

## Madhusudan Das and Women Uplift

*Dr. Somarani Chand*

The rise, growth and around uplift of the women had been a very significant event in the annals of modern Odisha. After the British occupation of Odisha (1803) slowly and silently a new factor entered into elite psyche in the form of women emancipation for it not only affected the home and personal lives but moulded the national character as a whole.

The first step to achieve the purpose was, 'Literacy'. During the early phase of the British rule though the vast masses of women in Odisha were illiterate, female education was not entirely non-existent. Some zamindars, rajas and aristocratic *karan* and *khandayat* families imparted teaching primarily in three R's to their women members by domestic arrangements<sup>1</sup>. They were not in favour of giving education to women in schools or in any public institution. Rather women were given education to guard their own interests. The observation of Rev. Sutton shows that - Odisha people being



conservative strictly observed the customs like *purdah* and early marriage<sup>2</sup>. From the Quinquennial Report of 1892-97 it is known that the seclusion of women (*purdah*) was a potent obstacle to female education in Odisha<sup>3</sup>.

Even if the Baptist missionaries took steps to teach girls in their school as early as 1836, the girls who read in the schools were Christian converts and did not hail from the Hindu or Muslim families.

In the later part of the 19th century, the renaissance wave swept intellectual Indians. They keenly felt for women education because

socio-cultural resurgence cannot be achieved without educated counterparts. But they had their own obsession with missionary girls' schools. Some Hindu elites in the towns even endeavoured for the establishment of girls' schools.

In 1869, some Bengali gentlemen of Cuttack town started a Hindu Girls' School in

the Balu Bazar residence of Abinash Chandra Chattopadhyaya. For many years Ramdas Chakravarty, the Headmaster of Ravenshaw Collegiate School remained its Secretary. Getting government recognition in 1873, it was named Ravenshaw Hindu Girls School. Yet, despite all individual and government efforts female education didn't prosper as expected till the end of 19th century.

The 20th century in a sense can be regarded as the herald of women's emancipation. The British rule itself according to Marx was the greatest agency, working for social uplift in India. Many cruel rites associated with the life of woman like infanticide, *satee*, child marriage, polygamy etc. were abolished during the British period through government enactments and legislations<sup>4</sup>. On the whole, a new era of social reconstruction came in popular life in general and women resurgence in particular under the enlightened socio-educational policy.

Coming to Odishan socio-educational scenario, we find the emergence of a group of Odia intellectual ladies who came forward with the flag of general awakening of Odia women. Prominent among them included Reba Ray, Sailabala Das, Kuntala Kumari Sabat, Sarala Devi, Rama Devi and Malati Devi who made their efforts in reforming the society and raising the standard of female education through various means and methods<sup>5</sup>. At this juncture to precipitate the process in 1896, as a member of Bengal Legislative Council, Madhusudan Das tried much for the growth of female as well as general education<sup>6</sup>.

The name of Madhusudan Das by this time had become a familiar household name in Odisha for his radical pragmatic approach to socio-political-economic conditions of Odisha. Being the first Odia graduate of Odisha, his words

and deeds had charismatic influence on the Odia psyche.

Being born and brought up in a traditional Hindu family, two traits of his character became very prominent with the advancement of age<sup>7</sup>. One was his reverence towards mother who was an incarnation of divinity of him. Even in his ripe old age he was choked with tears of respect when he spoke of his mother. Repeatedly he alluded that it was his mother who taught him the rudiments of high personal character to keep one's own dignity. The second trait was his love and regard for the poor. He had an open heart where there was the flow of fraternity even for a rustic ordinary fellow.

In addition to being the successor of a proud *Satee*, great grandma (Krishna Dei), Madhusudan held high esteem for the opposite sex of the society. He never forgot that he had the blood of a great-*satee*-grandma and carried the torch of that lesson throughout his career.

In his 29th year, his partner of life - the noble divinity who nursed and fed the poor (Soudamini Devi) left him. In those days, for men of his education among the Hindus of Calcutta and also among the Christian community, offer of a beautiful girl and a dowry of Rs. 50,000/- came from several quarters. "Yet he remembered the brethren of the land of his birth, how they were suffering under vices of ignorance and poverty. He decided in the name of the partner of his life to relieve the distress of the poor, to bring the light of education and learning to his countrymen"<sup>8</sup>.

