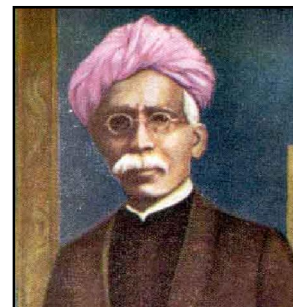


Tributes and Statements of Mahatma Gandhi on Madhusudan Das



Surasinha Patnaik

The collection of 'Tributes and Statements of Mahatma Gandhi on Madhusudan Das' containing seventeen references of Mahatma Gandhi is really a historic document which had projected Madhusudan Das the maker of modern Orissa and the mentor of Mahatma Gandhi in real perspective, wiping out the dusts that had settled down on his image by sheer distortion of facts and by misleading interpretation of the statements and events. The facts presented in this unique collection are so revealing and startling that they may ultimately lead to replacing of priorities and to redrafting of few chapters of Orissan history of pre-independence era. By these efforts Madhusudan Das can be projected in his original glow and stature brilliantly resplendent in the rare insight and innovative vision he possessed coupled with his exceptional qualities of alacrity and steadfastness in execution of projects he conceived.

It is really astounding that the all embracing and wide ranging vision of Madhusudan Das was quite closer to the highly evocative intellectual perceptions of Count Leo Tolstoy, who had exerted deeply stirring impact on the highly receptive yet delicately sensitive mind of Mahatma Gandhi. Count Leo Tolstoy and Madhusudan Das breathed the same air, drew inspiration from the same source and having the same thoughts though they were brought up in two different regions of the world and belonged to different cultural backgrounds. The neighbourly feeling exuded by them have the same triumphing pull and same pulsation of life. Mahatma Gandhi, the trusted disciple of Tolstoy projected the vision of his mentor in the following words;

"The divine law is, man must earn his bread by labouring with his own hands'. It was

first stressed by a Russian writer T.M. Bondaref. Tolstoy advertised it and gave it wide publicity".¹

Surprisingly, Madhusudan Das spoke in the same language, "the hand is supreme. The hand that eats the bread should earn it".² How forceful, and compelling his words were.

Tolstoy was born on 28th August 1828 and Madhusudan Das was born only twenty years after the birth of Tolstoy on 28th April 1848. In the mental set up both belonged to that age of medieval tradition where thought was upheld in pristine purity, communion of Godhead with man was spontaneous and the spirit of idealism was burning effulgently shedding light in the seething darkness. Both lived a rich and rewarding life like a king in the midst of affluence and in the end of their life, they reached the stage of homelessness, devoid of any wealth and property. Madhusudan

Das, the maker of the Modern Orissa exerted a deep and widely stirring influence on the highly sensitive and encompassing mind of Mahatma Gandhi, the effect of which remained unfaltered and undiminished throughout his entire life. Mahatma Gandhi had held Madhusudan Das as his mentor at the time of formulating his recuperative programmes for economic resurgence of the country, for spearheading his Swadeshi Industrial Movement embracing the entire country and for the rehabilitation of forlorn and dejected untouchables as a measure of social reformation and regeneration.

The life of Madhusudan Das was deeply committed for the cause of alienated untouchables and underprivileged minority communities, whose rights were perpetually infringed, putting them at the mercy of the affluent classes. But the triumphant spirit deeply ingrained in Madhusudan Das, revolted and raised a shrill voice in protest against the evil plots designed to subjugate them. The anguished and frozen faces of the depressed classes tormented the restless spirit of Madhusudan Das and the naked and hostile attacks on the weaker section of the community stressed Madhusudan to inner core of his heart. In fact, he was a Messiah of the downtrodden people.

Gaining abiding strength in carrying on experiment with the truth in South Africa, Mahatma Gandhi returned to India in the year 1915. Madhusudan Das was far ahead of Mahatma Gandhi in the implementation of the programme relating to Swadesi industrialisation, rehabilitation of untouchables and social reconstruction. In fact Madhusudan Das started these works since 1895.

Much before the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi in the Indian political scene, Madhusudan had long since implemented Gandhiji's following

programmes and ideologies with a spirit of total dedication.

