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Law, Education, and Odia Identity: Reflections from Gopabandhu Das’ Letters

Dr. Biswa Ranjan Sahoo

Assistant Professor in English,

Sri Krushna Chandra Gajapati (Autonomous) College, Paralakhemundi,

Gajapati, 761200

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Abstract:

Pandit Gopabandhu Das (1877-1928) was the most inspiring orator, the noblest socio-political worker, and the most visionary and progressive-minded educationist of late 19th century Odisha. He was a dedicated servant of humanity’s cause. Although he was marred slightly by speech deformity, it did not stop the Pandit from communicating his zeal to the millions of Odias living under the sun. Through letters, magazines periodicals, and poetry he has captivated the public's emotions that have never been seen in Odisha before. Although the gem of Utkal started his career in writing poetry as a University student, he completely forgot poetry till his final days for various nationalist activities. The foundation of Satyavadi School (1909) is one example of his multifarious activities. Every aspect of national life engaged his attention. To spread his ideas he first founded the monthly Satyavadi and later the weekly The Samaj. In these editorials, he poured his soul, feelings, and agonies. Apart from these journals and magazines he has reacted against injustice and cruelties wrought on the Odias through his letters to different officials. Uncovering those letters is the aim of the present study.

Keywords: Letters, Law, Education, Politics, Identity.

Introduction

During the 19th century, Britain saw massive growth in technology, industry, and communication. Armed with modern inventions like the telegraph, railway, internal combustion engine, bicycle, dynamite, steam turbine, the telephone, Maxim gun, and many more Britain ruled almost 85 percent of land mass and London became the colonial metropolis of the said territory. Although Britons justified colonialism as a civilizing mission

for emancipating the so-called barbaric, uncivilized, and uneducated with evil rituals and practices, it did not want the colonized to match them up. So the colonized periphery remained undeveloped, unindustrialized, and least communicable. At best what may be the greatest gift of 19th century Britain to the colonized India is telegram and railway. Had they not introduced them in India they might have faced enormous communication difficulties. Ergo, a telegram was in vogue during the late 19th century and early 20th century as a medium of quick communication. By making an ardent analysis of the letters written by Gopabandhu Das, this paper will analyze how Gopabandhu Das dared the British government for the cause of Odias and Odisha by taking law as a profession and social service as a passion.

Gopabandhu's Tryst with Law

In the year 1909 Maharaja of Mayurbhanj wrote a telegram letter to Gopal Chandra Praharaj, pleader at Cuttack Judges Court, and asked to inform Gopabandhu if he was willing to accept the post of state pleader, Mayurbhanj. After receiving the letter from Mr. Praharaj Gopabandhu gleefully accepted the offer to remain state pleader for Mayurbhanj and wrote back to him with a copy to Maharaja of Mayurbhanj. Subsequently, Maharaja Sri Ram Chandra Bhanja Deo asked Gopabandhu through Mr. Praharaj to join by 3rd January 1910. However, Gopabandhu had to settle matters at Puri and Cuttack and wanted an extension in joining which he did on 10th January 1910 reaching Baripada by Madras mail from Cuttack. His joining was confirmed by P.K. Mukherjee, the secretary to the Chief, Mayurbhanj, Baripada. Working for two and half years in Baripada, Gopabandhu tendered his resignation to the superintendent of state, Mayurbhanj on the 12th of June 1912 showing his work at Sakhigopal, Puri. Then he asked for payment of 19 days as he worked for the court. This resignation did not go down well with the state judge who denied him the fee and ordered the cancellation of his practice at Mayurbhanj as he left the criminal case State vs Banamali Dhar Mohapatra. Later reaching Baripada, Gopabandhu agreed to work for the state of Mayurbhanj till the completion of the above case which was scheduled on 2nd July 1912. On 24 August 1912, Gopabandhu wrote a letter to the State Superintendent to comply with him after due verification of his character and antecedent whether he would be able to practice at Cuttack as the High Court of Calcutta has been pleased to renew his license. Haridas Bose, the then state judge wrote, "he was very respectful to the court and as far as I know he bears an exemplary moral character." (Correspondence, 9) After the representation of Gopabandhu Das for payment of his due amount for the days he worked as a state pleader in the case of

state vs Banamali Dhar Mohapatra, much argument and counter-arguments took place and he finally received a sum of Rs 764/-.