The influence of motherly love had such a hypnotic charm on his mind that in 1901 when Lord Curzon refused to meet him in Shimla, he made the persistent appeal in the name of a race which had been unjustly treated in the name of 'Mother Odisha' and a daughter in exile<sup>9</sup>. And he showed that the gulf of administration separated the mother from the daughter and how the Odia

race suffered so badly. He triumphed and with him dawned the era of 'Mother-Daughter Uplift' chapter in Odisha society.

First of all, the chains of superstition, social restrictions and dogmas were to be broken. It could only be done with the spread of higher education among women. Liberation of women from the disabilities or disqualification of sex was one of the most important programmes of Madhusudan Das' public life<sup>10</sup>. He worked for redeeming women from the shackles of the 'zenana' and wanted them to be equals of men in every walk of life for which higher education was conditional precedent. That is why he wanted to set the example within his own family who would show the beacon of light to other distressed females.

Miss S. B. Das (daughter of his college friend Ambika Charan Hazra) was the adopted daughter of Madhusudan Das. He made her his own child and educated her abroad with the result that she became a prominent figure in Bihar and Odisha in advancing the cause of Indian women. As a matter of fact, she was Indian by birth and Odia by choice.

While Miss Das was in England, it was decided to have her presented at the court of His Majesties King Edward and Queen Alexandra. The question arose as to presentation of her court dress. And she insisted on following the Indian tradition and was thus the first Indian lady at the Royal court in her *sari* and paid her homage by making *pranam* to the royal couple. Not only the London illustrated papers but also the continental journals featured her in her Indian dress that shows the determination of the lady and her mentor for the preservice of Indian tradition.

Now started her active public life at Cuttack after coming back from England. Ravenshaw Hindu Girls' School from 1887 to 1906 passed through many ups and downs. In

1907, the –then Inspector of Schools after inspecting the school opined that it would be very difficult for the survival of the school even at the primary level<sup>11</sup>. So the members of the Management Committees asked for timely suggestion of Madhusudan who took the responsibility and entirely reshaped the Management Committee. Sailabala who was now at Cuttack, became the first lady Principal and President of the Committee. Gopal Praharaj also refers how Mr. Das helped Miss Sailabala in starting the Ravenshaw Hindu Girls High School which was then an infant school. For sometime Praharaj himself worked under Miss Das as Assistant Secretary of the institution and both of them got invaluable help from Madhusudan<sup>12</sup>. Due to his endless efforts the school got immense help from government and private level. The flow of charity also came from rulers of *Garhjat* states. In 1909, the first student from the school appeared privately under the Calcutta University. In 1910, as full-fledged Girls' school it got recognition from the University. The credit for the same goes to a great extent to none else but the pioneering advisor Madhusudan Das.

In 1909, while delivering a lecture in Bengal Council, he told that in Bankipur and in Calcutta only there was provision for the training of lady teachers. In Odisha, there was better scope for the women education, but no steps had been taken till then. Early marriage was of course the main obstacle. But the government had a definite responsibility in this regard. The wives of magistrates should not inspect the schools because neither they made proper inspection nor they showed any interest for the spread of women education. Rather those guardians who sent their daughters for education and were actively involved in school development, should be the members of Managing Committee. Referring to the Literacy chart of 1901, he showed despite several hurdles, the educated ladies of Odisha

were double the number than in Bihar. Yet, the Bengal Government sent one lady to England in government expense to get training on women's education whereas in Odisha only one lady went for that same training to England and that too on private basis. She was Miss Sailabala Das. Even after her return, she had successfully managed the affairs on one Girls' school in Odisha which as per the Bengal School Inspector's report was the real institution for the spread of education in Odisha. Odisha now requires more number of trained mistresses for the growth of women education. While in Bengal and Bihar the government was taking steps for that, Odisha was lagging behind.

A letter from Mr. Egrten<sup>13</sup> shows that he assured him to get some statistics on the crime of infanticide etc. among the young women on the basis of his letter to him. This shows the real concern of Madhusudan for women's uplift because till then education was accessible to a microscopic few.

