

DR. HAREKRUSHNA MAHATAB AS PRIME MINISTER OF IN ORISSA

Dr. Surendra Kumar Biswal,

H.O.D in History, Srinibas Degree College,
Mangalpur, Soro, Balasore.

Abstract:-(Harekrushna Mahatab an astute politician, an undistinguished freedom fighter, an unchallenged leader and statesman played an unique role as a Prime Minister of Orissa during pre- independence era. As a Prime Minister of Orissa, he under took number of bills. Measures for the upliftment of Harijans, Orissa Removal of Civil Dissabilities Bill of 1946, Orissa Temple Entry Authorisation and Indemnity Bill, Orissa Prohibition Act were passed. It was his sagacity, prudence and strength that Orissa was recognized as an independent state in the lap of India on 15th August 1947.

Dr. Harekrushna Mahatab, a great son of Indian soil, front ranking freedom fighter, far-sighted and elderly politician, undisputed and candid personality, destiny-maker of Orissa, the Ex-Chief Minister of Orissa, known as Utkal Keshari, played a very prominent role not only in Orissa, rather all over India.

As he was the front-rank freedom fighter, he had special contribution towards freedom-struggle, especially in the soil of Basudevpur. He was steering wheel, heart and soul of patriots of Basudevpur. He guided and suggested to the nationalist of Basudevpur area. Frequently he visited Basudevpur area to accelerate the ship of the freedom movement. His activities and dedication and representation towards Orissa politics, depicted as follows:

In 1946, Mahatab was elected uncontested from Chandbali-Basudevpur joint constituency.

On 20th April 1946, Mahatab was unanimously elected as the leader of the Congress Legislature Party in the Assembly. The Governor had also nominated four members to the Assembly according to the suggestion of Mahatab. On 22nd April 1946, Mahatab, the leader of the majority Party in the Assembly met the Governor and discussed with him regarding the formation of a Cabinet. Ultimately, on 23rd April, the Congress Ministry was sworn by the Governor. Besides Mahatab, four other members, Navakrushna Choudhury, Nityananda Kanoongo, Lingaraj Mishra and Radhakrushna Biswas Roy, were taken into Ministry.¹

Harekrushna Mahatab, as a Chief Minister declared in his speech with enthusiasm, "Independence is not now a distant object to be gazed at like a star of once choice in distant horizon. It is now on a point of being realized and all of us believe that, we will have it before the year is out. Independence is most urgent matter for without it poverty and squalor of the country can't be effectively dealt with. To me independence has no political charm of thrown it. I can't tackle the problems of masses namely their object, poverty, disease and ignorance".

Mahatab as a Prime Minister remained in the charge of Home, Finance and Planning Department.²

Mahatab Ministry was formed in 1946 when India was on the verge of independence and after working for one year in full cooperation with British Authority, it emerged first Ministry of Orissa, in independent India. The Ministry adopted a realistic programme for the development of Orissa which gave emphasis mainly on three points, i.e. location of new capital for the province, construction of Mahanadi Valley Project and completion of Machhakunda Duduma hydro-electric scheme with the cooperation of Govt. of Madras.³

On 30th September 1946, Mahatab brought a Bill in Assembly stating that, “the new Cabinet of the State would be built up at Bhubaneswar”.

Congress Ministry decided that, the best place for the capital of the province from all points of view, will be Bhubaneswar and Mahatab advanced a number of arguments justifying the choice.

Mahatab’s resolution of 30th Sept. regarding new capital was adopted by the Assembly without any opposition.⁴

On 5th September 1946 Mahatab brought a bill in Assembly regarding Mahanadi Valley Project. The Govt. of India was fully reported about the matter and when after independence various river projects including Damodar Valley project, in the North, Tungabhadra project in South. Mahanandi Project in East was also reviewed. Finally, on 28th August 1947, Mahatab moved a resolution in Assembly which stated that, “The Assembly do resolve to take into consideration the Report of Mahanadi Valley development Hirakud Dam Project made by A.N. Khosla, the Chairman of Central Water Ways, Irrigation and Navigation Commission and it requested the Govt. to take necessary steps to give effect to the recommendations made in the report of the Mahanadi Valley development Hirakud Dam Project”.⁵

The resolution was passed before the house and was adopted by the Assembly.

On 16th Sept. 1946, Mahatab moved a resolution regarding Machhakunda-Dumduma Hydroelectric Project. After a protracted debate the resolution, however, unanimously adopted in Assembly without any division on 17th Sept. 1949.⁶

Apart from three major programmes of Mahatab’s Ministry, other activities of his Ministry enumerated as follows:

Harekrushna Mahatab adopted in 1946, a comprehensive policy for the industrialization of several large-scale industries in the provinces.⁷

Textile Mills	5 units
Rayon	1 unit
Paper board	1 unit
Sugar mill	1 unit
Vegetable ghee	1 unit
Pennals & vernishes	1 unit

In addition to such allotment, the Govt. tried to develop in the province several more industries such as⁸:

1. 2nd vegetable ghee plant
2. Cement factory
3. Iron and steel works
4. Jute Mill
5. Paper Mill
6. Salt and Alkali plant
7. Pottery works
8. Tannery and leather goods factory
9. Five chemical and drugs
10. Rolling mills and foundary
11. Glass works

To manage those industries, Govt. considered the policy

- a. State ownership
- b. State management
- c. State control

Apart from encouraging large scale industries, the Govt. tried to promote the development of small scale and cottage industries also.

