



SOCIAL MOVEMENT IN ORISSA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO TEMPLE ENTRY MOVEMENT (1930 – 1938)

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(Abstract: - Gandhi believed that the temple was in the core of everyday life for millions of Hindus whether they be caste Hindus or untouchables. His vision therefore was of equal access to temples in a system with no high and no low. The caste Hindus had threaded the untouchables badly by excluding them and Gandhi welcomed them into a common religious arena, the temple. Gandhi wanted for achieving equality when untouchables would become equals. Gandhi wrote an article in the Hindu of what a perfect temple was. The perfect temple would be one where the priest was a devoted man of God who had the least of needs and personal ties. His sole concern would be the welfare of his people. The temple would have to be accessible to the untouchables and other poor in clean surroundings and without discrimination)

ISSN : 2348-5612 © URR



Gandhiji gave much stress for the upliftment of the untouchables, the weakest, the poorest, the most depressed classed for bringing about the harmonious and homogeneous society. But for them, no socialistic and democratic society would be possible. For Gandhi Orissa was a 'Land of Love'¹. To fulfill his depressed classes Gandhiji devoted his heart and soul for the upliftment of the dressed class and the so called Harijan. To him Harijans were the children of God.² With the help of the Indian National congress Gandhi carried on the process of Hinduisation and assimilation of dipressed classes through an innovative ideological concept like Harijan, temple entry movement, opening of wells and persuading the depressed classes for adopting Hindu norms of life.³

Gandhi's fast unto death in protest against common Award of August 1932 was one of the most successful actions of his life. From the political point of views, of course, he was successful in preventing possible emergence of a third force of over fifty millions into the arena of Indian politics. But his involvement with the cause of untouchables whom he called Harijans was rooted in deep humanitarianism, planted in him from the very childhood. Gandhiji confessed "my mother said, you must not touch this, he is an untouchable, why not ? I questioned back, and from that day my revolt began."⁴

His fight against untouchability was fight against the impure in humanity. In 1933 he declared, "my battling against untouchability and is dedicating myself to that battle, I have no less an ambition than to see a complete regeneration of humanity."⁵ While drawing the Hindu attention in the intolerable slight of the untouchable, He argued, "It is simple fanatical obstinacy to persist in persecuting man in the sacred name of religion."⁶

Gandhi organized an All India Anti-untouchability league in September 1932 and published a weekly journal known as Harijan in January 1933 for wide publicity of the new movement. The week, following the end of his 'fast unto death' was celebrated throughout the India as untouchability Abolition week. On 8 May 1933 Gandhi began twenty one days fast for self purification on Harijan cause and Sabarmati Ashram was handed over to Harijan



sevak Sangha. He covered 12,500 mile on foot in this All India tour in order to promote the Harijan cause. But the radical nationalists were not happy as Gandhiji shifted his attentions from the main issue like anti imperialist struggle to anti untouchability work. However Gandhiji's performance of Harijan upliftment while consolidating the socio political solidarity created a larger base for popular response to the future nationalist cause.⁷

The All Indian Anti untouchability League was renamed as All-India Harijan Sevak Sangha with Ghanashyam Das Birla as its president, Amritlal Thakur as Secretary. Its branch in Orissa was organized at Cuttack with 28 members. Balukeswar Acharya, a famous Kaviraj of Cuttack was its Chairman. Rama devi, Laxmi Narayan Mishra and Satyanarayan Sengupta were made its secretaries. Some of the notable members were Acharya Harihar Das, Bichitrananda Das, Radhanath Rath, Gunanidhi Mohanty and Harekrushna Mahatab. Its main objective was to remove socio economic disabilities of the Harijans. Efforts were made for the temple entry of the Harijans and use of the public tanks and wells by them.⁸

