

## Biju Patnaik and Odisha Politics

*Prof. Surya Narayan Misra*

Odisha became a separate province in 1936. It was first province to be linguistically organized. On the basis of the provisions under the Government of India Act, 1935 elections to provincial assemblies were held and accordingly newly constituted a sixty member Odisha Assembly was formed. Because of some irritants in the Act, although Congress had secured a majority of seats in the House, it refused to form the government, Hence Parla Maharaja became the first premier of the province. Of course, the irritant provision from the Act was removed and Congress agreed to form Government, (Sri Biswanath Das became the first Congress premier of the Province). Since 1937 the state had experienced the governmental leadership under several personalities. They were other than the two mentioned above, H.K Mahtab, N.K. Choudhury, Biju Patnaik, Biren Mitra, S. Tripathy, R.N Singh Deo, Biswanath Das, Smt Nandini Satapathy, B. Acharya, N. Routray, J.B. Patnaik, H. Biswal, Biju Patnaik,



J.B. Patnaik, G. Gomango and the present Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik.

Sri Biswanath Das, Biju Patnaik and J.B. Patnaik were credited to be Chief Ministers with a gap. But Biju's ascendancy to power wrote a different story of its own. He became Chief Minister in 1961 and again in 1990. It was different from that of the achievement of Sri B.Das. Whereas Sri Das became Chief Minister in 1971 as an alternate choice of a coalition Government.

But in Biju's case, he provided a new dynamic leadership to Congress which had a pitiable condition in the State during Congress era. In 1961 first Mid Term Poll to the Odisha Legislature Biju brought glory to the Congress camp and also to Pandit Nehru. In 1970 Biju had an unceremonious exit from the Congress politics. He formed a regional party called Utkal Congress being influenced by Annadurai's DMK of Tamil Nadu. His regional out fit saw Congress out of power and Odisha

could see a non-Congress Swatantra – Utkal Congress – Jharkhand Coalition. Of course, Biju did not get opportunity to lead the new formation. In 1977 he was instrumental in the exit of Congress. He, in fact, initiated ‘Big Majority Politics’ in Odisha in 1977 and political instability and defection politics were given good bye. The 1990 election to the State Assembly was Biju’s own show and it was Janata Dal Government under him. He secured three-fourth majority in the Assembly. That in why it was different form that of Mr Das.

Biju was a rare breed of politician. In fact he was a nationalist, adventurist, forward looking, ambitious and above all a statesman, His love for his land and people made him a leader with a passion for change. These qualities were observed from his young days. He was an athlete and unlike all athletes he had sportsman spirit. He was courageous which prompted him to venture for a cycling from Cuttack to Peshawar. He was attracted towards aeroplanes and his educational career was moulded accordingly. He turned into one of the finest pilots. This new skill helped him to join nationalist struggle through secret missions to leaders who fought against the British colonial administration. Even during the Indonesian struggle against Dutch his heroic deed decorated him as ‘Bhumi Putra’ of that country. When Indo-Pak conflict began in 1947 and Pak forces were intruding into Kashmir his was the first flight carrying soldiers. He could also help Indian Army in coordinating food supply to Indian forces during 1962 war with China. Even it was learnt that late J.L. Nehru wanted to keep Biju near to power centre at Delhi at the time of national crises those days. How many politicians have either done this or have ever thought of doing this. Hence he was rare.

After the constitutional democracy was on the rails, nationalist Biju who believed in rapid industrialisation for employment and poverty alleviation was provoked by his political mentor Sri Mahatab to contest election and serve people as representative of people. This indoctrinated him to represent people in 1952, 1957, 1961 during the first phase of political career as MLA from Bhanjanagar, Jagannath Prasad and Choudwar. During this first phase he wanted to motivate the policy makers towards his dreams for making the State growahead of others. Even he wanted to save the Government when it was in dire need due to lack of legislative support to continue in power. At that time Odisha was amidst peculiar combination of parties and politics which was not observed elsewhere. It was multi polar with Congress, Ganatantra Parishad and PSP in lead roles along with CPI and Jharkhand party. Biju initially garnered the support of unattached and Jharkhand to save Mahtab Government. Subsequently, he could impress upon the National leadership to approve a Right-Right coalition of Congress and Ganatantra Parishad. The intention behind such political move to find a stable Government in the State which would help industrialization of mineral rich Odisha.

Later, Biju could learn that he was only used in the whole process of saving the Government which did not pay any attention towards the industry plan he had. He then entered into centre-stage of politics to break the unholy coalition and lead the Congress system in the State. He was able to do it and could achieve as well. The first stable Congress Ministry after independence could be installed in power in 1961. He was the Chief Minister by attacking the system from the front.

Though Biju’s obsession was industrialization he was equally indoctrinated

towards planned economic development and social upliftment . He was critical of rising population in the country. He was the pioneer of State Planning Board concept. Under his personal touch, the programme of action for infrastructure development was initiated which included a port so that the abundant mineral resources could reach different destinations and the state earn monetary resources. The internal communication system was also developed. He thought of making the state power surplus by utilizing the existing riverine system. He along with Dr. A.N. Khosla, the technocrat Governor could think of linking the rivers under 'Decade of Destiny' which no other leader in the country talked about.

