

Biju Patnaik, The Unique Mass Leader of Orissa

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His life was a story of struggle, sacrifice and achievements. In his childhood he once broke the police cordon to touch an aeroplane. As a football player, he always dominated the playground. He could swim across the river Mahanadi in spate. As a student in Ravenshaw College he undertook an adventurous journey by bicycle from Cuttack to Peshwar, a distance of 4500 miles. As a pilot he displayed exemplary skill and courage by bringing revolutionary leaders from Indonesia in face of stiff opposition from the Dutch. He was no other than Bijayananda Pattnaik, popularly known as Biju Babu, the foremost mass leader of modern Orissa.

As a dreamer he dreamt of a progressive and prosperous Orissa in which the glory of the days of Emperor Kharavela would be revived. He recalled the days when it was the greatest empire of India extending from the Ganga to the Godavari. Its army had defeated Alexander's Greek Army and had thrown them across the border of India. Kalinga was the largest maritime power ever known in the world whose merchant-sons had to brave the rivers and seas to establish commercial trade link with Java, Sumatra, Bali, Borneo and many other South East Asian countries and made the Kalinga Empire affluent. The epoch also witnessed a galaxy of architectural marvels at Puri, Konark and Bhubaneswar.



Biju Babu was a patriot par excellence. It seems that his mother Asha Devi had moulded the emotional life and character of young Biju and had left her imprint on his personality. Her advice was, "Beginning from the dust every object of this world is working for the benefit of human beings. You will also work for the human society". At a later stage he was profoundly influenced by Gandhiji's trumpeting call to free India from the British rule and came forward to associate himself with the underground movement led by Jayprakash Narayan and Ram Manohar Lohia in 1942. He was arrested on 13.1.1943 and was put behind the bar for two years. Soon after his release from jail in 1945, Biju Babu appeared as a vibrant leader in the political firmament of Orissa.

In the year 1946 Biju Babu was elected uncontested to the Orissa Legislative Assembly from North Cuttack Constituency. In 1952 and 1957 he won from Bhanjanagar and Jagannath Prasad respectively. On 13 February 1961 Biju Babu assumed the presidentship of the State Congress. The over all responsibility of the Congress Party in fighting the mid-term election in 1961 was that of Biju Patnaik. The Congress Party captured 82 seats out of 140 securing 45% of the total votes polled and he won from Choudwar Constituency. The poll verdict was astounding and as a reward for securing absolute majority for the Congress first time in the Legislature, Biju Babu took over as the Chief Minister on 23 June, 1961. In 1967 he unsuccessfully contested but the next year he was nominated to the Rajya Sabha. In 1971 he contested from four Assembly constituencies and one Lok Sabha Constituency as a candidate of his newly formed regional party named Utkal Congress but lost the election. In spite of successive defeats he was firm and headstrong.

Biju Babu was elected to the Orissa Legislative Assembly in 1971 in a by-election from Rajnagar. In 1974 he won from Patkura and became the Leader of the Opposition. In 1977 he won from the Kendrapara Lok Sabha Constituency and became the Union Minister for Steel & Mines from 1977 to 1979 and Union Minister for Steel & Mines and Coal from July 1979 to January 1980. He was the Member of the Lok Sabha from 1980-85. In 1985 he resigned his Lok Sabha seat to contest from the Bhubaneswar Assembly Constituency and became the Leader of the Opposition in Orissa Legislative Assembly. In 1990 Assembly Polls he steered his party Janata Dal into victory and became the Chief Minister of Orissa for the second time. It is worth mentioning that his party could secure 123 seats out of 147 and reduced the main opposition party strength to 10 as against the required number of 15. Biju Babu contested the 12th Lok Sabha election (1996) from Aska and Cuttack Constituencies and won both the seats. Later on he resigned from Cuttack Parliamentary seat.

Biju Babu's first spell of Chief Ministership lasted for only 15 months but during this short period he made a mark in the history of Orissa by giving his people a powerful and efficient administration. He sought to inject a rare dynamism into the administration and lifted the featureless and futureless people of Orissa out of the slough of despondence. He succeeded in setting up the Paradeep Port, the MIG factory at Sunabeda, a Thermal plant at Talcher, the Express Highway connecting the iron ore deposits of Sukinda with Paradeep, Balimela Hydrel Project, Engineering College of Rourkela, Sainik School and Regional College of Education at Bhubaneswar and Orissa University of Agriculture and Technology at Bhubaneswar.

The name of Kalinga was so dear to the heart of Biju Babu that he set up Kalinga Tubes, Kalinga Airways, Kalinga Iron Work, Kalinga Refractories and the Kalinga, a daily Oriya Newspaper. In 1951 he established the international Kalinga Prize for popularization of Science and Technology among the people and entrusted the responsibility to the UNESCO.

Biju Babu was well aware of the fact that Orissa was a poor and backward state in the country inspite of having a good deal of natural resources and its reason was the lack of proper planning for development. He set up the State Planning Board and a number of Public Corporations. Ayodhya Nath Khosla, the internationally reputed engineer as the Governor of Orissa gave a helping hand to Biju Babu in formulating the development of the river basin of Orissa, by preparing a ten-year plan popularly known as the Decade of Destiny.

During the second term of Chief Ministership from 5.3.1990 to 15.3.1995 Panchayati Raj movement gained momentum under his dynamic leadership. He took a revolutionary step to reserve 33 percent of seats for women in the three tiers of the Panchayat Raj system and subsequently Orissa Zilla Parishad Act of 1991 and the Gram Panchayat Samiti Amendment Act of 1992 were passed by the Orissa Legislative Assembly, which provided for 33 percent of reservation for women including S.C. and S.T. women. Further provision was

made so that one third of the Zilla Parishad would have inclusively women Chairpersons. In the case of Panchayat Samities and the Gram Panchayats one of the two office-bearers, i.e. Chair Person or Vice-Chair Person in case of Samiti and Sarpanch or Naib-Sarpanch in case of Gram Panchayat must be a woman. As a mark of his profound love for Panchayati Raj institution the people of Orissa observe his birth day (March 5) as Panchayati Raj Divas.

Many of his dreams remained unfulfilled. He was rightly honoured by the Indonesian Government with the highest citizen award of that country *Bhumiputra*. The 'Son of the Soil' breathed his last on 17th April 1997 at the age of eighty-one. The whole country was stunned. Message condoling his death and eulogizing his contributions started pouring in from far and near. Manoj Das the eminent writer and thinker wrote on his sad demise, "Perhaps Biju Patnaik was having a developed inner-self which was known to a very few of his fellow beings. He seems to have achieved many things in one life which might be impossible to achieve in a number of lives".

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