha was organized at Cuttack under the chairmanship of Balunkeswar Acharya, a renowned Kabiraj of Cuttack. Smt. Rama Devi, Laxmi Narayan Mishra and Satyanarayan Sengupta were chosen as Secretaries. Acharya Harihar Das, H.K. Mahatab, Bichitranaanda Das, Radhanath Rath and Gunanidhi Mahanty were its prominent members. All over the country the Civil Disobedience Movement gradually petered out, but in Orissa the sparks and flashes of the Movement remained alive due to Gandhiji's first famous Padayatra for Harijan welfare work which helped indirectly to mobilize the lowest and most oppressed sections of the rural society for the cause freedom struggle. When the movement began to fritter away most of the leaders including Gopabandhu Choudhury, Rama Devi and most of the Congress leaders devoted themselves enthusiastically to the cause of the Harijan welfare movement in Orissa. Mukunda Prasad Das and Bhagabat Mahapatra guided the movement in Baleswer and Bhadrak respectively. Pt. Nilakantha Das and Lokanath Mishra guided the movement in Puri, Nrusingh Guru guided the Sambalpur, Jagannath Das, Fanindra Nath Samal and Narayan Chandra Ghose actively guided the Jajpur. For the promotion of education among the Harijan he promised special aid for Orissa. Many leading Congressmen evinced much interest in Harijan work. In fact, with the gradual
decline of the Civil Disobedience Movement in the province, the Congress volunteers enthusiastically undertook the Harijan work. On behalf of the Utkal Harijan Sevak Sangh, programmees like allowing the untouchables free access to the temples, public ponds and wells, opening of schools and hostels for their children, and teaching them the simple rules of health and hygiene were undertaken with great zeal. The move of Gopabandhu Choudhury, Satyanarayan Sengupta, Radhanath Rath, Raj Krishna Bose and Atal Bihari Acharya to allow the untouchables entry into the temples of Cuttack city was opposed by Parikhit Dash Sharma, the Secretary of ‘Utkal Sanatan Dharma Rakshini Sabha’. Das Sarma asserted that “the removal of untouchability would destroy the Sanatan Dharma.” The move of Nilakantha Das, Lokanath Mishra, Raghunath Mishra for opening the doors of the temple of Lord Jagannath at Puri for the people of all castes was opposed by the Raja of Puri, Mahant of Emar Math, Hariram Goenka and other members of Sanatan Dharma Rakhini Sabha. But in various places of Orissa, gradually more and more temples were thrown open to the Harijans. Subsequently, the caste Hindus employed the Harijans, accepted them and they were encouraged to participate in the public dinners. This process of socialization and interaction made a great impact on both rural and urban life of Orissa. Steps were taken by Rama Devi and Naimavati Devi for the promotion of education among Harijan children. On behalf of Anti-Untouchability Board, Rama Devi and her associates like Mangala Sengupta, Godavaris Das, Sobha Panda, Annapurna Choudhury, Tulasi Mahanty, Manik Devi and Sushila Devi worked with enthusiasm to promote social well-being of the Harijans.

Gandhiji came to Orissa in May 1934 in this connection. On 5 May he reached Jharsuguda. Then he travelled to Meramundali. In both the places he addressed public meetings and collected funds for Harijan welfare. From Meramundali he went to Puri. The next day he spent as his day of silence and on 8th May he announced his novel programme for removal of untouchability from the masses by undertaking Padayatra in Orissa. Like an ancient sage propagating his message by sacred marches on foot throughout the countryside, Gandhiji was determined to root out the evil from the Hindu society by his sacred mission which began from Puri, one of the most famous religion centres of the Hindus in India. On May 1934, the Padayatra began along the Puri-Cuttack road. His party included Amritlal Thakur, Mir Behn, Sushila Behn, Uma Bajaj (daughter of Jamnalal Bajaj), Padmabati Devi (wife of Jaya Prakash Narayan), Balaji Govindji Desai, Damodar Das, Kaka Kalekar, K. Butow (a German Journalist), Gopabandhu Choudhury, Rama Devi, H.K. Mahatab, Nilakanth Das, Raj Krishna Bose, Jadumani Mangaraj, Satya Narayan Sengupta, Bichitranaanda Das, Binod Kanungo, Surendra Pattanaik, Sahadeb Das, Gajendra Nath Das, Nanda Kishore Das, Karunakar Panigrahi and many other workers joined Gandhiji’s Padayatra. Larger and larger crowd followed Gandhiji as he marched on. This famous march was not only a novel experiment in India, but also it provided a unique experience for Gandhiji himself. He realized that by travelling on foot though distance covered was much less, yet greater amount of work was done by coming into intimate contact with people. He hoped that the Congress workers in different parts of India would undertake similar Padayatra to every home. In fact, Gandhiji could personally realize the problems of Harijans when he visited several Harijan habitats in course of his march from Puri to Cuttack. At some places he used to visit Harijan Habitats advising them to discard intoxicants and
follow simple rules of health and hygiene. While addressing the public meetings, he urged the caste Hindus to treat the Harijans as their brothers and to give up the curse of untouchability, and warned that ‘Hinduism will be effaced altogether’ if this evil is not resisted. He visited Gopabandhu Seva Sadan (Kadua Ashram), stayed in its Harijan-boarding, addressed the Brahmans of Purushottampur, who were in favour of the removal of untouchables. At Satyabhamapur, Harijans were invited to dine with the team of Padayatris. At Balianta, Gandhiji performed the ceremony of opening the Conga Bihari temple to all Hindus, including Harijans.

On 16 May Gandhiji went to Patna to attend the A.I.C.C. meeting and again returned to Orissa on 21st May, 1934. On that day he started the second phase of the programme from Bari, and continued his missionary programme till 7 June 1934 when he reached Bhadrak. On the whole he covered 156 miles in coastal Orissa on Foot. For him it was a sort of spiritual experience and he realized the problems in Indian villages by his long 26 days Padayatra in one of the poorest provinces in India. Gandhiji enjoined his followers to carry on his mission in villages where poverty was mythical and untouchability firmly entrenched.

The Harijan movement in Orissa roused the people to a great extent and made them conscious about the social problem of vast magnitude. The Congress leadership also became aware of the village reconstruction programme which, as Gandhiji wanted, must be undertaken in right earnest. The top Congress leaders in Orissa, inspired by Gandhian ideals, devoted themselves whole-heartedly to build some Congress centres in remote rural areas for pioneering Harijan, Khadi and other village reconstruction programmes. The Padayatra of Gandhiji in Orissa for Harijan welfare had a tremendous impact on national life. Despite the formidable resistance of the Sanatanists, the pilgrimage of Gandhiji gave a momentum to the programmes like village reconstruction, Harijan welfare and Khadi throughout Orissa and heralded a new era of social emancipation.

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