He utilized his influence upon power apparatus at the Centre to get projects like Sunabeda, MIG, Regional College of Education, Regional Research Laboratory, Sainik School, Rourkela Engineering College etc. His intention was to create trained man power in the state and remove regional imbalance on incremental basis. All his plans and programmes which he could launch only during first two years of his Chief Ministership were bulldozed when he was emotionally attracted towards 'Kamraj Plan' and took a new 'Sanyas' form politics. The plan was intended against corrupt politicians elsewhere to save Congress from demoralised state after its debacle in the Sino-Indian war. His dreams of developed Odisha was to be carried by his followers but it was not the same spirit and leadership with a foresight.

Congress had a domestic crisis after Nehru and Odisha experienced it as well. A strong vocal section left Congress and formed Jana Congress with the obvious intention to return to power. But Congress to give a fighting reply was not under the leadership of Biju Baboo. A bad

patch in his political career appeared and he was defeated in 1967 election and in 1971 as well surprisingly when his party Utkal Congress had a reasonable success and formed Government.

One visible part of Odisha politics of 1960s and early 70s was that internal trouble in the Congress Party led to the division of the state unit twice in 1965 and 1970. Of course, the party at the national level had a major split in 1969. In 1969 Smt Indira Gandhi was in dire trouble, many deserted her. But Biju was with Mrs Gandhi. When a Rajya Sabha seat fell vacant and the State unit recommended Biju's name Indira turned it down. By that time Biju's creation Nandini Devi was already close to Mrs Gandhi. She and Sri Shyam Sundar Mohapatra, it was reported, prevailed upon Mrs Gandhi to avoid Sri Patnaik. This humiliation turned Sri Patnaik from Congress and the Utkal Congress was born not out of arrogance but out of self system.

Biju left Congress for ever. In fact during later years he became the symbol of opposition unity in the state when he could bring his mentors and opponents to one forum called 'Pragati Combine'. Though this could not make a major inroad in to Congress social base of which he was the architect, yet it did not give unilateral role to Congress to lead the State.

During emergency he was under detention. In post-emergency period Biju who associated himself with JP movement and toured in Odisha played a significant role to organize all hue and cry to fight against Indira in 1977. He, as mentioned earlier, founded 'Big majority' in Odisha.

In 1977 he entered in to Lok Sabha. Had he wished he could have opted for State leadership. It was in 1970 his entry in to upper house was objected. But within two years he

entered into Rajya Sabha to silence his opponents. He found that the Center's negligence of the State had reached a serious stage. Despite the potential, the State was denied a second steel plant and state's industrialization was not in the agenda of New Delhi policy makers. Hence, he preferred an active role in New Delhi and impact, presided over a key economic ministry i.e. Ministry of Steel & Mines. The small stint at Udyog Bhawan gave us NALCO ,a mega project. Had he remained as Minister for a full term the neglect of the past could have been made good.

Since 1980, Biju was a crest-fallen politician. He never lost any election after 1971. In 1980 he remained in low profile as a member of Lok Sabha and encouraging a demoralized and truncated Janata Party against massive majority of Congress.

Mrs Gandhi's unfortunate assassination and a strong Congress apparatus in Delhi provoked Biju to remain in action in the State. With him his associates got new lease of life. He became leader of opposition and made whirlwind tour of the State. In fact, he became king-maker after 1989 Congress rout at the Centre. Had he wished he could have got any position including Deputy P.M. But he preferred Bhubaneswar as his centre of activity. The unceremonious and untimely exit of V.P Singh when Biju was Chief Minister with unheard popularity and electoral success caused mental agony in him. Biju brought left parties to his fold and made accepted seat adjustment. But a crestfallen man with age on the wrong side as well as obsession to work for the State found him a dejected leader. The socio-political climate of the country was changed.

Mandal-Kamandal politics disturbed him and as a true nationalist he made some remarks which was not even liked by his own colleagues. But it was only from a man who was caring for his State and crying for his country. Even the onset of liberal economy could not allow industrial climate to come first due to step motherly attitude of New Delhi.

In 1995 election to Assembly Biju was advised to distance from the Left by his own coterie. There was a split in the social base. Though party had a reasonable electoral support yet it could not be translated into seats as many of his candidates lost the election with few votes. Congress secured a survival majority. Biju could not be accorded as fitting success in the semifinal of politics. He decided to go to the Centre in 1996 and in fact won from two seats. As a Member of Lok Sabha, there was an opportunity, demand as well as hope that Biju should have become the Prime Minister. But it could not happen. It was a personal loss to Biju. Of course, he was not a scheming politician. In my opinion it was a loss for our State. A crestfallen Biju ultimately in a sad episode of last days of his life breathed his last on 17<sup>th</sup> April, 1997. Thus came the end of a hero's travel. But his name has remained in the minds of the people, the symbol of which is carried through a political outfit called Biju Janata Dal which distanced itself from anti- Odisha Janata Dal.

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Prof. Surya Narayan Mishra, KIIT Law School, KIIT University, Bhubaneswar.