

## Madhusudan Das : The Pride of Odisha

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**M**adhusudan Das, popularly known as Madhu Barrister, respectfully regarded as Mr. Das and nationally esteemed and addressed as 'Utkal Gaurav' was the moving spirit for about half-a-century in the political, economic and social life of Odisha. As the third child of his parents, Choudhury Raghunath Das and Parvati Devi, Madhusudan was born on 28<sup>th</sup> April, 1848, in Satyabhamapur, a little-known village in the district of Cuttack. Mother Parvati Devi had molded the emotional life and character of young Madhusudan, and had left her imprint on his personality. "You alone can keep your own honour," she had impressed upon Madhusudan from his childhood. This golden maxim Madhu Babu had remembered all through his life and was guided by it whenever situations necessitating compromise with honour or principles arose.

After completing his early middle vernacular school in the nearby village of Mahasingpur, Madhusudan went to Cuttack for high school education and passed the Entrance (Matriculation) Examination in 1864. His father



insisted on Madhusudan's seeking his fortune in some Government office but Madhusudan wanted to get higher studies at Calcutta. He passed B.A. and M.A. in 1870 and 1873 respectively from the Calcutta University. However, having passed B.L in 1878, he started practicing law at Alipore Court. With the sad demise of his wife in 1878, Madhusudan did not feel like continuing to stay at Calcutta any longer. He returned to Cuttack in September, 1881 after a long spell of fifteen years, an anonymous lawyer with the myths of the "first graduate", the "first M.A." and the "first Advocate of Odisha", wreathed around him.

Madhusudan's appearance at the Cuttack Court heralded a new era in the history of Odia nationalism. By education, training and temperament he was most sensitive to the contemporary issues concerning the Odia speaking people. Their stark poverty, humiliation, and sufferings created a deep scar in his mind. In trying to find out a prompt remedy he painfully observed the apathy

of the administration, the political dismemberment of the race, the absence of adequate economic opportunities and the lack of proper education. He had learnt the liberal philosophy of John Stuart Mill, and studied about the unification movements in Italy and Germany. These lessons of history were not lost upon him. He resolved to save the people from the stupor of ages through education and political union.

The Utkal Sabha or the Odisha Association was formed in 1871 to promote Odia language and literature. Gopal Chandra Dutt, a domiciled Bengali was its first Secretary. Madhu Babu closely associated himself with Gouri Shankar Roy, the editor of Utkal Dipika and secretary of Utkal Sabha. In course of time the Sabha concerned itself more and more with specific problems of the Odia-speaking people instead of general issues concerning India. Madhusudan's stewardship was probably responsible for this new orientation. In 1885 he was the Secretary of Utkal Sabha and Vice-President from 1888.

In November, 1885, when Sir Richard Thompson, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal visited Odisha, Utkal Sabha gave a memorandum to him demanding the merger of Sambalpur and Ganjam with Odisha Division. To the second session of the Indian National Congress, held in December, 1886 the Utkala Sabha sent four delegates-Madhusudan Das, Golak Chandra Bose, Hariballabha Ghose and Kalipada Banerjee. Madhu Babu was the harbinger of Congress ideas and activities in Odisha. He also tried to raise the question of amalgamation of Odia-speaking areas in the forum of the Indian National Congress. In November, 1888, on the occasion of the visit of Sir S.C. Bayley, the lieutenant Governor of Bengal to Odisha, the Utkal Sabha presented a memorial, demanding

the unification Odia-speaking territories. In his reply to the memorial, Bayley turned down the demand.

In 1895 the Chief Commissioner of the Central Provinces decided to abolish the Odia language from official use in the district of Sambalpur. Such a decision against the interest of the majority of Odia population in the district raised a storm of protest not only in that district but also throughout Odisha. On 20<sup>th</sup> June 1895, the Utkal Sabha sent a memorial to Lord Elgin, the Governor General, protesting against that unjust and arbitrary measures. It was observed that the denial to the people of the use of their mother tongue was worst form of gagging and was unknown even in the most despotic form of government. In 1901 some leading men of Sambalpur suggested Sir Andrew Fraser, the Chief Commissioner of the Central Provinces, that "If it was thought impossible to have Odia as the language of the Central Provinces' district, they would prefer to be transferred to Odisha". Madhusudan, who was then a member of the Bengal Legislative Council, wrote to Lord Curzon that the people of Odisha fully supported the memorial submitted to Sir Andrew Fraser and it was their desire that the Odia territories should be placed under a Chief Commissioner. However, the matter was not settled at that time though Odia was restored to its rightful place in the district of Sambalpur from 1<sup>st</sup> January 1903. By the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century the constitutional agitation in different parts of the Odia-speaking territories had started and Madhusudan played a key role in rousing public enthusiasm on this vital issue.