Swadeshi Industrial endeavour (1896-1930), reduction of Salt tax and revival of Salt Industry (1896-1930), removal of untouchability and rehabilitation of depressed community in the sphere of industrial undertaking (1898-1930), improvement of handloom weaving (1930 onward), Hindu Muslim unity (1888), Charakha as a symbol of rural resurgence (1902 onwards), preservation of the rights of the peasants (1912), organisations of Praja Parishadas the Peasants Organisation (1909), integrated and comprehensive growth of agricultural and industrial sectors (1896 onwards), scientific processing of agricultural commodities (1904 onwards), reservation for untouchables in the committee of management of local bodies (1923) and assigning a place to the labour in the management of industrial undertaking - Utkal Tannery (1919) etc.³

From the memoirs of Suryamoni Nayak, the caretaker of Chittaranjan Das, it was revealed that Madhusudan Das had his first contact with Mahatma Gandhi in the month of December 1920 when he was assigned with the highly interactable job of bridging the yawning gap between Mahatma Gandhi and Chittaranjan Das.⁴ Practically at the instance of Rabindranath Tagore he had to persuade Chittaranjan Das to remain under the all-embracing sway of Mahatma Gandhi. Though this was a very tiring job, Madhusudan Das through his compassionate and communicative bearing could able to bring the two stalwarts together without avoiding the clash of their egos. During his first parley at Calcutta, Madhusudan Das apprised Mahatma Gandhi with the pioneering ventures he had taken up in Orissa, for bringing about lasting changes in the rural economy and for the rehabilitation of alienated untouchables.

From the chronological sequences, recorded in the reminiscences incorporated in the autobiography of Sailabala Das named 'A Look back and After' it is learnt that Madhusudan Das after renouncing his ministerial assignments at Patna in the year 1923, had proceeded to Sabarmati Ashram in the year 1924 to revive his old acquaintance with Mahatma Gandhi and to resolve the financial crunch through which Utkal Tannery was passing.⁵ Both the master minds came together face to face and reviewed the entire gamut of circumstances and situations the country was facing with. On this occasion particularly for Mahatma Gandhi, this meeting was highly rewarding yielding bountiful returns. During their deliberations, the vision of Mahatma Gandhi was widened to a legendary proportions. At the close of the deliberation, Madhusudan Das invited Mahatma Gandhi to come down to Cuttack for visiting the Utkal Tannery, which was conceived and designed as a fore-running venture for the rehabilitation of the subjugated untouchables.

In response to the request made by Madhusudan Das, Mahatma Gandhi came down to Cuttack on 19.8.1925 and visited the Utkal Tannery which had practical kept him non-plussed, perceiving the size and the enormity of the venture. The visit had a electrifying effect on Mahatma Gandhi. To salvage the Utkal Tannery he decided to acquire the project which did not of course materialise.⁶ However later on Mahatma Gandhi started a tannery at Sabarmati Ashram during the year 1928 after seeking detailed guidance from Madhusudan Das.⁷

Mahatma Gandhi arrived in Orissa on his marathon tour covering a period of nearly a fortnight. He entered Orissa on 3rd December 1927 and finally reached Cuttack on 18th December 1927, after covering long distances in the journey. This prolonged heavy entourage in a speed of a whirlwind had completely exhausted

Mahatma Gandhi, adversely affecting his health. Blood pressure was running high with a slight temperature in the body when he reached Cuttack and pined for Madhusudan Das. Congress workers had made arrangements for his stay. But Madhusudan joining Mahatma Gandhi at the point of his arrival had practically snatched him away. On reaching the residence of Madhusudan, Mahatma Gandhi felt relaxed. The very touch of his fingers gave him immediate relief.⁸

In the deliberation with Mahatma Gandhi, Madhusudan Das laid stress on the introduction of rural industries and handicrafts in the villages, which would have an invigorating effect on the rural society. The application of the fingers, in producing an industrial product would have its immediate impact on the psyche of a person, keeping him alert, smart, intelligent and enterprising.

After fully recovering from the illness, Mahatma Gandhi left Cuttack on 21st December to attend the All India National Congress Session held at Madras.

