

Gandhiji and Harijan Movement in Orissa

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"Harijan Service is a religious obligation. There is no room in it for cunning. It has to be absolutely faithful and non-violent. It can be accomplished only by sacrifice and penance. I very much fear that we shall not be able to win the trust of Harijans without self-purification it should not surprise us, if today they look upon all we do with suspicion and distrust. Hitherto we had been riding their shoulders. We must dismount if we would do justice to them, and regard them as we regard other Hindus.," so writes Gandhiji in 'Young India', dated March 12, 1931.

The Second Round Table Conference brought no boon for the Indian rather it injected a poisonous serum into India's Freedom Struggle. In August 1932 the British Prime Minister Ramsay Mac Donold announced the famous Communal Award which provided separate electorates for the communities like the Hindus, the Muslims, the Sikhs, the Christians and other minorities such as the Harijans. Mahatma Gandhi returned from the Round Table Conference dejected, deceived and distressed. On his return, however, the Congress Working Committee authorized him to resume the Civil Disobedience Movement which was launched again. He was arrested but the Movement continued.

In protest against the Communal Award, Gandhiji began his fast unto death, inside the

prison. He said, "What I want, and what I am living for, and I should delight in dying for, is the eradication of untouchability, root and branch. Separate electorates for Harijans, he thought, would paralyse the cause of reform. The nation was shocked at Gandhiji's decision. The leaders of various communities including Dr. Ambedker, a prominent Harijan leader, met and a settlement was reached. Gandhiji accepted it and the famous Yervade pact was signed.

Gandhiji's fight against untouchability was a hard task, for he found lack of support among his own followers. He started an All India Anti-touchability League in September 1932 and the Weekly, Harijana, in January 1933. On May 7, 1933 he had an unusual experience as he began a twenty-one day fast for self-purification, on Harijan cause. Sabarmati Ashram was handed over to Harijan Sevak Sangh. Eradication of untouchability being an important Constructive Programme, Gandhiji could never tolerate social inequality, the feeling of high and low among the citizens of India. He could not tolerate that a community the human beings should be treated as worse than animals.

Despite his many fasts, he felt that the hearts of the people still needed to be changed. After recovering his strength at the Wardha Ashram,

he set out on a tour of the country on November 7, 1933.

A branch of Harijan Sevak Sangha was organized at Cuttack under the Chairmanship of Balukeswar Acharya, a renowned Kaviraj of Cuttack. Smt. Rama Devi, Laxmi Narayan Mishra and Satyanarayan Sengupta were chosen as Secretaries. Acharya Harihar Das, Harekrushna Mahatab, Bichitrananda Das, Radhanath Ratha and Gunanidhi Mahanty were prominent Members. The Utkal Harijan Sevak Sangha in Orissa undertook various reformatory programmes like allowing the untouchable to enter the temples, public tanks and wells, opening of schools and hospitals for the children and teaching them the simple rules of Health and Hygiene. On the other hand some conservatives opposed this movement. Prominent leaders like Nilakanth Das, Lokanath Mishra, Raghunath Mishra requested for opening the doors of the temple of Lord Jagannath at Puri for the people of all castes but the Raja of Puri opposed it. But in various places of Orissa the Harijans enjoyed the privileges of free entry into the temples.

In 1934, Gandhiji wanted to launch Harijan Movement in Orissa for eradication of untouchability. He arrived at the Jharsuguda Junction on the 5th May, 1934 at 5 a.m. and from Jharsuguda he motored to Sambalpur. He collected a good amount of money for Harijan Fund. On May 6, 1934 Gandhiji left for Anugul. The vicious attitude of the Deputy Commissioner of Anugul to foil Gandhiji's visit could not be successful. Gandhiji's name exerted an extraordinary appeal and thousands thronged to have a Darshan. He pointed out that untouchability has no place in the Shastra and urged the people to gospel the idea of untouchability from their minds. On the 8th May, 1934 Gandhiji unveiled the statue of the Late Pandit Gapabandhu Das and paid high

tribute to his selfless deeds and exhorted the audience to emulate his noble ideas.

Gandhiji began his historic Padayatra or Footmarch on the 9th May, 1934 at 5.30 a.m. along Puri-Cuttack road. His party included A.V. Thakkar, Miss Bira Ben, Sushila Ben Uma Bajaj, Pravavati Devi, Balaji Gobindji Desai, Damodar Das, Gapabandhu Chaudhury, Rama Devi, Harekrushna Mahatab, Nilakanth Das and others.

Gandhiji visited Kadua Ashram founded by the Late Gapabandhu Das, stayed in its Harijan boarding and thereafter he addressed a large gathering at Birapurastampur. On the 13th May, 1934 Gandhiji and his party went from Balakati to Satyabhamapur and the Harijan were invited to dine with the team of padayatri there. On May 15th, 1934 Gandhiji performed the ceremony of opening the Kunja Bihari Temple at Baliana to all Hindus including Harijans. At Telengapenth about 2000 people shouting "Gandhiji ki jai" followed Gandhiji on his route. Gandhiji and his party arrived at Kajipatna from Telengapenth. An address was presented there to Mahatmaji by the neighboring villagers. In the evening May 16, 1934 there was a huge meeting of the citizens of Cuttack on the Kathajodi sands. Gandhiji appealed to the people to give up caste prejudices, intoxicants, abolish purdah, use the homespun Khadi and to open temples, wells and schools to the Harijans.

In order to attend a meeting of A.I.C.C. Gandhiji and his party left Cuttack for Patna on the 16th May, 1934 by the Puri Express suspending his pilgrimage on foot after covering 54 miles from Puri to Cuttack in 8 days. He again returned to Orissa on 21 May to resume his second phase of Padayatra in Orissa. On return from Patna, Gandhiji cancelled the rest on his programme of tour on foot on account of monsoon. Gandhiji and party left for Wardha on

the 8th June, 1934 via Balasore and Kharagpur. In his farewell address he spoke to the volunteers "you have laboured with rater devotion and never complained of overwork. You have laboured night and day in order to make the pilgrimage a success..... I would ask you to continue the work so well began in the villages. I leave Utkal with happy memories of association with you".

The immense footmarch in Orissa for Harijan upliftment had a significant impact on national life. It gave a momentum to the programmes like village reconstruction. Harijans' welfare and Khadi throughout Orissa and heralded a new era of social emancipation. Some

organizations were born to take up the Harijan uplift. Dr.H.K.Mahatab established Karma Mandir (Temple of Duty) at Agarpada. Gopabandhu Choudhury established Sevaghar (Abode of service) at Bari in the district of Cuttack. There were other similar institutions, such as Gopabandhu Sebashram of Sakhigopal, Satyagraha Ashram of Soro, Sebakutir of Delang, Patitamohan Mission of Berhampur and Harijan Sevak Sangh of Jajpur all dedicated to Harijan welfare.

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