

## Biswanath Das, Patriot With A Difference

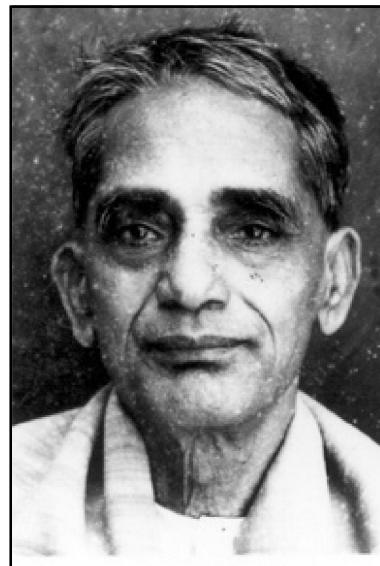
*Gurukalyan Mahapatra*

The people of Orissa even today remember Biswanath Das as a patriot and ace administrator who once dominated Orissa politics during the pre-independence period. In his role as a Prime Minister of Orissa or a Governor or Chief Minister, he always emphasized on morality, character building, honesty and integrity. Very few politicians of our state rose to the national level in the past. He was one of them.

Commenting on Biswanath Das, former Union Steel Minister late Kumar Mangalam once said, 'he is the only person in the country at whose character no accusing finger can be pointed out.'

Biswanath Das was born in Belagan village of Ganjam district (Orissa) in 1889. Some say that he was born on 8th March in that year and others claim that his date of birth was 21st April in the same year. However, it is upto the historians and research scholars to find out the exact date of birth.

Biswanath, in his early life was educated at Cuttack. He was a school student of the then Victoria High School (now it is Bhakta Madhu Vidyapitha). Subsequently, he was educated in



Revenshaw College and Calcutta University. He was attracted to the personality of Utkal Gaurav Madhusudan Das, who was then a renowned lawyer in Orissa and West Bengal. After completing studies he used to go to Madhu Babu regularly and got himself involved to the legal profession. He preferred to be a junior advocate under Madhu Sudan Das. After some time he returned back to Berhampur and started the legal practice independently.

In the meantime, he entered public life. It was his ambition. By that time, the landlords and zamindars were oppressing the royats or farmers. Biswanath organised them and formed an union of Royats in the northern district of Madras Presidency. Biswanath became the President of the Union and Varah Venkat Giri (V.V.Giri) was its Secretary (who later became the President of India) Eminent Professor, and lawyer late Dr. Sreeram Chandra Das has narrated this event in one of his articles. "I have myself heard Giri addressing Biswanath Das as *Bhaia* (elder brother) when Giri was the President of India and Biswanath Das was the Chief Minister of Orissa in 1971-72. As Royats'

representatives, both of them were elected to Madras Legislative Council. Later, when the Raja of Bobbili who became the Chief Minister of Madras on behalf of the Justice Party wanted to contest election from the southern part of northern districts of Madras as a farmers' representative, Biswanath advised V.V. Giri to give up Royat politics and seek election as a representative of Railway Labourers who were to be organised by V.V. Giri under Biswanath's advice. Thus under the Government of India Act, 1919 when Montford Reforms were introduced, Shri Das, Shri Giri and Raja of Bobbili were elected to Madras Council ..... In later years Giri rose to prominence as a leader of the Railway Men's Union in India and as a leader of the working class, he became the Labour Minister of the Government of India, represented India in International Labour Organisation and finally his eminence brought him the office of the President of India.'

In fact, the eminent labour leader and former President of India V.V. Giri was product of late Biswanath Das. But it was the characteristic of his personality that he never took advantage of Shri Giri at any time, even when he was the Union Labour Minister or the Vice-President or the President of India.

All over India, Gandhiji's call for the non-co-operation movement in 1921 had tremendous impact. Along-with Shashi Bhushan Rath, Niranjan Pattnaik, Lal Mohan Pattnaik (former Speaker of the Orissa Legislative Assembly), Biswanath joined the freedom movement. Biswanath represented Ganjam district in the Madras Legislative Council from 1921 to 1930.