During these four recorded contacts of Mahatma Gandhi with Madhusudan Das the total period of interaction was hardly less than a week. Yet the effect of these significant and memorable meetings with Madhusudan Das, on the psyche of Mahatma Gandhi was so startling, overpowering and engrossing that within the span of the period from 1925 to 1938, Mahatma Gandhi had not only paid tributes to Madhusudan Das in glowing terms by writing nearly seventeen articles and write ups in Young India, Harijan, Navajivan, Harijan Bandhu, Hindu, Bombay Chronicle and other leading papers but also had placed Madhusudan Das with deep reverence in an enviable position of adoration comparable with Leo Tolstoy, who had created an indelible impression on the mind of Mahatma Gandhi during early career of his life.

After the All India Congress came into power in various states of India during the election held in the year 1937, Mahatma Gandhi took a firm decision to introduce 'Basic Education' as an effective system in the educational curriculum of these states. For this purpose he convened a meeting of All India Educational Conference at Seagaon on 22nd October 1937. While delivering his momentous address in the All India Educational Conference on that historic day Mahatma Gandhi said "The late Madhusudan Das was a lawyer, but he was convinced that without the use of hands and legs our brain would be atrophied and even if it worked, it would be a home of Satan. Tolstoy had taught the same lesson through many of his tales."⁹ It was really a proverbial statement of paramount importance, in which while paying glowing tribute, Mahatma Gandhi placed Madhusudan Das in par with his earlier pathfinder, Count Leo Tolstoy, the international celebrity.

Madhusudan Das was projecting the effectiveness of the Basic Education in close association with the vocational training through his powerful delivery of speeches replete with spellbinding eulogies, on the floors of the Bengal Legislative Council as early as 1896 which had created a furore among the Conservatives aligned with the imperialist forces.¹⁰ Mahatma Gandhi was indebted to Madhusudan Das for his ramifications and further elaborations of the supreme concept of the application of Basic-cum-Vocational Education, which was deeply grounded in the various projects, launched by Madhusudan Das.

In the articles written on 'National School at Bombay' published in Navajivan on 23.9.1928¹¹, 'Statements on Untouchability' published in Bombay Chronicle on 15.11.1932¹² and 'The Village Tanning and Its Possibilities' published in Harijan on 7.9.1934,¹³ Mahatma Gandhi lauded Madhusudan Das for his

praiseworthy and commendable venture of the Utkal Tannery, for inlaying in it, the primarily fundamental yet supremely significant objective of introducing the diversified aspects of basic-cum-vocational education. Really this formed the integral part and the focal core in the schedule of the work undertaken in the giant manufacturing unit of the Utkal Tannery. In this tannery besides 100 skilled cobblers and tanners, nearly 300 semi-skilled and unskilled Dalits were engaged thus making this huge undertakings a memorable and colossal edifice designed to provide fruitful and remunerative livelihood to the deprived classes. This was first of its kind in the entire country.

To the utter surprise of Mahatma Gandhi, in the year 1932 the issue of the alienated depressed class of people surfaced into a major crisis, never witnessed before. The issue relating to untouchability and the representation of depressed classes in the administration of the country erupted with vehemence, shattering the entire fabric of the society. To resolve the crisis Mahatma Gandhi had to go on fast unto death on 20th September 1932. On this occasion Mahatma Gandhi was reminded of Madhusudan Das. After the fast was over he paid tributes to Madhusudan Das, by writing a special article on 15.11.1932 in Bombay Chronicle¹⁴ in the following manner.

"Madhusudan Das, a great philanthropist and had himself learnt the modern process of tanning, had prepared statistics to show what the country was losing annually owing to the superstition of untouchability masquerading under the name of religion. Harijan workers can learn the method and acquaint the tanners with it in so far as it is practicable."

Besides projecting the basic-cum-vocational education as the co-ordinated activity of the Utkal Tannery, Madhusudan Das had laid the real thrust on the removal of the corroding

and degrading features of untouchability. In reality in the day- to- day life, the alienated and deprived sections of the community were subjected to harsh oppression and crippling exploitation beyond any measures of human tolerance. This has been stated with conviction and further affirmation by Mahatma Gandhi. While paying deep obeisance to his mentor and pathfinder Madhusudan Das, in the article on "Village Tanning and Its Possibility" published in Harijan on 7.9.1935,¹⁵ Mahatma Gandhi wrote as follows:

'The divorce of intellect from body labour has made us perhaps shortest lived, most resourceless and most exploited nation on the earth. The state of village tannery is perhaps the best proof of my indictment. It was late Madhusudan Das, who opened my eyes to the great crime against a part of humanity. He sought to make reparation by opening what might be called an educational tannery'.