Promotion of Education

In a letter dated 22.02.1917 addressed to Mr. Duke, Inspector of schools, Odisha Division, Gopabandhu Das has requested to open one High School at Bargarh as the Zilla School at Sambalpur is not enough to accommodate the aspiring students for education. The local philanthropist Balunkeswar Mishra was very keen on opening the school but it was impossible to sustain a school without the government's endorsement. In the last finance committee, one approval was accorded to open a school at Bargarh but it had not yet been materialized. In the same letter, he also asked for financial support to continue the publication of the Odia journal Satyabadi and recognition of Geography as a subject in Satyabadi School.

On a letter dated 21.08.1917 to Post Master General, Bankipur, Gopabandhu requested for re-registration of the old periodical 'Satyabadi' at Sakhigopal as it was earlier functioning at Berhampur in Madras Presidency. In the event of changing in the jurisdiction necessary re-registration may be done.

In the letter in August 1917 addressed to the Inspector General of Civil Hospital, Bihar and Odisha, Ranchi secretariat, Gopabandhu expressed his displeasure as two medical scholarships fixed for the pure natives of Odisha have been awarded to two Odia students of Calcutta Medical College this year, one being a Mohamedan the other is a Bihari. In response to his letter dated 22.02.1917, he wrote another letter dated 15.02.1918 showing discontent that his proposal for Rs 10,000/- to open a school at Bargarh had not been accepted in the finance committee meeting. So the government must take the necessary steps to grant the said amount to open a school in Bargarh. He gave another proposal in the same letter to open a Sanskrit college at Puri with a provision of Rs 6000/- in the budget.

The letter dated 18th February 1918 addressed to District Magistrate Puri about the closure of Cuttack Survey School which has been reduced to the status of Amin Class and attracts less number of students- instead, Cuttack School of Engineering may be opened. In another letter to the Inspector of Schools, Odisha division, Cuttack, he takes the opportunity to propose the establishment of a High English School in Satyabadi separating the lower classes from the existing High School and constituting a separate Middle English School.

Gopabandhu's letter dated 21st February 1918 to the Hon'ble Mr T.S. Macpherson, ICS, Secretary to the Legislative Council, Bihar and Orissa conveys the recommendation of Lt. Governor in Council that the government should take necessary steps to revive small industry to make salt only for domestic consumption. He took preemptive measures by writing a letter on the same date to prevent cattle disease that caused several deaths of pets in villages Gabakunda and Balanga. Then he asked for the visit of the veterinary Director to take necessary steps in this regard.

With the letter dated 21st June 1981 to Inspector of Schools Mr. W.W. Henderson, Esqr. M.A. Inspector of Schools Odisha Division Cuttack Gopabandhu wrote about the Odisha Education Piece Fund for which the Principal of Ravenshaw College is chosen as the treasurer and the collection would be done by the members of the committee who by way of their age has some influence on the villagers, however, the students would help them on collecting the fund. He expressed his dissatisfaction and showed the promise with the collection of funds lesser than expected and acknowledged a sum of Rs 3000/- which has been spent to buy a War Loan Cash Certificate in favor of Principal Ravenshaw College the honorable treasurer of the fund. He expects more collection in the second round. He desires the inspector of schools shall issue a circular for the cooperation of the headmasters and deputy inspectors of the school in this regard.

In yet another letter to the inspector of General Hospitals, Lt. Col. J.C. Vaughn, L.B.L.M.S, Bihar and Odisha, Ranchi, Mr. Das wrote on Scholarship to medical students of Odisha, "the Odias have not yet made sufficient advance in medical studies and consequently have not been adequately represented in the department." (32) However the existing Odia students are making satisfactory progress in Calcutta Medical College. More scholarships may be raised in favor of native Odias studying in Calcutta. However, he protested against the gross violation of rules that takes place in the allocation of existing scholarships which are given to Bengalis domiciled in Odisha.