However, Biswanath Das set new precedents when he was the Premier (Prime Minister) of Orissa during pre-independence period which were followed throughout India.

Many spoke high of the bold administrative measures taken by him for the smooth functioning of our democracy.

His political maturity was conspicuous when he first became the Prime Minister of Orissa on July 19, 1937. He was elected from the Jagannath Prasad Assembly constituency. There were two other ministers in his Cabinet. One was Nityananda Kanungo and another was Bodhi Ram Dube. He wanted to implement the Government of India Act of 1935 during his Prime Ministership. In that Act, the provision was that the meeting of the Council of Ministers or the Cabinet would be held in the Government House and the Governor would preside over the Council or Cabinet meeting. But Biswanath deviated from the prevalent system and he himself presided over the Council of Minister's Meeting keeping the Governor in dark about that, which was informed to the Governor subsequently. Sardar Ballav Bhai Patel known as the Iron Man of India (also former Deputy Prime Minister of India) was the Chairman of the Congress Central Parliamentary Board at that time and he himself highly appreciated this act of Biswanath Das. That practice was followed by all other provinces in India.

Biswanath was praised for his political as well as administrative boldness. Sir John Hubback, the first Governor of Orissa in 1938 was granted leave for four months. And Sir John Rutherford Daim, the Revenue Divisional Commissioner was appointed as the Acting Governor of Orissa. Prime Minister Biswanath, however, could not accept this and complained that one of his subordinate officials who used to sit in the gallery during cabinet meetings could not be made the Acting Governor to preside over the meeting. Biswanath even threatened to resign if that was done. When the matter was brought to the notice of Gandhiji, he agreed to the arguments of Biswanath Das. On that particular

issue all other provincial Prime Ministers of India also threatened to resign. The then British Government in London was in a fix over this constitutional crisis. Subsequently, as per the British Government's order, the Governor of Orissa John Hubback withdrew his leave application. But again in 1939 he applied for leave and in his place G.T. Boag, the then Chief Secretary of Madras was appointed as the Acting Governor of Orissa.

Biswanath Das was a member of the Constituent Assembly in 1946. He was a member of All India Servants of India Society (Lok Sevak Mandal) in 1955. When Lal Bahadur Shastri (former Prime Minister of India) died Biswanath Das replaced him as the President of that society. He was appointed as the Governor of an important State like Uttar Pradesh from 1962 to 1967. In the Raj Bhavan premises he took personal care of his garden and orchard when he would have taken rest from the routine work. Most of the time, he will distribute the fruits and vegetables to the employees of the Governor House. He did not hesitate to sit and eat with them on the floor. He did not spend a single pie of his salary and donated all for establishing Ved Bhavan at Puri. He also helped the poor and needy students from time to time.

There are now nine Universities in our State to look after the higher education and research work. But when there was no single University in the State, Biswanath appointed the Utkal University Committee under the Chairmanship of Pandit Nilakantha Das (Former Speaker of Orissa Legislative Assembly). On the basis of that committee's report, after a span of five years, the then Education Minister, Pandit Godabarish Mishra (a famous poet also) in consultation with Pandit Nilakantha Das established the first University, known as the Utkal University on November 27, 1943.

His another significant achievement was to control flood in the river Mahanadi. He appointed Sir Visweswarya, a famous engineer of our country to find out the remedies. His recommendations were very much needed to control the flood and build a dam on the river at Hirakud.

For a stint, Biswanath was the Chief Minister of Orissa in 1971. During his Chief Ministership one interesting incident took place. A senior most officer of the education department was asked to come to meet the Chief Minister. That senior most officer who came to the Chief Minister had put on a multicoloured shirt. Chief Minister was unhappy about it and said, "please come with a decent dress, don't come like a student." The officer was ashamed and never put on a multi-coloured shirt during office hours again.

Biswanath Das, breathed his last on 2nd June in 1984 at his Kaji Bazar residence in the Cuttack city.

He is no more. But his simple living and high thinking has attracted many when he was alive.

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Gurukalyan Mahapatra is a Freelance Journalist poet and writer. He lives at Qr.No.D 10/5, Unit-8, Bhubaneswar.