In this connection reference might be made to the visit of Miss Carrie. This gifted American lady had been touring as an honorary travelling representative of the Hindu Marriage Reform League of Calcutta<sup>14</sup>. She came to Cuttack in connection with the establishment of a branch of the league at Cuttack with the following objects.

- To raise the marriageable age of the boys and girls and to spread education among girls on a wider scale.
- To minimise marriage expenses and abolish dowry system.
- To create public opinion on the question of marriage reforms by means of lectures, pamphlets and tracts etc.

An over-enthusiast, Sailabala with the timely advice of Madhusudan Das, called for a Women's Conference (consisting of aristocratic

native and foreign ladies)<sup>15</sup>. The adverse effect of early marriage, problems in women's education etc. were widely discussed in the meeting. The ignorance of the native ladies to follow English was keenly felt. So on one side it was decided for mass English education for the Indian ladies and also vernacular learning for the foreigners. The Marriage Reform Committee fixed 25 years and 16 years as age limit for boys and girls respectively. This shows the very practical attitude of Madhusudan Das who always acted as a force behind the spirit of Sailabala.

In 1913, while delivering a lecture on women's education he told that it was the general impression of Occidental people that all women of Hindu and Muslim families in India generally led the lives of houses imprisonment on the basis of *Zenana* custom. "At present though I am not a Hindu, but I have grown up in a Hindu *Zenana* family. I can tell without any hesitation that *Zenana* system is not at all a system of house imprisonment. As a matter of fact, both Hindu and Muslim ladies treat the house as a temple of family integrity, sanctity and universal fellow-feeling. Indian families till date had not been affected by the foreigners. So in the field of women's education in India, the interference of the foreign government or foreign officers were uncalled for".

He also referred to handicraft training for all. While planting a tree, we must take into consideration the soil, air and water of the place. Otherwise the plantation may come to a naught. Similarly to make our hands active proper training is required. A vehicle does not run only on petrol or horse power of its engine. It also needs wheels to move on. With these examples, he stressed upon proper coordination between hand and brain which real education should aim at.

The following statistics very well indicates the then condition of women's education in

Odisha<sup>16</sup>. For example, there were three colleges in Bengal, five colleges in United Provinces, whereas in Bihar and Odisha there was none. In 1913, 101 girls from Bengal and 55 girls from U.P. qualified for the Under Graduate course. It was, therefore, shocking that coming in contact with higher ideals and higher education, the Odias could not sweep away their dogmatic approach.

Madhusudan simply could not tolerate this. Having high esteem for women, he did not want them to suffer from socio-political ills under the umbrage of sex-disqualification. Speaking on a special resolution on franchise for women in Bihar and Odisha Legislative Council on 23rd November 1921, he said.

‘It is the disqualification which I object to. Burn and destroy the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* if you are going to say that women of India are disqualified. Destroy the *Mahabharata* or *Ramayana*- because without Sita there would be no *Ramayana* and without Draupadi there would be no *Mahabharata*<sup>17</sup>’.

Thus, he tried all his life for the uplift of Indian women and among his many valuable services may be recalled his securing for them the right to practice in the Indian courts of law which was not acknowledged till then. Miss Regina Guha was the first Indian qualified legal practitioner, who tried to be enrolled in the Calcutta High Court but failed in 1916. Even though Sex Disqualification Removal Act was passed in England in 1919 making the English Women at par with their male counterparts in England, in India it was still a distant dream for the socio-economic barriers imposed upon Indian women.

A similar thing happened in case of Miss Sudhanshubala Hazra (sister of Sailabala Das) to whom the Patna High Court did not grant permission to practice under the law as it then stood.

Hon’ble Chief Justice Mr. D. Mitter rejecting the appeal in April 1922 wrote, ‘x x x The decision we arrived at was one which was necessary to come to before we could determine whether or not Miss Hazra could be admitted as a pleader. It was all part and parcel of an Administrative Act and that being so I cannot see how we can grant leave in this case because it is the matter which lies solely within the jurisdiction of their Lordships of the Privy Council and this Court has no power to make the order. I request that this should be so, but I think Miss Hazra could have been better advised had she proceeded immediately to the Lordships of the Judicial Committee to ask for special leave.’

