

Pandit Gopabandhu Das - A Messiah

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Hailed from a non-descript village named Suando in the district of Puri, Pandit Gopabandhu came to the socio-political firmament for his unwavering and selfless sacrifice for the cause of the poor, needy and distressed Persons.

A leader of uncommon calibre and sagacity, his life epitomises a saga of struggle for the cause of his motherland and its people. Day in and day out he relentlessly worked for the distressed people with great zeal and spirit. All through he led a life of austerity and left all his properties for the cause of the poor and distressed before leaving this mundane world. Love and compassion was in his blood. Wherever there was any natural calamity and whenever there was call for self-sacrifice, Pandit Gopabandhu was there to come to the rescue of the distressed persons. Mahatma Gandhi rightly wrote about him "Gopabandhu Das was pure gold. His heart was bleeding for the sake of the country."

Gopabandhu was known for his self-less sacrifice and service for the cause of the people



who were affected by flood, famine and Cholera epidemic. While he was pursuing his studies at Ravenshaw College, Cuttack, a severe flood washed away the coastal districts. Without any

second thought, he immediately rushed to the flood affected area even after receiving the news of his son's illness. As a person of rare trait, the death news of his son did not deter him from serving the marooned persons. He went to Calcutta to study law but to his misfortune the day when his law result came out he simultaneously got the news of his wife's demise. After completion of B.L., he entered into legal practice for a brief period and became junior to Madhusudan Das and Gokulananda Choudhury

apart from being served as a State Pleader in Mayurbhanj State for a few years. But that did not solve his purpose of life. He extended financial help to many poor and deserving students. He set up an orphanage at Mayurbhanj and raised funds for the improvement of the Leper Asylum and himself contributed for this noble purpose.

Gopabandhu adhered to the principle of plain living and high thinking. He wanted to start a school on the lines of old Gurukula. Following the ideals of Deccan Education Society, he set up an open-air school at Satyabadi for the spread of education in Odisha. He thought that if schools are set up in rural areas then education could be easily accessible to the poor and needy students at a lesser cost. According to him, education was the main instrument for social transformation. Against the backdrop of Bakul grove near Sakhigopal Temple, open-air school was started with only nineteen students on the 12th of August, 1909. It was decided that the tuition fees payable by the students would be the minimum and they were advised to live a simple and austere life in the hostel adjacent to the school. They were taught to earn their livelihood through agriculture and cottage industry. The Students imbibed secularism and shunned casteism and superstitions which were eating into the vitals of the then society. This ideal institution preached the gospel of nationalism, moral values and patriotism and inculcated the spirit of discipline, self-sacrifice, confidence and organizing ability among the students. Mahatma Gandhi was greatly impressed on visiting the school and spending some time with the students and teachers. He wrote in 'Young India' on 13th April 1921 in following words:

“Pandit Gopabandhu Das, an ex-MLC, an ex-pleader and many other things besides, is a selfless leader. No wonder If I believe that with such earnest men, swaraj is possible for attainment during the year. Pandit Gopabandhu has an open-air school at Sakhigopal 12 miles on the side of Puri. It is a grove school. It is worthy of a visit. I passed a most delightful day in the midst of the boys and their teachers. It is a serious experiment in open-air teaching.”

Gopabandhu was a Member of Bihar and Orissa Legislative Council. As a member, he raised different burning issues before the Government. In the Legislative Council, he made brilliant speeches with detailed and objective analysis on various aspects of education right from the primary to degree level. His persistent efforts ultimately yielded result. Post graduation in English and B.L. classes were opened in Ravenshaw College. It was due to his sincere efforts a Sanskrit College was established at Puri and an Engineering College at Cuttack. He once lamented “when I remember the poor famine-stricken people in their skins and bones, I feel ashamed to have any further cooperation with this Government.”

On the clarion call of Non-Cooperation movement by Gandhiji, he resigned from the post and plunged into the movement with his dedicated co-workers. He spread the message of non-cooperation throughout the length and breadth of Odisha. On advice of Mahatma Gandhi, he raised contributions for 'Tilak Swaraj Fund'. In 1919 he became the President of Utkal Sammilani and presided over Chakradharpur Session in 1920. The session wholeheartedly endorsed the views of Indian National Congress regarding formation of State on Linguistic basis. Gopabandhu moved a resolution proposing that the objectives and aspirations of the Indian National Congress be accepted as the objectives and aspiration of the Sammilani. The resolution was passed and Utkal Sammilani for all purposes lost its identity and got merged with Utkal Provincial Congress. Later he became the President of Utkal Provincial Congress.

Pandit Gopabandhu Das in his “A Prisoner’s Autobiography” wrote :

“Utkal is one of the sacred places of India but its name was missing from the Indian almanac.

There was no separate place for Utkal in the Indian National Congress. By the grace of Lord Jagannath, the length and breadth of Utkal was deluged with the flood waters of non-cooperation. Like Bhagirath bringing the Ganges to the earth, Gandhi brought the congress to Utkal.”

