

Harijan Upliftment Movement in Orissa During National Freedom Struggle

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The 'Fast Unto Death' of Mahatma Gandhi in protest against 'Communal Award of August 1932' was one of the most significant attempts of his career. His attempt aroused great anxiety in the hearts of millions in India and they breathed a sign of relief when his fast ended. The week following the end of his 'Fast unto Death' was celebrated throughout India as Untouchability Abolition Week for 'Self-Purification' on Harijan cause. His fight against untouchability was a fight against the 'impurity in humanity'. Gandhiji's total emphasis was for removal of all social disabilities of the Harijans.



In the meantime All India Harijan Sevak Sangha was instituted with G.D. Birla as its President and A.V. Thakkar as Secretary. A branch of 'Harijan Sevak Sangha' was organised in Orissa also at Cuttack under the Chairmanship of Balunkeswar Acharya. Smt. Rama Devi, Laxmi Narayan Misra and Satyanarayan Sengupta were chosen as its Secretaries. Acharya Harihar Das, H.K. Mahtab, Bichitrananda Das, Radhanath Rath and Gunanidhi Mohanty became its active members. When the Civil Disobedience

Movement began to fritter away, most of the leaders including Gopabandhu Choudhury, Rama Devi and many Congress leaders devoted themselves enthusiastically to the cause of the Harijan Welfare Movement in Orissa. Mukunda Prasad Das and Bhagaban Mahapatra guided the movement in Balasore and Bhadrak respectively. Pandit Nilakanth Das and

Lokanath Mishra guided the Harijan Movement in Puri. Harijan Sevak Sangh of Sambalpur was functioning under Nrusingha Guru. Jagannath Das, Fanindra Nath Samal and Narayan Chandra Ghose were members of Harijan Sevak Sangh at Jajpur. The visit

of A.V. Thakkar spread the Harijan Movement in Orissa. For the promotion of education among the Harijans, Thakkar promised here special sanction for 'Utkal Harijan Sevak Sangh.' The revolutionary literature which grew so abundantly during this epoch generated a new sense of unity and political awareness among the people of Orissa.

On behalf of the 'Utkal Harijan Sevak Sangh', programmes like allowing the untouchables free access to the temples, public

tanks and wells, opening of schools and hostels for their children, and teaching them the simple rules of health and hygiene were undertaken with great zeal. The programme of Gopabandhu Choudhury, Satyanarayan Sengupta, Radhanath Rath, Raj Krushna Bose and A.B. Acharya to enable the untouchables' enter into the temples of Cuttack was opposed by Parikshit Dash Sarma, the Secretary of 'Utkal Sanatan Dharma Rakshini Sabha.' Sarma asserted that the removal of untouchability would destroy the *Sanatan* religion. The move of Pandit Nilakantha Das, Lokanath Mishra and Raghunath Mishra for opening the doors of the Jagannath Temple at Puri for the people of all castes was opposed by members of Sanatana Dharma Rakhini Sabha. But in different places of Orissa, gradually more and more temples were made open to the Harijans. Subsequently, the Caste Hindus employed the Harijans, accepted food and water from them; wells and bathing ghats were opened for them and they were encouraged to participate in the public dinners. This process of socialisation and interaction made a great impact on both rural and urban people of Orissa.

Few steps were taken by Rama Devi and Haimavati Devi for the promotion of education among Harijan children. On behalf of Anti-Untouchability Board, Rama Devi and her associates like Mangala Sengupta, Godavari Das, Sobha Panda, Annapurna Choudhury, Tulasi Mohanty, Manik Devi and Sushila Devi worked with great enthusiasm to promote social well-being of the Harijans. To encourage learning and social awakening among the Harijans many schools were opened all over Orissa. However, the Congress workers and social reformers rendered commendable service in generating awareness among the Harijans before Gandhiji's eventful 5th visit

