

## Mahtab, A Patron of Odishan Historical Research

*Dr. Hemanta Kumar Mohapatra*

During the Quit India Movement, Mahtab was imprisoned in the Ahmadnagar fort along with many national leaders including Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Vallabhabhai Patel. One day Nehru showed Mahtab some lines from Edward Thomson's book "The Beginning of Indian Princes". In this book Thomson depicted Jagannath Temple as a "Notorious Shrine, the uncouth temple where an incomprehensible people revered ugliness as the personification of divine attribute and Brahminism seems to flaunt its differences from all other religions of the modern world<sup>1</sup>". Mahtab was sorry because he had little historical knowledge to counter such an uncalled for view of a foreign historian. Even he could not name a standard book on Odishan history for reference to refute such humiliating version in the book of Thomson. Before Nehru he felt ashamed and from that moment he had decided to explore the history of Odisha in



order to know the ancient history of Lord Jagannath.<sup>2</sup> During his imprisonment Mahtab studied the historical writings of Toynbee, Gibbon and many other historians of essence. And he published the Odia version of his History of Odisha in 1948.

### **Mahtab and Indian History Congress**

When Harekrushna Mahtab was the Chief Minister of Odisha, the 12<sup>th</sup> session of the Indian History Congress along with a special session of Indian Historical Record Commission was held at Ravenshaw College, Cuttack from 25 to 28<sup>th</sup> December 1949. In this session of Indian History Congress prominent historians like R.C. Majumdar, K. K. Dutta,

R.P. Tripathy, D.C. Sarcar, Bisweswar Prasad, K. Alankar participated.<sup>3</sup> This was the first ever all India conference in Odisha and there was euphoria and enthusiasm in the air.<sup>4</sup> Mahtab's welcome address was followed by the keynote

address replete with historical references and literary flash. In the session Nilakantha Das's theory of Jain origin of Sri Jagannath drew the attention of the scholars. His monograph on the origin and socio religious significance of the cult of Jagannath cast a spell over the enlightened assembly of scholars, which hailed it to be an authoritative and philosophical masterpiece of Jagannath. But the colour of the discussion underwent a sea of change when Mahtab refuted the Jain theory of Nilakantha and presented a more convincing and credible theory of Buddhist origin of Sri Jagannath.

Mahtab was a sensible historian no doubt, but by organizing this session of IHC at Cuttack he proved his eagerness for potential research in the history of Odisha. Even when he had lavish pre-occupation as the Chief Minister of Odisha, he took personal interest almost in every matter connected with the gathering. He was present at all its functions. Behind the hosting of this session there was a grand design of Mahtab. In fact he wanted to inaugurate the post-independence phase of Odishan historiography. Apart from providing the scholars of Odisha an exposé to the latest historical trends Mahtab took a series of steps to sensitize, activate and prop up their acumen.<sup>5</sup>

### **Other Initiatives**

Some other activities of Harekrushna Mahtab also showed his interest in historical research in Odisha. In 1949 Mahtab celebrated his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday and on the occasion he donated Rs.25,000/- to the Utkal University for publishing old palm leaf manuscripts.<sup>6</sup> He also accepted the recommendations of the Indian Historical Record Commission for setting up an archive in Odisha. Mahtab was also instrumental in establishing the Orissa State Archive, Orissa State Museum and

Orissa State Archaeology cell at Bhubaneswar. He was also the force behind the excavation work at Sisupalagarh in 1949. Under his guidance and active support Orissa Historical Research Journal was published. This journal provided an excellent forum for the publication of research articles on Odishan history and culture.

He virtually founded the school of Odishan historiography which produced a galaxy of historians like Kedarnath Mohapatra, S.C.Dey, S.N. Rajaguru, Ramesh Chandra Mohapatra, H.C. Das, Nilamani Mishra, Paramananda Acharya and others. By his encouragement original historical source materials in massive scale were brought into light. He also promoted the growth of all round research in history, literature and culture.