To alleviate the economic condition of rural folks, he insisted on spinning and weaving. With his effort, Charkha Centres were set up in different places. He encouraged Swadeshi as propounded by Gandhiji and propagated Khadi as the symbol of freedom.

When Odia language was of cross-roads, the contribution of Gopabandhu for enrichment of Odia Language was immense. His series of collections (poems) created national fervour among the people of Odisha. He was the Editor of 'The Satyabadi' and 'The Samaja'. He realized that step-motherly attitude was meted out to Odisha by the British Government and hardly any attention was paid to the sufferings of the people during natural calamities. He felt the need of a newspaper of his own for three reasons namely, had there been a newspaper, the sordid picture of flood, famine, Cholera and inaction and apathy of the Government could have reached different parts of the country. Secondly, the inhuman and dastardly act of the British Government at Jallianawala Bagh had taken the entire nation by surprise but to utter dismay there was no platform to ventilate the reactions of people against such heinous crime. Lastly, callousness of the local authorities to address the local problems prompted Gopabandhu to bring out a newspaper which ultimately paved the way for the birth of 'The Samaja' on 4th of October, 1919. It was published every week on Saturday from the

Satyabadi Press. He was a fearless journalist and he was against any sort of concocted news. He was rightly called the pioneer of journalism in Odisha.

Odisha was always prone to natural calamities. In 1925 a massive flood had inundated many villages in Puri District. The agony of the affected people beggars description. To lessen the sufferings of the people, relief operations was started by Gopabandhu Das with the help of Acharya Harihara and a dedicated team of volunteers. Gopabandhu could not control his tears on seeing the plight of the people and started elaborate relief measures there. The floods of similar magnitude occurred in other districts in the following year. With his dedication, immediate relief was provided to the marooned people. His motto of life was 'service to mankind is service to God'. He was convinced that without dedication and resoluteness nothing was possible and realized that India must rely on this own strength.

In his 'Autobiography of a Prisoner' Gopabandhu in anguish and desperation penned the following lines which are translated into English:

Let my body mingle with the earth of this country.
 Let the people walk on my back,
 Let the pits on the road to Swarajya
 Be filled up with my flesh and bones
 Let charakha be plied in each household.
 Let all quarrels be settled in the village.
 If there is Charakha in the household and
 Panchayat, in village,
 If there is unanimity of opinion among the villagers.
 The misfortunes of Utkal will be a thing of the past.
 Let Nationalism and Universalism
 Be the guiding principles of the people of Utkal

These heart-touching lines speaks volumes of his patriotism, love and dream for the cause of the State and its people. His untiring and relentless effort stirred the hearts of the fellow countrymen. Gandhiji had great liking for Utkalmani. On receipt of the news of his demise, he was saddened and paid glowing tribute with the caption 'A Noble Soul Gone'. He wrote 'The country is poorer for the death of Pandit Gopabandhu Das. His one ambition in life was to see dismembered Utkal united and happy. Though he is not in our midst in the flesh, he is in our midst in the spirit. Let that noble spirit guide the workers of Odisha, let his death result in a larger dedication to service, greater effort, greater self-effacement and greater unity among the scattered workers who are too few for the national requirements'.

Lala Lajpat Rai in his tribute to the great soul wrote in 'The People'-

'The Late Pandit Gopabandhu Das of Odisha was literally a prince among men..... He gave his all to his people.... his body, his purse, his talents, his energy and his soul. With the exception of Mahatma Gandhi himself I have not come across another Indian Leader who was so simply clad as Gopabandhu used to be ever since the fateful 1920..... He was pre-eminently one who lived as he professed- honest, truthful, frank, guileless, simple and unostentatious..... He was the uncrowned king of Odisha.....'

Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose on hearing the news of passing away of Gopabandhu Das said:

'Pandit Gopabandhu may be regarded as the father of the National Movement in Odisha..... Pandit Gopabandhu was thoroughly national in outlook. Plain living and high thinking was the motto of his life..... The result of Pandit Gopabandhu's courage and sacrifice was to instil into the hearts of young Odias a spirit of sacrifice and fearlessness..... He loved to work and serve as a recluse and shunned name and fame.

Pandit Gopabandhu died at the age of 51 years on 17th of June, 1928 on Netra Utsava Day i.e. the day before the famous Car Festival of Puri. Though he is not amidst us but his contribution and sacrifice for the cause of the people of his motherland will remain in the hearts of the fellow countrymen for years to come. His magnetic personality, his unbounded love for the country had drawn thousands of people to participate in national movement. He was Bhagiratha of Odisha, Jewel of Utkal. With his death, India has lost a true and sincere patriot and our country is poorer by the death of her illustrious son. He was the real 'Mani' of Odisha, who had lived and breathed for others.

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