

# Vignettes of Odisha in the Nineteenth Century: Bipin Chandra Pal's "Memories of My Life and Times"

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Bipin Chandra Pal, "one of the mightiest prophets of Indian Nationalism," architect of Bengal renaissance, strode the country like a giant in the last quarter of nineteenth century and the first two decades of twentieth. Through the written word and the spoken, through a long life of suffering and sacrifice, an unrelenting adherence to principles he professed, and with a rare clarity of vision he awakened his countrymen to a consciousness of inner strength. Pal was conscious of the interdependence between society and the individual, and looking at his attempt as a reflection of the contemporary history beginning with the period immediately after the first war of independence of 1857. His autobiography reflects the impressions of a young perceptive mind of a transitional period, tremendous political upheaval and unprecedented wide turmoil led to total transformation of Indian life and thought.

The life of Bipin Chandra Pal reads like a fascinating realistic version of a political pilgrim's progress in the winding and unpredictable paths of our nationalist movement. If we shift our sight from general theoretical problems and sometimes hasty and sweeping generalizations about B.C.Pal, we realize that his ideas were not wholly patternless and that our notions about him are inexact. One may surmise that we can find clues to an understanding of Pal's ideas in his autobiography which reads like an open book with no embroidery of silken phrases. The melange of his memory was not written with any rhythmic

glory, though it reveals the solitary pain that gnawed his heart at the crossroads of his life and also glimpses into the contemporary social and political history. It is extremely hard to escape the dilemma of understanding Pal's Life's mission, his ideology, close to sympolitical (the term coined by Benedetto Croce), and the political waves raised by him at the regional and national level.

Every individual has a debt to his history – his family, socio-economic roots and political arithmetic of his times. B.C.Pal has remarkable sense of history and he believed, as he stated, in a discovery and in "a process of re-explanation, re-interpretation and readjustment". The autobiography of B.C.Pal is no doubt a unique composition and evidence of so many untraceable occurrences of the country in general and Odisha in particular. Inclusion of so many known and unknown facts, social happenings and events of remarkable importance connecting to urban and rural life under one platform is striking. The autobiography furnishes lively pictures of Odisha during 1879. Pal has depicted his compelling journey to Odisha owing to sharp differences of views with his father. He writes, "the breach between father and son had become by this time too strained for any reconciliation. I could no longer depend upon him for my expenses. I had, therefore, no option but to look out for some employment".

The first appointment which Bipin Chandra received was in 1889 as Headmaster

of the Cuttack Academy at Cuttack owned by a local Brahma gentleman. In his autobiography Pal has given a vivid description of Odisha, as well as of the city of Cuttack with photographic honesty.

*“Odisha had not as yet been connected with Bengal by rail. People had during my boyhood and early youth to walk all the way from Bengal to Puri along the old pilgrim way mentioned in 16<sup>th</sup> century Bengali literature. In the seventies of the last century steamer communication had however been opened between Calcutta and the part of Chandabali in Odisha. My first trip to Cuttack was made on board the ill fated S.S. Sir John Lawrence, which was lost a few years later in the Bay of Bengal. It was a rickety old thing hardly seaworthy, and no one who had any experience of it had any cause for surprise when it went down with a full complement of passengers during the pilgrim season and not a sign could be traced of either its men or its materials. That was my first experience of the sea, and though it was winter time and the sea stood calm and placid almost like a lake, I did not entirely escape the discomforts of crossing the black water. We left Calcutta early in the morning and reached Sagar, the mouth of Ganges, at about sunset. It took about six hours to cross from here to Chandabali, which stands at the mouth of the delta of the Mahanadi.”*

After twenty four hours of hazardous journey by canal boat Pal reaches Cuttack. Cuttack stands at the junction of the Mahanadi and its tributary, the Katjuri. Cuttack was the ‘Chief town’ of Odisha under Hindu rule. Commenting on the social life in Odisha, B.C.Pal remarks “when I went to Cuttack fifty years ago, neither the classes nor the masses there had developed any separatist provisional consciousness. Odisha formed then a part of Bengal Administration”. Pal tells us that the educated Bengalis had no conceit of provinciality

and looked upon Odisha “as much as their own mother country as they did upon Bengal proper”. Together with this, the rising generation of Odisha was also eager to study the Bengali Language and literature as they cultivated their own mother tongue. In 1841 the city of Cuttack had an English school. It was raised to a High School which was affiliated to the Calcutta University in 1868. In 1876, Cuttack was endowed with a full fledged college up to M.A. degree examinations of the University of Calcutta. The college was named after Mr. Ravenshaw, who had been popular commissioner of Odisha.