Date 9th August 1918 Gopabandhu wrote a letter to Khan Bahadur Mohinuddin Ahmed, Offg. Registrar, Cooperative Societies, Bihar and Odisha, Ranchi, and expressed his pleasure in receiving the registration certificate of Sri Ramchandrapur Co-operative Society. He was skeptical of how the society would run and how the loan amount of Rs 1020/- for the sustenance of the society would be transferred to the society as the Puri Central Bank had not been established. Khurda Bank may be directed to advance the loan. He expects more

societies to open near Satyabadi soon and reiterates the opening of the Puri Central Bank. Again on 28th August 1918, he gave a gentle reminder and inquired about the progress of the opening of Puri Central Bank. One society for coconut oil makers must be established as they produce large amounts of coconut which gets rotten owing to the want of supply of wagons. He requests to make sufficient provisions to extract oil from the raw coconut. There would not be any difficulty in transporting oil as it is included in the category of war materials for which a vehicle can be hired. In this letter, Gopabandhu also wrote about the upcoming Odia article in the magazine which talks about the deprived, poor, and needy and communicates with them about their rights. For Gopabandhu,

“Co-operation, sanitation, primary education, agriculture, cottage industry, village panchayat, arbitration, and such other subjects will be dealt with in a manner which will be largely intelligible to the people and educate them in successfully looking after their several village concerns. The real strength of the mass in our body politic is being gradually recognized and if the Indian constitutional reforms are to be carried out with any degree of success, the work must begin from below and the primary condition, viz., the education of the people should be undertaken before everything else. ” (36)

He was a sentinel to protect Indian democracy and the rights of the people. He batted for self-government in local and district boards. Members of the board must be chosen by way of election and nomination with a ratio of 3:1. He endorsed the suggestion that the Civil Surgeon and the Education Officer should be the members of the district board instead of the Superintendent of Police and Deputy Collector, the letter of Gopabandhu to District Magistrate of Puri on dated 3rd October 1918 conveys.

On October 18 1918 Gopabandhu wrote a letter to Rai Bahadur Manmohan Rai about the scarcity of rice in Odisha. There was an abnormal price rise and shortage of food grain even at such a high rate. It was suspected that some people who hoarded large stocks of paddy did not sell them for cash but rather lent them on interest and some sold them to big Mahajans on a large scale instead of selling them to the poor in low quantity for their urgent consumption. He requested the magistrate to send an order to the black marketers who had hoarded rice not to sell their rice at times of calamity to the big businessmen but to the needy. The price of coarse rice at that time was 6 seers a rupee.

A letter reached from Gopabandhu to Mr. H Lambert, Principal, Ravenshaw College, Cuttack dated 03.11.1918 to establish a boarding house for the students from Satyabadi with strict adherence to the regulation and discipline of Satyabadi School. He intended to make higher education affordable and reachable to the poor students of Satyabadi keeping intact the spirit of Satyabadi that is devotion and simplicity. He herewith appoints Babu Shyam Mohan Ray as the superintendent of the hostel. The teachers of Satyabadi school will constantly visit the hostel and stay with the inmates whenever they visit Cuttack. In a letter dated 12.12.1918 to Mr. Fawcus, Gopabandhu sought approval of the open-air school system in the primary and secondary levels which has been recognized by Sir Edward Gait.

The predicament of Odias in Singhbhum District

In a long letter of about 10 pages addressed to Mr. A Garrett Esqr., ICS, Deputy Commissioner, Singhbhum, Chaibasa Gopabandhu Das shows his concern about the depleting social, cultural, and linguistic status of Odia people in Singhbhum district. At the beginning of the letter, he is aggrieved about the condition of Odia education in Singhbhum district during his visit to Porahat Pragana. Singhbhum is an Odia district with a strong prevalence of the Aryan language, geographical position, and socio-historical antecedent. The Odia language had been utterly neglected in the region and been banished from courts and schools. In the last Legislative Council, he raised the issue of Odia education and recognition of Odia as a court language. However, the government pleaded the lack of strong feelings of Singhbhumi Odias in this matter. The reason is that their tongue has been cut away by systematic negligence to the community that has a strong language, literature, and history in the district. The imposition of Hindi education upon the Ho community is understood as they are indigenous and don't have a structured language but incomplete dialects. The Odias have been strangulated here and are, "groaning and struggling in the dark and unknown jungles of Singhbhum." (44)