### **Mahtab's relation with Odisha History Congress**

The first session of Odisha History Congress (Then entitled as Orissa History Congress) was held in the Utkal University campus, Vani Vihar. Credit for organizing the maiden session entirely goes to Prof Manmath Nath Das and his colleagues. The next session of the OHC was held at Gangadhar Meher College, Sambalpur in 1970. This session was inaugurated by Harekrushna Mahtab. Since then he remained the chief patron of the O.H.C. and continued to participate in its annual session either as a guest or as a delegate till his last days.

During his inaugural address he drew the attention of the scholars about some important issues of Odishan History. He raised a question about the Hathigumpha inscription when he said "Admittedly, the script and language used in the Hathigumpha inscription was a script and language of the whole of Eastern India during that period.

How is it that no other inscription or any reference to the events mentioned in the inscription has been discovered any where in any such connection? Is it that sufficient study has not yet been made of the history of development of Jainism and of all the literature relating to it?<sup>7</sup> He went on questioning other dark areas of Odishan history. On medieval Odisha he questioned, “why and how the development of architecture are suddenly stopped with Konark as the flicker of the candle?” He appreciated the historical research by the scholars in and around the magnificent temples of the Golden Triangle.\* But simultaneously he persuaded the researchers to take up projects on the neglected temples of Keonjhar, Mayurbhanj, Bolangir, Kalahandi and Sambalpur. He was also concerned about the scanty research undertaken so far to explore the history of modern Odisha.<sup>8</sup>

Mahtab also put forward his unhappiness over the distortion of history by manufacturing artificial source materials. He cited instances where myths were presented as history and said “Either the history as based on research is not written in precise words or sometimes emotion gets better of the analytic mind of the historians.” To elaborate, he cited an example how the wrong fixation of boundaries of Orissa has created inferiority complex among the Odias due to emotional writings of so called scholars who failed to distinguish between a king and an emperor or between a kingdom and an empire.<sup>9</sup>

Harekrushna Mahtab also was present in the Puri session of Odisha History Congress, 1972, along with Nityananda Kanungo and Biswanath Das. During this session Mahtab delivered a speech inaugurating the seminar on the prominent freedom fighters of Odisha. Mahtab also attended the Jyoti Vihar, Sambalpur University session of Odisha History congress in 1978.

In his valedictory address of Jyoti Vihar session he pointed out the process of unification of India beginning from the time of Chandragupta Maurya and Asoka. Mahtab also dealt with the problem of reconstruction of Indian history. He also felt the need for reconstructing the ancient and medieval history of Odisha. Mahtab believed that the writing of a complete ancient and medieval Odishan history would require investigation into the ancient and medieval histories of three regions, correlating the frozen past with the ebullient present.<sup>10</sup>

In the Bhubaneswar session of Odisha History Congress, 1979 held at B.J.B. College Mahtab was present along with other prominent guests like Dr. Radhanath Rath, Dr. Herman Kulke and others. In this session instead of delivering a formal speech he presented a paper entitled “The mysterious Jagannath and problems of History of Orissa”. In this paper Mahtab appreciated the publication of the book “The cult of Jagannath and the Regional Tradition of Orissa”, edited combinedly by A. Eschmann, H.Kulke and G.C Tripathy and published from New Delhi in 1978. He called it a masterly work<sup>11</sup>. However he expressed his reservations since the editors had paid no attention to include in the book the full history of the evolution of Jagannath from a tribal deity to the position of an ageless one.

During his presentation of the paper Mahtab answered three questions as regards to Jagannath cult. Such questions were –

- (a) Why was Vasudev exclusively named Jagannath at Puri?
- (b) Why a sister among two brothers is worshipped?
- (c) Why the shape and figures of the images are so unusual and symbolic?

Mahtab had his own explanations to these questions. He thought that the three deities Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra rose to divinity independently of each other by the fusion of various folk cults of the pastoral and agricultural people and in course of time they came together, identified as brothers and sister and linked themselves to the family of the Sattwata clan of the Vishni tribe.

