

Gopabandhu Das : The Lode Star of Idealistic Journalism

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From 1803 to 1866 Orissa presented a dismal picture in every sphere of activity. It was intellectually and materially backward as not much progress had been made in the fields of education, trade, commerce, agriculture. But this period holds importance because of the emergence of middle class intelligentsia. In the aftermath of 'Naanka' famine of 1866, marked changes appeared in the socio-political arena. Efforts were made to establish schools and colleges, improve the means of communication and transportation which eventually boosted trade and commerce. Printing presses, journalism and cultural associations facilitated independent discussions and provided a platform to dabble in. This emergence of self conscious middle class spearheaded 'Language Agitation'.



Orissa was a precursor of the evolution of Indian Union for it came into being as a linguistic province as early as 1936. This successful

movement of the Oriya speaking people prepared the ground for other regions to put forward similar demands. This modern consciousness inspired nationalism and numerous grievances of the people converged on the mainstream of the national movement for liberation.

At this critical juncture the emergence of Gopabandhu Das on the scene of Orissa as a crusader against socio-political evils catapulted the tempo and tenor of the ongoing movement. He epitomized selfless service and dedication for which within a short span of time he secured a place among distinguished Orissa's freedom fighters and social activists of the time.

He was at once a social reformer, a political activist, a poet and an essayist, a columnist and a redactor, an educationist, a legislator, a mass leader, an astute diplomat and a dexterous organizer. Having such protean attributes and maintaining equilibrium between them was an arduous task and can only

be possible for such a larger than life figure. Born and brought up in an era that bears the stamp of renaissance and rising nationalism, he found ample opportunities to nurture his reformist and Samaritan zeal and convivial characteristics. The journey of such a great soul began in a rustic surrounding and Spartan background, the sublime spiritualism of Jagannath culture of his provenance left an imprint on him and nurtured his immanent attributes to bloom forth and made him a master statesman.

Journalism, which have been performing its task of effective communication through passing information to the recipient in order to stimulate their opinion and thought process, got a new meaning in the pre-independent period of enslavement, when it was used as an instrument to inform and educate the mass to prepare a ground for them to get rid of the foreign yoke. And the baton was in the hands of eminent personalities who were known for their erudition, sagacity and fearlessness. In Orissa it made a decent beginning in the nineteenth century with the establishment of printing presses. In the tumultuous period of eighteenth and nineteenth century kit made a steady progress when the socio-political malaises coupled with a series of events stirred the mind of the people who urgently felt the need of a power of expression. The spurt in the activity occurred through the efforts of missionaries who established printing presses during this time. The journalistic efforts were no less remarkable as is evident from the activities of various persons and personalities of eminence. From *Kujibara Patrika*, *Arunodaya*, *Gyanaruna*, of the early nineteenth century to the *Utkal Dipika* of the late nineteenth century and *Asa*, the *Samaja* etc. of the early twentieth century, Orissa witnessed a steady and marked progress in journalism.

The journalistic enterprise of *Utkalmani* was not for the partial fulfillment of his prevailing circumstantial needs nor was it something fortuitous or accidental foray into the profession, rather it was a culmination of his long standing efforts for the emancipation of the people which overtly reflected his sense and sensibility and concern for a just and equitable society. His socio-political thought found ample expression in his journalism which macadamized his journalistic endeavour by alchemizing diverse elements active in the socio-political sphere in the march towards freedom. His penchant for journalism sprouted early in his youth itself when he tried his hand in writing pamphlets to edit magazines. Such was his obsession that even in school he incurred troubles in speaking his mind on different issues like the one in which he expressed his opinion in a magazine *Indradhanu* on the ongoing controversy as to the greatness of Upendra Bhanja and Radhanath Rai in 1893, for which he was censured.