During his stay in the district, Gopabandhu received three petitions forwarded by Mr. Garrett from the residents of Sonua, Mahuldha, Somaposi, Kera, Chainpur, and some other villages of Porahat requesting the incorporation of Odia instead of Hindi in their schools. These three petitions asked for necessary inquiry which he has done as below.

Existence of Odia Language in Singhbhum

The Odias as stated earlier were the first Aryan settlers in this area spreading civilizing habits among the natives who had been adopting Odia manners, customs, language,

and mode of living for centuries. Even in the most aboriginal places like Kolha the Odia communities like Goalas, Tantis, Kumbhars, and Kamars live harmoniously for a long. The Bengalis and Hindi-speaking people are migrants and fewer in number, however owing to their influence in the political sphere they have replaced Odia in the schools and courts with Bengali in Dhalbhum and Hindi in Porhat and Kolhan. As a result, the Odia boys are forced to learn either Hindi or Bengali which are not their mother tongue. In the police stations, the plea of Odia-speaking people is misunderstood by the posting of Hindi-speaking officers. The Aboriginal communities face difficulty in learning another Aryan language.

Although Hindi and Bengali have been introduced quite some time ago, Odia has not been killed yet. They are still using Odia and facing lots of problems while using Bengali or Hindi in their everyday life. Amidst such adversaries, they have upheld their language by making Odia pathshalas. If enough justice had not been given to them they would lose their identity once. The Odias in Singhbhum are demoralized by now like the Odias in Midnapur whose number drastically reduced from 6 million to 3 million in just a decade due to the imposition of the Bengali language. If the same process continues Odia will disappear from Singhbhum within two or three decades.

Education for Odias in Singhbhum

Odia has only a nominal presence in schools. Local educational officers do not favor its continuance. A desperate attempt was made by the officers a few days back to abolish Odia from Singhbhum Zilla School. The officers like the deputy inspector of schools sometimes discourage and speak against the students learning Odia at lower classes as noted in the case of Kera and Souna village. However, the continuance of Odia in Chaibasa Zilla School has been permanent and Odia would be taught at Chakradharpur. He also expresses concern about ME School and UP School at Baharagora in Dalbhum the medium of instruction is Bengali although the majority of the students are Odia. As per the suggestions of the Deputy Inspector of schools, Odia schools should be erected and continued for a certain length on their own to receive aid from the government which is a difficult job to do. Instead, Gopabandhu suggested starting Odia classes in the existing Bengali and Hindi schools in both Porahat and Dhalbhum areas for lower classes. As they progress the Odia would be taught to them subsequently as they promote. The expense would not be extra.

Odias in Government Service at Singhbhum

Odias of Singhbhum are discontented as they do not receive any government jobs. The same is the case with Hoes. Outsiders like Bengalis and Hindi-speaking people have a lion's share in government service. No Odia is working in judicial service except Odia Mohemedan who is working as a sub-deputy collector at Chaibasa. A Deputy Magistrate with a peskar and a clerk is direly needed to receive people's representation effectively. The education department is meagerly represented. There is no Odia Deputy Inspector of schools present not even a sub-inspector of schools. Out of 21 sub-inspectors of Police only one Odia was posted last year. In the forest department out of three forest divisions where the requirement is 70 officers both in executive and non-executive class only one forester and two Oriya clerks are present. The Odia ministerial staff working in the Deputy Commissioner's Office was low in number. Odias have insignificant representation in different public committees. In Chaibasa and Chakradharpur Municipalities, no Odia commissioner is present although these two regions are full of competent Odia people.

Conclusion

Through these letters, Gopabandhu has tried to raise the Odia question of their existence, survival, education, livelihood, and honor. He can be construed as an iconic Odia figure who sacrificed his family for the cause of social service.

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