In an article in Navajivan, Gandhi used even stronger words. Cruelties to the untouchables did not merely equal to the Punjab atrocities; they constituted 'an outrage grosser than that in Punjab against which we have been protesting'

'We segregate them drive them to live on the outskirts of the village, (are) not concerned whether they live or die Give them food left over by others'. (C.W.M.G. Vol.XIX p.331)¹⁶

Mahatma Gandhi as the chronicler of Madhusudan Das had brought out the glorious yet a forgotten chapter in the eventful life of Madhusudan Das in his article 'Advise to a Harijan Worker' published in Harijan Bandhu¹⁷ on 3.9.1937. It was as follows :

"We have to see how better tanning of leather could be done in the villages : What did Madhusudan Das do ? He gathered the tanners

of Utkal and studied how they did their tanning. He was not satisfied with it, and he went to Germany and saw leather work there. He brought a German (expert) with him and set up a factory. It is no longer under him. I do not know its present condition. Many Harijans learnt the work during the days of Madhusudan Das. Like Madhusudan Das you too should first master the craft. It cannot be done in one month's time. You can do very well, if you learn it properly."

Mahatma Gandhi was deeply moved by the candid revelation made by Madhusudan Das about the gnawing and depraving state of affairs prevailing in the rural India in which a slumberous peasant was reduced to the degrading state of an animal while passing his time in perpetual lethargy and inertia. This penetrative yet highly startling revelation of Madhusudan Das based on his lifelong investigation was projected in its proper perspective by Mahatma Gandhi in the article published in the Harijan on 7.9.1934.¹⁸

'When the village handicrafts disappear, the villagers working only with their cattle on the field, with idleness for six or four months in the year, must, in the words of Madhusudan Das, be reduced to the level of the beast and be without proper nourishment, either of the mind or the body, and therefore, without joy and without hope.'

Mahatma Gandhi had undertaken the historic walking tour in Orissa passing through the hamlets and villages mostly inhabited by the deprived and alienated Dalits from 15.5.1934 to 8.6.1934. This highly eventful and engrossing tour had brought sweeping changes in the mental set up of Mahatma Gandhi and provided a new dimension to the work schedule taken up by him in the rural India. Giving the entire credit for this to Madhusudan Das for his encompassing vision endowed with supreme sensibility and compassionate fellow feeling for the lowliest of

the low, Mahatma Gandhi said in his speech delivered at a public meeting held on 23.2.1935 at Nagpur as follows.¹⁷

"It was during my walk in Orissa in course of my Harijan tours that it was clearly brought to me that the village industries must be revived, if Khadi is to be made universal. I could not have realised this in any tour by rail or car.

As the late Madhusudan Das has said 'our villagers were fast being reduced to the state of brutes with which they work and live; as a result of forced idleness in which they pass their days.'

If this continues in that state even independence would little improve the state of India. I therefore, decided that I must in the evening of my life make a heroic effort to end this idleness and inertia. This may be considered quixotic but it was my firm faith that he who undertakes to do something in the name of God and full faith on him, even at the end of his days does not work in vain and I am sure that the work. I have undertaken is not mine, it is God's. (**Harijan - 1.3.1935**).

It was certainly a work of supreme sacrifice. Providence had brought Mahatma Gandhi closer to his mentor Madhusudan Das. It was divine intervention. The work undertaken by Mahatma Gandhi was placed at the altar of the Supreme as a dedicated offering.

On the sad demise of Madhusudan Das, Mahatma Gandhi paid his sublime tribute in a tone of benediction in the following words.²⁰

"I had the privilege of meeting the late Madhusudan Das. He was a great patriot. He held most liberal views about religion. Though he professed Christianity, he had the same regard for Hinduism that he entertained for his own faith. He wore himself out in teaching the youth of the country the dignity of labour and gave practical

proof of his teaching by establishing at great sacrifice a tannery in Cuttack."

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Shri Surasinha Patnaik lives at Light House Square, Gopalpur, Ganjam.