Harijan movement spread like a wild fire from village to village. Gopabandhu Choudhury and his wife Rama Devi led the movement in Cuttack. Godavari Das, Annapurna Choudhury, Mangala Sengupta, Manika Devi, Sushila devi, Tulasi Mohanty and others stood behind Rama Devi to wipe out the age old social evil like untouchability. Mukunda Prasad Das and Choudhury Bhagabat Prasad Mohapatra carried on the movement in Balasore and Bhadrak respectively. Pandit Nilakantha Das and Lokanath Mishra guided the Harijan movement in Puri. Narasingha Guru took in charge of Harijan Sevak Sangha in the Sambalpur district. Jagannath Das, Fanindranath Samal and Narayan Chandra Ghose were actively busy with the welfare of the depressed classes in the Jajpur area. In 20 November, 1932 a meeting was held under the chairmanship of Gopabandhu Choudhury which was addressed by A.V. Thakur, the Secretary of the All Indian Harijan Sevak Sangha. ⁹ on behalf of the Utkal Harijan Sevak Sangha, Programme like allowing the untouchable access the temple, 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 efforts of Gopabandhu Choudhury, Satyanarayan Sengupta, Radhanath Rath, Raja Krushna Bose and Atal Bihari Acharya to allow the untouchable entry into the temples of the Cuttack city were opposed by Prikshita Dash Sharma, the Secretary of Utkal Sanatana Dharma Rakshini Sabha. Dash Sharma firmly held that the removal of untouchability would destroy the Sanatan religion.¹⁰ In Puri two opposite parties came front to front. The pro entry group led by Nilakantha Das and Lokanath Mishra, Raghunath Mishra who were the in favour of the Harijan entry into the temple. The anti entry group was against the Harijan entry into the temple. On 8 January 1933 both the groups assembled in front of the Jagannath Temple at Puri. The pro entry group for opening of the doors of Lord Jagannath of Puri for the people of all castes was opposed by the anti entry group like the Raja puri, priests of the temple, Mahanta of Emar Math, Hariram Goenka and other members of Sanatan Dharm Rakashi Sabha. Both the groups organized meeting of their own and argued of their own stand. The result was that the temple entry movement in Puri could not get much success due to the resistance of the local Raja and the conservative people.¹¹

Although the movement for the temple entry of the Harijan was not successful in Puri, in some other places of Orissa temple were opened for the Harijans. Harekrushna Mahatab, as a true follower of Gandhiji, opened the temple of his family deity lord Krishna.¹² Similarly, Narayan Birbara Samanta allowed the Harijans to enter the



Parameswar temple at Paradip.¹³ The other temples which opened their doors for Harijans were Raghunath temple of Berhampur, Gopinath Temple of Remuna at Balasore and Shiva temple at Kujanga.¹⁴ Harijan Sevak Sangha worked miracles. Some celebrated Hindus took food and water from the Harijans. The Harijan in many places allowed taking water from the common well and bathing in the common ponds. Harijan Sevak Sangha established twenty six school for Harijans and depressed both day schools and night schools.

In order to popularize the entry of the Harijans into temples poets and authors took up cudgel against untouchability. Being inspired by Gandhiji's speeches and writings, newspaper carried news of temple entry that took place in different areas. The popular song of Jatiya Kabi Bira Kishor made the following passionate prayer to Lord jagannath to remove this man made heinous system called untouchability.¹⁵

Let us ask Lord Jagannath

*O Lord,
 You are omnipotent
 And your names we chant
 So tell us why
 Are we made orphans
 You see everything,
 Nothing betrays you eyes
 Your Fag Flies high in the sky
 So tell us why
 Shall we b left high and dry
 Those whom we serve
 Throughout our lives
 Keep us in misery
 And detest our shadows
 So tell us
 What rule is this follow
 X x x x x x
 They say
 Gandhi has come from you
 To end our misery
 So tell us Lord
 If this be true
 We do accept him
 To find our liberty.*

As per the promise made to Gandhiji in 1934 Baman Charan Das and Nanda Kishore Das assisted by Harish Chandra Das of Neula, Bhagirathi Das of Anandapur and Gobardhan Puhan and Artabandhu Mohanty of Aranga bad allowed the Harijan to enter into the temples of their family deities. When the question was raised by sanatani Hindus, rama devi and Binod Kanungo came to the rescue of the above Gandhites.¹⁶ In 1936 Laxmi Narayan Mishra and Budhram Dubey of Sambalpur attended the opening ceremony of a Harijan temple constructed at Pandru Pathar village in Jharsuguda.

In order to give a greater momentum to the depressed classes, Gandhi with his party came to Orissa for the fourth time in 1939. He reached in Jharsuguda on 5th May 1939 by train. Then he and his follower came to Meramunduli railway station by cars and went on Puri by train. Gandhi arrived Puri at 11 P.M. on 6th May 1934.¹⁷ and he was accompanied by Miraben, Amritlal Thakkal, Balaji Govindji Desai, Damoda Das, Kaka Kalekar and