Literature was a part of his life and he was always in search of opportunity to express his mind and heart. And the spread of print media during that time provided him that needed opportunity. The journalistic traits were ingrained in him and he nurtured it and utilized it for social service. He considered it as the most apposite medium to rouse public opinion. With this in mind he landed in the field of journalism and started a monthly literary magazine in 1915, '*Satyabadi*'. In it various segments were introduced in which prominence was given to discussion on important issues, their critical review and in the student's sections students were also allowed to contribute through writing essays on varied topics in it. The development of motherland, mother tongue and mother literature was the prime concern of *Satyabadi*. But he could not remain in content as

this could not whetted his appetite of spreading consciousness among the gullible, ordinary masses. As such he started the weekly *Samaja* in 1919. In the words of Godabarish Mishra his intimate colleague “Now a day almost all the newspapers have become the mouthpiece of political parties. This was not the situation in India at the time of birth of the *Samaja*. Unaware of any party- political or social Gopabandhu was overwhelmed with only one idea that is nation. To educate the large illiterate mass he felt the need of a proper newspaper. But due to the absence of adequate resources he could not proceed in that direction. For that reason while staying at Satyabadi, he accepted the editorship of *Asha* newspaper published from Berhampur. But by seeing that he could not pursue and achieve his ambition he started the weekly ‘*Samaja*’ with a little principal sum”.¹

For the attainment of the goal of *Samaja*, Gopabandhu never stayed behind. He had done yeomen’s service in the field of spread of education among the people. Even if he had undergone a lot pain and punishment under the foreign regime he never abstained from the path of his duty. The ideal of his life was the ideal of *Samaja* and his ideal was

Misu mora deha e desa matire
*Desabasi chali jaantu pithire*²

(Let my body feed the soil of this land,
May my countrymen tread on it as they walk.)

He was of the opinion that truth, clarity, keen sense of understanding and analytical skills were the pre requisite of a journalist. One should not be worried about the publication of his articles, instead he should try to reach more and more people concerned with the subject matter of the report to know the truth.³

Gopabandhu’s journalism was much in tune with the characteristics of a revolutionary and

reformative era which was adorned by the titans like Tilak, Gokhle, Gandhi, Madhusudan Das, Gourisankar Ray and others, This can be gleaned from his writing- “The real condition of the nation is discussed in the *Samaja*. The genuine wants and needs, complaints and accusations which are proper and necessary for the Government to be acquainted with, are all presented in a neutral and unbiased manner. Further, the activities, aims and objectives of the Government were conveyed to the people in lucid manner. The socio-economic condition, the elementary education, health, local self government, religious discussions were given special attention in it. The language of the *Samaja* is very simple and easily understandable.”⁴

Thus, the basic purpose of his newspaper was to act as a link between the people and the government.

He put much emphasis on language and was of the opinion that there is a relationship between language and nationality as literature contributes a lot for the growth of a nation. Instead of the complex style of the time he advocated a form simple and communicative capable of reaching the high ideas to the common man in the language of his own. In order to spread his ideas among the masses of Orissa, he first founded the monthly, ‘*Satyabadi*’ and later the weekly, the ‘*Samaja*’. In the editorial columns of these journals Gopabandhu poured out his soul, his feelings, and his agonies too. The prose he wrote with an inimitable blend of the colloquial and the classical, easy flowing, sonorous and rhythmic, reminding the moderns in Orissa of the charm of the biblical idiom of the *Bhagavata* of Jagannath Das- was a revolution of the nobility which Oriya prose can attain at the touch of a masters spirit.⁵

Later due to certain difficulties he handed over the reins of Satyabadi Press and the *Samaja* to the Servants of Peoples Society in order to

secure its future and increase the name and fame of Odisha through this all India organization.

Gopabandhu was greatly influenced by Mazzini's role in Italian *Risorgimento*. He emulated the Mazzinian means and methods in dealing with the foreign regime. The organizing up of various associations by him like the one *Young Utkal Association* in 1907 during his studentship at Ravenshaw College reflected his sentimental attachment to Mazzini.

His journalism stands on the edifice of his nationalistic sentiment, his romanticism, his literary talent, his dedicated patriotism and craving for the motherland. These sentiments and ideologies guided his journalistic endeavour.