On 24th November 1922, under the caption, “Indian Lady’s Appeal against Patna Decision,” an article was published in Englishman Magazine: “The Judicial Committee of the Privy Council has granted special leave of appeal on the petition of Sudhansubala Hazra, B.L. (Calcutta) whose application for enrolment as a pleader was refused by the High Court of Patna on grounds of sex.”

The credit for this achievement which removed a serious sex discrimination and enabled the women of India to practice in courts of law was largely due to the agitation carried on by Madhusudan Das on behalf of Miss Hazra. Thus, he made her the first lady legal practitioner of India.

The undated speech of Madhusudan on the floor of the Senate refers to the following resolution:

‘The Senate recommends to Government that I.A. classes for girls be opened at Bankipur Girl’s School from July 1925. The educational needs of this province are increasing by leaps and bounds. It is only a modest corollary of the proposal that shall have to be ultimately adopted in furtherance of our growing educational

requirements. Our University is academically complete and self contained without suitable provision for the higher education of our girls. He cited the examples of Miss Nrityalila Chatterjee, Miss Indira Gupta and a married Hindu Behari lady- all the three above could not avail higher education, for Calcutta University was pretty distant from them. To me it is truly pathetic that these girls and other like them should be lost to their original Almamater.....

‘Incidentally I may mention here that we keenly want more lady doctors for this province. The establishment of I.A. classes for girls is therefore a necessary adjunct of the medical college about to be inaugurated in immediate future. Also, to enable the girls to pass the L.T. examination and to be qualified as efficient lady teachers, one must pass I.A. examination. In educational matters the Government owes a sacred duty alike to our boys as to our girls and that the money that is being spent for higher female education is absolutely microscopic.....

I think I cannot better conclude my humble observations than by reminding you of the word of the poet.

‘Woman’s cause is Man’s. They rise or sink together.

Dwarf or God like, bonded or free.’<sup>18</sup>

Madhusudan died in 1934. Till his last breath he took keen interest in all matters relating to women’s welfare, women’s education and uplift. In this connection Sudhansubala Hazra refers to one incident. Once when Madhusudan was in Calcutta, she told him that an Odia girl was in Christ Church Girl’s School when she herself was there between 1906-07. At once, he became interested in the matter and desired to see her. He told Sudhansubala that he was so very anxious to see her because she was an Odia and everything connected with Odisha had a special place in his heart of hearts. He was so pleased to see an Odia girl seeking to educate herself.

Whether as a social worker or a promoter of educational and industrial expansion or a champion of political rights and privileges, Madhusudan was always very clear and steadfast till his last. Thus, he stood firm like a rock, true to his principles and ideas and never compromised his position or prestige for a mess of pottage.

### References :

1. *Utkal Dipika*, 21st May, 1881 & 4th Nov. 1882.
2. Sutton, Rev. A., *Odisha and its Evangelization*, Derby, 1850.
3. *Odisha Historical Research Journal* (OHRJ), Vol. XV. Pp. 121-123.
4. Sharma, B. K., Women and Social Change in British Orissa in *Berhampur University Research Journal*, Vol. II.
5. OHRJ, Vol. XXXVIII, p.8.
6. Mohapatra, C. S., *Madhubabu : The First Odia* (Odia), 1980, p. 42.
7. Das, S.B. Ed., *Life of Madhusudan Das as seen by many eyes*. p. 58.
8. *Ibid*, p. 80.
9. *Ibid*, p.84.
10. Mohanty, S. *Madhusudan Das*, NBT, New Delhi, 1975, p. 112.
11. Mohapatra, C. S. op. cit. p. 66
12. Das, S. B., op. cit, p. 91.
13. D.O. No. 223, dt. 11.09.1912, Commissioner of Odisha to Madhusudan Das.
14. *Utkal Dipika*, 10.02.912
15. *Ibid*, 02.03.1912
16. *Ibid*, 18.04.1912
17. Proceedings of Bihar-Odisha Legislative Council, 1921.
18. File Acc. no. 2069, Odisha State Archives

---

*Dr. Somarani Chand, Reader, P.G. Department of History, Utkal University Vani Vihar, Bhubaneswar.*