Pravavati Devi, the wife of Jay Prakash Narayan. He walked to his place of residence at Chakra Tirtha on the sea beach. Gandhiji spent 7th May as his day of silence. On 8th May 1934 a public meeting was held at the Lion's gate of the Jagannath temple. Gandhiji addressed the meeting and unviled the marble statue of Pandit Gopabandhu Das and paid his high tribute to his selfless work, lofty ideals. He also said that Gopabandhu Das was not only an Orissan figure but also an all india figure. There he was welcomed by the citizens of Puri and Taruna Sahitya Samaj together with purses of Rs. 400 and Rs. 21/- respective. Then Gandhi delivered speech by announcing that his walking tour or Pada yatra would start from Puri where all Hindus take the Mahaprasad of Jagannath.¹⁸ He said “ Gandhiji gave the citizens an idea of the new dispensation. He was glad that his walking tour would commence from Jagannath Puri, the eastern Shrine for Excellence, where all Hindues received the Prasad of the lord of the universe on a footing of perfect equality. The walking piligrimage emphasized the spiritual nature of the Harijan movement..... People were welcome to join in his piligrimage but they must not try to touch his feet or crowd round him. They must walk behind the pilgrim, never ahead or a breast of them and obey their instructions. They must not make noises, but March in peace and they must make their own arrangements for food and shelter. There not be any burden to the villagers.”¹⁹

The Sanatanists were against the activities of Gandhi. They were very much hostile for the temple entry of Harijans programmes. They invited Swami Lainath from Benaras. With the support of the Raja of Puri and few mahantas, the sanatanis held organized meeting from 4th May to 8th May 1934. They denounced Gandhiji as an imposter and a cheat and his Harijan Movement as an attempt to destroy the Hindu religion.²⁰ At the beginning of Gandhiji's Parayatra, the sanatanis showed him black flags, pasted placards containing 'Go back Gandhi' on the walls of Puri town and circulated an oriya booklet entitled “Asli Gandhi”.²¹

Gandhi began his strategy Harijan Padyatra at 5.30 AM on 9th May 1934 from Puri along the Puri Cuttack road. Although he could not lead the untouchables to enter into the Jagannath temple Puri, he himself did not visit the temple on the ground that the untouchable were not allowed to enter the temple. In Balianta, Gandhi performed the ceremony of Opening the Nikunja Behari Temple to all Hindus including Harijans. Visiting various Harijan Bastic Gandhi and his party left Cuttack on 16 May 1934 in order to attend a meeting of AICC at Patna and again returned to Orissa on 21 May to resume his second phase of Pada yatra in Orissa.

Gandhiji in bold way criticized the temples particularly Jagannath temples preventing the Harijans to the temples. The temple of Jagannath was in fact a great social religious resolution against all short of inequality, prejudices etc. While inaugurating an exhibition of arts and crafts of Orissa at Delang in March 1938, Gandhi stated very rightly Orissa is the land of my Love in India. Ever since I landed in India, I began to hear of Orissa's poverty and famine... Later Orissa became for me a place of Pilgrimage not because of the temple of the lord of the world was there..... for it was not opened to me, as it was not opened to the Harijans but because I thought of a novel way of touring the country of the sacred mission of the abolition of untouchability.

“Jagannath, the Lord of the world' Gandhiji continued has the reputation of being the most famous in India. For there all human distinctions are supposed to vanish and Brahmin and Pariah brush shoulders with one another trying for the darshan of the Lord, and even eat his Prasad out of one another's hands. But evidently it has outlived



that reputation and description has become a fiction, for Harijans would not be suffered to enter the great temple. I said to myself that so long as these distinctions endured before the very eyes of the Lord of the world, that he was the lord of those who exploited his name and kept Harijans out, but certainly not the Lord of the world. My ambition of the restoring of its old reputation to the temple is yet unfulfilled you have to help me in fulfilling it.²² The temple which bans the depressed, the down trodden and the so-called Harijans, the Lord of the temple is not the Lord of depressed, the down trodden and the Harijan".²³

Toward the mid of the 19th century the important legislature measure, the Orissa Temple Entry Authorisation and Indemnity Bill 1947 was also introduced by the premier Harekrushna Mahatab. The bill was regarding the temple entry of scheduled caste and intended to remove a legal disability which had been imposed upon them by virtue of long standing customs.²⁴ The most important provision of the bill was that there was no legal bar in throwing open on the part of large section of the scheduled caste to enter temple was genuine desire and temples should be thrown open to Harijans. In replying to the criticism that the kind of measure was a mild one and Government should use force to bring about reform in society, the premier explained that this was a permissive bill and it did not compel any section of the trustee or worshippers to do a certain thing. But where the trustees and worshippers in general agree that Harijan should enter into the temples, they could do it.²⁵

The bill was also criticized on the ground that if the trustees did not permit the harijans to enter into temples, the bill would remain a dead letter.²⁶ However, the bill was passed and received Governor General's assent on a April 1947.²⁷

From the above mentioned factors it is revealed that Temple Entry Movement in Orissa gained momentum and Gandhiji's welfare activities for Harijan had a tremendous impact on the national and social life. In spite of the resistance of the sanatanists, the pilgrimage of Gandhi earned the programmes like village reconstruction and Harijan welfare. In post independence era it opened the flood gates for elimination of social prejudices and heralded a new area of social emancipation.

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