He considered nationalism a psychological aspect as it originates in the mind and thinking pattern of a person. The height of his nationalism and his love of motherland can be known from his simple but sublime and beautifully delineated description- Orissa's river is called *Mahanadi* or Great River, Orissa's Sea is *Mahodadhi* or the Great Sea, Orissa's hill is *Mahendra* or Great Mountain, Orissa's tree is *Kalpabata* or the Tree of Fulfillment, Orissa's Lord is *Jagannath* or the Lord of Universe and Orissa's cremation ground is the *Swrgadwara* or the Gate of Heaven. The Oriya visualizes greatness all round.⁶

Further he said "*Nationalism is our religion and God is present before us in the form of our nation.*"⁷

He was a mass leader. From his student days at Ravenshaw he came in contact with great luminaries in the political life of Orissa. During this time Gopabandhu was the natural leader of his contemporaries, who because of his plain living, high thinking, amiable manners and austere life, loved and respected him.⁸

He was of the opinion that the leaders should set examples for the people who could follow their words and deeds. There should not be contradictions in their behaviours and approach which apparently would send a wrong message to the public. The leaders have a great responsibility for the sake of their countrymen and it is their *Rashtradharma* to perform that with utmost devotion.⁹

He was a great fighter against the British rule. He suffered imprisonment in 1921 for publication of the news relating to the alleged molestation of a woman by the constables of a local police station but was acquitted later due to lack of evidence. He became a nightmare for the local administration for his role in non-cooperation movement. His active support and encouragement to the resistance movement in Kanika and advocacy of its cause through the columns of *The Samaja* perturbed the administration.¹⁰

In line with Gandhi, he was a staunch believer in the service to humanity. His humanism basically centered on the worth and dignity of the individual. Service to humanity was his inborn quality and he found it an effective mean to reach people and instill faith in their destiny. His roles in the floods and famines of Orissa – in the relief operations during the high floods of 1907, 1925, 1927 and the Dovar famine in 1920 in particular- is memorable.¹¹

He was a well read man and an essayist and a poet of no mean order. He wrote a number of poems known as *Abakasa Chinta* (Thoughts of Leisure) which contains the kernel of his political ideas. He was great advocate of mass education which to him was essential for rejuvenating people with fervent nationalism. He even conceived *Universal Education League* much early for the spread of education in Orissa by taking a cue from the *Deccan Education*

Society. During his days in prison he wrote a poem- *Bandira Atmakatha* (The Autobiography of a Prisoner) which proved his poetic genius and revolutionary spirit.

He had always given importance to group effort and *esprit de corps* for he was aware of the axiom- "United we stand, divided we fall". It was this quality which helped him immensely in his struggle for freedom throughout his life.

Thus, the achievement of Gopabandhu as a journalist was nothing but a manifestation of his eventful life which is full of devotion, dedication, fellow feeling, service to humanity and stainless politics, which was a rare phenomenon. He conveyed all his ideas and ideologies to the people through his newspapers. And used them as a vehicle for social transformation. One of his outstanding personalities, as he was, who appears and reappears in the political arena of nineteenth century Orissa, Gopandhu was the saint and prophet of its struggle for independence and holds an imperishable place among the makers of modern Orissa. He was a profound thinker, a great visualiser, an untiring political activist who remained a man of honesty and a dedicated patriotism in every inch of his life. His resoluteness, docility, his erudition and sublime intellectualism, his suavity, his perspicacity to assess the current geo-political and social situation made him a journalist par excellence for his posterity which is apparently groaning in wilderness where the epithet, 'the golden rule is that there is no golden rule' reins supreme, when politicization of newspapers has become a common phenomenon in Orissa, his distinguished journalistic endeavour which was marked by the three Cs i.e. courage,

conviction and conscience and whose watch word was public service, should have been the eye opener and should be accepted, practiced and taken precedence of for the creation of a vibrant society. He was an institution in himself and a Karmayogi throughout his life and his saintliness justified the title *Utkalamani* bestowed on him more than others.

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