**Pal’s Memories of my Life and times** reflects all shades of activities of the Odia and Bengali societies i.e. art, culture, literature, religions and religious activities, social rights and festivals. Pal nostalgically echoes about the process of inter provisional fusion between Bengal and Odisha for more than five hundred years. Constant flow of pilgrims from Bengal to Odisha helped to spread the culture, literature and religion and religious temper. The movement of Shree Chaitanya exerted perhaps deeper and wider influence among the people of Odisha than even Bengalis themselves. The element of protest against Brahminical caste and ritualism of Chaitanya’s movement was soon overwhelmed by the influence of Bengal Brahmins, who captured even during the life time of Chaitanya, the leadership of the movement. The old process of interprovincial union or fusion was further advanced under British rule by the establishment of a common Administration over these two provinces. Regarding Odia language and literature Pal opines “my contact with Odia language and literature created the impression upon me that these represented only an ancient and archaic type of Bengali language and literature itself. The rising generation of Odisha were as eager to study the Bengali language and literature as they were to cultivate their own mother tongue.

B.C.Pal’s reminiscences of life at Cuttack and the vivid description of the city is quite

interesting. Cuttack was the nerve centre and principal city of all activities of Odisha under the British administration. It was the centre of intellectual and cultural life of the province. Ravenshaw College was the educational hub of the province. The most prominent public man in Cuttack was Babu Gouri Sankar Roy, the editor of Odia weekly "Utkal Darpan" and the Secretary of the Cuttack Printing Company. This company not only owned a printing press and the weekly newspaper, but also built a public hall, the Cuttack Printing Hall, in which was located a public library. This Printing Hall was a great influence in those days in the cultural life of young Odias; and it was here B.C.Pal became closer with the representatives and leaders of the new intellectuals and national movements in Odisha.

The school in which B.C.Pal was appointed as Headmaster was a private school. The private schools were springing up almost all over country to meet the demand for English education for our people. During that time the Government schools were comparatively more expensive than the private institutions. Public spirited young men, who had themselves received a fairly high education and who were moved by the 'new spirit of patriotism and public service', set the private schools among the educationists. One of the pioneers amongst the educationists was Babu Peary Mohan Acharya who had founded the Cuttack Academy. Babu Peary Mohan Acharya was a Brahmo. In inviting Bipin Chandra who too was a Brahmo, Babu Peary Mohan must have been moved by the desire to get a Brahmo worker in his town. Pal, being an ardent Brahmo, quickly picked up connections with other Brahmo leaders as well as people of social prominence. B.C.Pal writes, it was here at Cuttack that he entered public life as minister of the local Brahmo Samaj and went on lecturing on both social and political subjects.

As a Headmaster, Bipin Chandra was entrusted with the task of selecting students from his school for the Entrance Examination of

Calcutta University. Normally all Headmasters would do, Bipin Chandra also held the examinations test and certified only four candidates for appearing at the said examinations. After completing all formalities, B.C. Pal came to Calcutta for his Puja vacations. When he went back after the vacations, to his surprise he found that, his orders had been reversed by the proprietor. The candidates, who had been rejected by Pal, were recommended by the proprietor. To this Pal strongly reacted. He writes as 'it was a denial of my right and my authority as Headmaster which I could not possibly submit to. Immediately upon my return to Cuttack, I tendered my resignation and came to Calcutta'. With this resignation of Pal from Cuttack Academy, ended his first phase in his professional career, a school master "short as it was", wrote Pal, it was my first stepping stone to public life.'

Each age is a dream that is dying or one that is coming to birth. Everyone is a child of transitional period and embodies ideas of the past groping towards the future. B.C.Pal was a man of great intellectual force and high character, 'a born rebel' as maintained by an academic historian. He was indeed a born rebel, whether at home or in public life, with his uncompromising spirit he rebelled with his family, society, colleagues and friends for his cherished ideas. In the words of Dr. Rajendra Prasad, 'he was one of those pioneers whose life long efforts created the climate in which the struggle for freedom could be waged successfully, leading to the desired consummation, our political emancipation.' Posterity will judge and evaluate the extent of success of B.C.Pal achieved in his political life and in the freedom battle.

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