One of the most outstanding and singular achievement of Madhu Babu was the organization of the Utkal Union Conference or Utkal Sammilani on the 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> December, 1903 which became the leading socio-political

organization through which Odia nationalism found a proper forum for expression. It consisted of the ruling chiefs, officials and non-officials having moderate views. The first session of this Conference was presided over by Maharaja Sriram Chandra Bhanja Deo, the illustrious king of Mayurbhanj (State). Madhusudan Das was the Secretary of the Conference. The President emphasized the main objectives of the Utkal Union Conference (1) for political progress to unite the scattered Odia-speaking people, (2) for economic progress to develop the industrial potentiality of Odisha and (3) for social progress to ensure the spread of general, technical and female education. Representatives from all the Odia-speaking tracts under Madras, the Central Provinces and Bengal Governments as many as thirty kings and princes from the Odia feudatory States under the above provinces assembled at Cuttack with high hopes and in great jubilation. Since then the Utkal Union Conference became a common platform for the Odias and synonym of their national aspirations. Every year thereafter during December the annual sessions were held at different places drawing together politically minded persons, the elites, the princes and the peasants to discuss common problems and suggest remedies.

In the year 1907, he went to England to convince the British for the utter necessity of unification of the Odia-speaking areas. Lord Curzon supported the cause of Odias in the House of Lords and Mac Cold Scot took the cause of Odisha in the House of Commons. Consequently, Odia-speaking tracts were separated from Bengal to come under the province of Bihar and Orissa, formed in 1912. The formation of the Province of Bihar and Odisha was a far cry and Madhusudan continued to carry on the movement for the ultimate realization of his mission.

The Utkal Union Conference during its existence from 1903 to 1920 shows that it concerned itself with problems like (i) Union of the scattered Odia-speaking people, (ii) development of industrial potentialities, (iii) spread of education, (iv) improvement of agriculture, (v) extension of railways and roads, (vi) more representation of Odia members in the Legislative Councils and Imperial Council. Political unification of the scattered Odia-speaking tracts was accorded first priority in the agenda of the conference. Madhusudan Das as the moving spirit of the Utkal Sammilani, advocated for industrialization, growth of local crafts and spread of technical training as essential measures to remove poverty. Revival of the salt manufacturing industry and exploitation of natural resources were some of the proposals he wanted the Govt. to undertake. At the time of annual sessions, he organized industrial and agricultural exhibitions to expose people to new ideas and techniques.

Madhusudan's leadership and hold over the Utkal Union Conference during 1903 to 1920 was highly beneficial to the cause of the Odia-speaking people. The conference drew closer like-minded persons devoted to the cause of political unification. All round welfare of the Odia people was the chief goal of Madhusudan. During his visit to England in 1907, he distributed a pamphlet called "Discontented India" in a press conference, presenting there the genuine problems of India with particular reference to Odisha. In all possible ways till his death, he tried to convince the British authorities, the necessity for merger of all Odia-speaking tracts. In the year 1917, when Edwin Montague, the Secretary of State of India, came to India to ascertain the political views of Indians, Madhusudan led a deputation and demanded the merger of all Oriya-speaking areas in Sub-Province. In December, 1917, he brought out a weekly journal, titled 'The Odia' for

ventilating the grievances of the Odias. He was very genuine and emphatic in his voice and action.

As a legislator, Madhu Babu acclaimed a commendable height of wide appreciation and position. He was elected a member of the Imperial Council or the Indian legislative council from the Bihar and Orissa legislative council on January 20, 1913 and sat in that august assembly till 1916. He was appointed as Minister in the Bihar and Orissa Government in 1921 but resigned in 1923 on the issue of making the post of Minister non-salaried and honorary. Spread of higher education among women was another noteworthy aspect of Madhusudan's social reform activities which deserves particular mention. Liberation of women was one of the most important programmes of Madhusudan's public life. He worked for redeeming women from the shackles of the "Zenana" and wanted them to be equals of men in every walk of life. Through his effort, a Girls' High School was started in 1908, in Cuttack, to teach the girls up to the matriculation standard.

Madhusudan held women in great esteem. He did not want them to suffer under social, economical or political disabilities under the umbrage of sex-disqualification. Speaking on a Special Resolution on franchise for women in the Bihar and Orissa Legislative Council on November 23, 1921, he had said "It is the disqualification which I object to.

Madhu Babu paid sufficient attention for industrialization of modern Odisha and tried his best for revival of our indigenous cottage industries. He established 'Odisha Art Wares' for manufacturing highly artistic filigree products which

earned reputation for its brilliance and excellence in designs, presentation and craftsmanship. In course of time, the delicate filigree works of the Orissa Art Wares became internationally famous and used to be marketed to the fashion capitals of Europe. He had manufactured improved 'Charkha' for spinning of the yarn from the cotton, which had attracted the attention of Mahatma Gandhi. Besides this, he started from the year 1905 the export orientated venture of 'Utkal Tannery' in close association with the subjugated untouchables. The quality of the products manufactured by Utkal Tannery were of such a high standard that the boots manufactured by Utkal Tannery were used by the Soldiers during the First World War. Gandhi was overwhelmed on visiting the Utkal Tannery at Cuttack in 1925.

Thus, Madhu Babu was the moving spirit for about half a century in the political, economic and social life of Odisha. He breathed his last on 4<sup>th</sup> February, 1934. Odisha was about to emerge as a separate entity in the body politic of India. But the architect of new Odisha was not there to guide its destiny any more. But his immense contributions towards the State and Nation would be admired forever and he will continue to remain as a source of motivation for the younger generations.

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