to Orissa on 5th May, 1934. Gandhiji addressed huge gatherings at Jharsuguda and Sambalpur, collected a good amount of money for Harijan Fund and enroute to Puri he addressed a mammoth gathering at Angul, where he pointed out that untouchability has no place in the *Shashtra* and urged the people to dispel the idea of untouchability from their minds. Larger and larger crowd followed Gandhiji as he marched on Cuttack-Puri road. At some places he visited Harijan inhabitants advising them to discard intoxicants and follow simple rules of health and hygiene. While addressing the public meetings, he urged the Caste Hindus to treat the Harijans as their brothers and to give up the curse of untouchability, and warned that 'Hinduism will be effected altogether' if this evil is not resisted. He visited 'Gopabandhu Sevasadan' or 'Kadua Ashram', stayed in its Harijan boarding and addressed the Brahmins of Birapurushottampur who were in favour of the removal of Untouchability. At Satyabhamapur, the Harijans were invited to dine with the team of *Padayatris* of Gandhiji's march. At Baliana, Gandhi performed the ceremony of opening the Conga Behari Temple to all Hindus, including Harijans. Then in a mammoth gathering on the river bed of Kathjori at Cuttack, Gandhiji appealed to give up caste prejudices, intoxicants, abolish *pardah*, use the homespun Khadi and throw open temples, wells and schools to the Harijan.

Gandhiji's second phase of *Padayatra* started from Baree. In this *yatra* he visited few places like Champapur, Bheda, Lekhanpur, Bahukud, Patpur, Nischintakoili, Jajpur, Manjuri, Bhandaripokhari, Todang and Garadpur. Gandhiji was impressed by the devotion and enthusiasm of Rama Devi, Subhadra Devi and other eminent women like

Sunamoni Devi, Radhamoni Devi, Godavari Devi, Sobha Devi, Annapurna Maharana, Mangala Sengupta and Manika Devi for promoting Khadi and Harijan Welfare. At Bhadrak, Gandhiji associated himself with Harijan workers for flood relief and spinning of *Charkha*.

The visit of Gandhiji to Orissa for Harijan Welfare had a tremendous impact on national life. Despite the formidable resistance of the Sanatanists, the pilgrimage of Gandhiji gave a momentum to the programmes like Rural Reconstruction, Harijan Welfare and Promotion of Khadi throughout Orissa and heralded a new era of social emancipation. Most of the socio-religious activists who became constructive workers, devoted themselves whole-heartedly for the socio-economic upliftment of the people of Orissa. Some of the centres like 'Karma Mandir' of Agarpada and Balasore guided by H.K. Mahtab; 'Bhadrak Ashram' of Bhadrak managed by Jivaramji Kalyanji, Iswarlal Vyas and Puru Bai; and 'Bari Ashram' of Bari and Cuttack guided by Gopabandhu Choudhury with the assistance of Rama Devi, Annapurna Devi, Surendra Nath Patnaik, Binod Kanungo and others emerged conspicuous for their common service in organising Rural Reconstruction Programme and promoting Harijan Welfare.

In order to promote the Harijan cause Gandhiji covered many areas in his all-India tour including Orissa. Radical nationalists were not happy as Gandhiji shifted his attention from the main issue like Anti-imperialist Struggle to Harijan Welfare. Orthodox Hindus within the Congress also did not like his utmost concern for the Harijans. Many Congress men, of course, were critical of Gandhiji for his new emphasis on Harijan Welfare, but eventually his mission proved to be remarkably successful in creating a new identify of the Harijans *vis-a-vis* the National Congress. Gandhiji's programme of Harijan Upliftment consolidated the socio-political solidarity which also created a broader base of popular response to the future nationalist cause. The nationalist struggle against the alien British Government became more vigorous and purposeful hereafter. All over the country this movement gradually petered out, but in Orissa the sparks and flashes of the movement remained alive due to Gandhiji's famous visit for Harijan Welfare work. It helped indirectly to mobilise the lowest and most oppressed sections of the rural Orissa for the cause of freedom struggle.

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Hon'ble Chief Minister Shree Naveen Patnaik addressing the Orientation Programme for newly elected Hon'ble Members of Orissa Legislative Assembly on 31st July, 2004