To encourage the historians at a ripe age of 81 Mahtab accepted the invitation of the organizers to attend the Bhanja Vihar Session of OHC in 1980 as the Chief guest. Here also Mahtab presented a paper entitled "Mystery surrounding Sri Chaitanya's Disappearance". His paper apparently revolved round the controversy over the saint's death and disappearance of his material body mysteriously.<sup>12</sup>

Next year (1981) Mahtab attended the Rourkela Session of OHC as the guest of honour. The other guests of this session were Prof. Nimai Sadhan Bose and Prof N.K.Sahu. In this session Mahtab congratulated the members of the OHC for their sincere effort in utilizing the newly discovered source materials and undertaking serious research on many aspects of Odishan history. But he cautioned them against the dilution of the quality of research and deviation from the standard research methodology. He thanked the OHC for bringing out its own Research Journal with the title of Journal of Orissan History (Now, Journal of Odishan History).

At the age of 83 Mahtab attended the Baripada Session of Odisha History Congress in 1982. There he presented a well-prepared speech which dealt with certain important aspects of historiography like dangers of tinctorial research and serious misgivings of the NCERT in its direction for text book preparation and teaching

of history. In this speech Mahtab dealt with exclusively the historiography of India and Odisha. In this last speech of Mahtab to OHC, his sense of dissatisfaction was very much exhibited. The deliberate distortion of history, lack of knowledge in the purpose, treatment and research methodology, and condition of historical investigation in Odisha had disillusioned this elderly statesman – historian. During his speech in the spirit of emotion he lamented saying "On account of these reasons and the atmosphere of research of today, I feel I am completely out of place now. I think it would be better for me to stand at a little distance."<sup>13</sup> His words were prophetic. And the Baripada session was the last one he attended.

Thus Mahtab proved himself a great patron of historical research in Odisha. He himself was a historian of repute and published the magnum opus of Odishan history both in Odia and English. He was very much conscious of the fact that his version of Odisha history was not final and in various occasion called upon the scholars to do intensive research and uncover the ultimate truth. He brought the current of national history to Odisha when on his encouragement and patronization the 12<sup>th</sup> session of Indian History Congress was organized in Ravenshaw college in 1949. By this the young researchers in Odishan history got necessary exposure and were able to be acclimatized with the contemporary trend of Indian historiography. With dedication and sincerity he became instrumental to provide historical research infrastructure to the budding historians of the province. By his effort state archive, museum and a section of archaeology were opened in Bhubaneswar. He provided all the facilities for the excavation of Sishupalagarh. To Utkal University he donated an amount of Rs.25,000/- for preservation of palm leaf manuscripts. Under his guidance the Orissa

Historical Research Journal was published. This Journal went a long way to enlighten a number of dark areas in the history of Odisha. He remained a patron and guide of Odisha History Congress (then known as Orissa History Congress) and himself attended most of the sessions of OHC not only as a guest but also as a participant in the deliberation. Even at the age of 83 he attended the Baripada Session of Odisha History Congress and delivered his illuminative speech touching difficult aspects and problems of Odishan historiography.

### References :

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3. Proceedings of Indian History Congress, 12<sup>th</sup> Session, Cuttack, 1949 P. IX
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5. Odishan historians like S.C Dey, S. Patnaik, P. Acharya, N.K. Sahu and P. Mukherjee Presented their papers, in the 12<sup>th</sup> session of IHC. See- Proceedings of IHC, Cuttack Session, 1949.
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\* The Tourist Circuit of Bhubaneswar, Konark and Puri
8. H.K. Mahtab, Inaugural Address of Sambalpur Session of Orissa History Congress, 1970 (Printed speech)
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12. Ibid, Baripada Session, 1987.
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Dr. H.K. Mohapatra, 23, Ekamra Villa, Jayadev Vihar, Bhubaneswar, Odisha – 751015.