

## Kantakabi : The Poet of Orissa's State Song



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Kantakabi Lakshmikanta Mohapatra was a versatile genius, who has left his indelible imprints in various genres of Oriya literature. A leading freedom fighter and a great nationalist poet of rare caliber, Lakshmikanta's immortal patriotic songs were a perennial source of inspiration for the people of Orissa during the movement for a separate state of Orissa and the freedom struggle of India. He tried his hand at nearly all forms of literature - drama, parody, poetry, short story, novel you name it. His writings were characterised by an indomitable nationalistic spirit, a strong sense of humour and exquisite craftsmanship. As a musician and an actor, he also contributed enormously to the rich tradition of the performing arts in Orissa.

Lakshmikanta, popularly known as 'Kantakabi' in the state, occupies a unique place in the socio-political-cultural life of Orissa. He made a significant contribution to Oriya literature at a time when the very existence of the Oriya language was under threat due to the conspiracies hatched by the neighboring states. Neither Orissa nor Oriya had an independent identity then. But Oriyas were gradually awakened and provoked to react sharply to the unjust domination of the neighboring states through the fiery writings of the early nationalists. The political movement for a separate Orissa province gained momentum through the tireless efforts of 'Utkala Sammilani'. Kantakabi made an immense contribution to Oriya literature during this crucial phase. His composition, '*Bande Utkala Janani*' was

adopted as the welcome song at the Balasore session of the 'Utkal Sammilani'. The distinguished guests on that session, Utkalamani Gopabandhu Das and Utkala Gauraba Madhusudan Das, praised the young poet highly for having penned such a powerful patriotic song. '*Bande Utkala*' and other popular patriotic songs like '*Koti Koti Kanthe Aji*' and '*Udaee Nishana Bajai Bheri*' written by Lakshmikanta stirred the souls of millions of Oriyas during their long, two-pronged battle - one against the domination of the neighboring states and for an independent Oriya identity, language, culture and province and the other for the freedom of India. Kantakabi contributed immensely to both struggles through his powerful writings.

A multi-faceted personality, Kantakabi dabbled in almost all genres of literature and achieved excellence of the highest order in each of them, which is a rarity. But the one piece of writing that has immortalised him is '*Bande Utkala Janani*', which has attained the status of the state-song of Orissa by the people of the state. His epoch-making short story '*Buddha Shankhari*' ('The Old Bangle Seller') leaves a deep imprint in the hearts of the readers. The bangle-seller's character remains, to this day, one of the finest creations in the history of Oriya fiction. Even his unfinished novel '*Kana Mamu*' ('One-eyed Uncle') has become a landmark in the history of Oriya novels. Each word of his magnum opus '*Jeevan Sangeeta*' ('Songs of the Soul'), the outburst of a bleeding heart, finds resonance in

the heart of the reader and makes one forget the agonies of life. Far from being dreamy-eyed, he discovers new dimensions of reality in 'Jeevan Sangeeta'. That is why Kantakabi's songs are a source of inspiration for somebody, who has lost all hope in life and gives him immense strength to face its challenges. Kantakabi founded a literary journal named 'Dagara,' which was not only regarded highly by the contemporary intelligentsia but also adored by common readers for its unique style of writing.

This distinguished man of letters was a prolific writer in English too. He once wrote a drama in English for 'The Observer' on request. A French lady was so moved by his story 'Music of the Whistle' published in 'Current Affairs' that she took it upon herself to translate it into French. He himself translated his masterpiece, 'Jeevan Sangeeta' ('Songs of the Soul') into English in the forties, but it was published by the Kantakabi Centenary Committee only in 1988 - a full 35 years after his death.

Kantakabi was at once a creative writer and a critic. His caustic criticism of erring politicians and despotic feudal chiefs earned him an awe-inspiring reputation. His creative writings, on the other hand, were expressions of his free spirit unencumbered by egotism.

Apart from his bountiful contribution to Oriya literature, Kantakabi's family also actively participated in the freedom movement. His sister Kokila Devi, brothers Sitakanta and Kamalakanta, two sons Nityananda and GourChandra all participated in different phases of the freedom struggle and courted arrest time and again.

Born to Radhamani Devi and Choudhury Bhagabat Prasad Samantaray Mahapatra as their eldest son on 9th December 1888 at Dhuanpatria lane of Cuttack city, Kantakabi breathed his last on 24th February 1953. His death was mourned by legions of his admirers. His father Bhagabat

Prasad was also a great nationalistic leader, who was elected to the Orissa-Bihar Legislative Council four times and served as its Deputy Speaker for two terms. As a social reformer, Bhagabat Prasad played a significant role in the eradication of the dowry system and the reduction of wasteful wedding expenses. Kantakabi's mother, Radhamani was a voracious reader and memorised the Vedas and the Upanishads. Both father and mother had a great impact in the making of Kantakabi.

The Orissa Legislative Assembly condoled the death of Kantakabi on 2nd March 1953, within a week of his sad demise. The then Chief Minister Nabakrishna Choudhury, the Opposition Leader Sradhakar Supakar and the Speaker Nanda Kishore Das expressed their heart-felt grief. They said; "Kantakabi's death has not only created a void in the literary world, but has also irreparably damaged the public life of Orissa. Especially, his efforts to cleanse politics through satire shall be remembered by the posterity *ad infinitum*."

Lakshmikanta was christened 'Kantakabi' not by any royal family or by the government, but by his innumerable admirers. Though the Orissa Government is yet to formally accord it the status of the state song, the people of the state have treated '*Bande Utkala Janani*' as such for a long time now. The song is recited before almost all important government and non-government functions in the state and the people stand up spontaneously as a mark of respect to this soul-stirring composition. In the nineties, Orissa became the first state in the entire country to adopt a patriotic song - '*Bande Utkala Janani*' - for singing at the valedictory session of the Legislative Assembly.

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