Mahatab took prominent role in piloting controversial measures like the Agricultural Income Tax Bill of 1946 and the Bill on Power and Privilege of the Assembly member. He also successfully persuaded Governor for agreeing to the passage of ordinances such as the Orissa Drug Control Ordinance of 1946 and the Madras Estate Landlord Ordinance of 1947. Ministry took interest in social reforms, prohibition, basic education and agrarian reform. He introduced the Orissa Legislative Assembly on 30 Sept. 1946 to remove disabilities inflicted upon the Harijans. The Bill provided for financial penalty for obstruction a Harijan in the exercise of his rights under it. On 14th February 1946, he introduced the Orissa Temple Entry Authorization and Indemnity Bill to enforce temple entry to Harijans. He also introduced the Orissa Opium-smoking Bill on 31st March 1947 to wipe out smoking. He also introduced 16 Police Stations in Cuttack district in April 1947 with a total ban on country and foreign liquor as well as today. Ganjam small Holders Relief Act, 1947 was introduced by which Zamindars reduce one third rent.⁹

One of the most glorious achievement of Mahatab, as first Chief Minister of Orissa, was the merging of Orissa native States with the province of the British days. Though the merging process in India was almost all inevitable consequence of the country, Orissa may claim priority in it and Mahatab by playing significant role in democratic movement of different native states of Orissa.

In mid-July, 1946, the rulers in Orissa and Chhatisgarh State made conference and the proceeding of the meeting were clear indication of their determination to oppose the

amalgamation at any cost. Mahatab, after considerable efforts met some representatives of the rulers of Sambalpur, but nothing substantial came out of it as Mahatab himself has put it.¹⁰

The process of amalgamation of native states with the province of Orissa began with the assumption of Nilagiri State by Mahatab Govt. Mahatab regarded this merger as one of the most important achievement of his first Ministry of Orissa.

Another activity towards politics is that, by the effort of Mahatab, Nandakishore Das was made Orissa Congress President.

Mahatab's role for four years during his First Chief Ministership was full of achievements. The ascendancy of the Mahatab faction was certainly not looked with favour by his opponents within the party and his removal from Orissa politics to the Central Govt. by this time was possibly not unconnected with the intrigue politics of the Congress Party. In 1949 when Nehru came to Orissa, he asked Mahatab whether he would like to join the central cabinet. Mahatab did not accept the offer readily, though as himself wrote, he gave the impression that, he was 'agreeable'. "Many friends in Orissa and outside", he wrote, "warned me not to accept the proposal I was hearing that, Sardar Patel also was not liking my quitting the office of Chief Ministership". It was only Nehru who pressed him to come to Delhi and join the Central Cabinet.

Nehru sent him two letters, one on 7th March 1950 and another on 2nd May and though, as Mahatab recorded, he did not accept the offer formally, Nehru ultimately sent him a telegram on 8th May requesting him to reach Delhi on 12th May to take oath as Central Minister on the following day.

Before Mahatab left for Delhi, Nabakrushna Choudhury, the most favourable leader of Nehru in Orissa, was made Chief Minister of the State. One faction led by the most resourceful leader Biswanath Das was opposed to this choice but Mahatab supported Navakrushna Choudhury and the opponents of Das. He wrote, "It was Sri Bijayananda Pattnaik, and Sri Biren Mitra who pressed me to bring in Nava babu, otherwise they feared Sri Biswanath Das, who, according to them, was an obscurantist would get in I acceded to their demand and got Navababu elected". Later on he himself regretted the strategy which he had adopted against Biswanath Das in order to make Navakrushna Choudhury the Chief Minister of Orissa and observed. "This left behind a scar of misunderstanding between me and Biswanath babu which I regretted later in my political career."

Why did Mahatab support the candidature of Navakrushna Choudhury antagonizing Biswanath Das ? And why did he regret his strategy later on ?

Referring to the party meeting, where Navakrushna's candidature was approved, one scholar has written, "In the party meeting Mahatab insisted that, in the event of a contest, between Das and Choudhury he would prefer to stay in the state because in no case he would leave the reins of the administration to Das."

Why did he take such a strong attitude ? According to the above scholar, “Mahatab perhaps calculated that, by patronizing Navakrushna he could carry favour with Nehru while his political interest would remain intact as Choudhury was not essentially a power-loving man.”

Ultimately, Mahatab joined as a minister in centre and Navakrushna Choudhury oath as Chief Minister of Orissa in 1950. But, Nava babu was not member of Legislative Assembly by that time for which he was elected from Basudevpur-Chandbali joint Constituency. Chakradhar Behera was very much interested to contest from Basudevpur-Chandbali joint constituency. But at the motivation of Navakrushna Choudhury, Chakradhar babu gave him green signal by not contesting with him.

Navakrushna Choudhury was the great son of Indian soil, front ranked freedom fighter, an epoch making figure, a luminous star in the political firmament of Orissa, candid personality, who has special dedication towards Basudevpur, not only in political sphere, but also particularly in freedom struggle. During his Chief Ministership in 1951, it was first general election of Orissa Legislative Assembly in independent India. In that election, universal adult franchise was adopted.

In the long run Mahatab's leadership helped the Orissa cause immensely. While his leadership of the Congress Legislative Party was 'beyond doubt', his leadership in Orissa was 'undisputed' and unchallenged like Jawaharlal Nehru on the national front.¹¹ He not only piloted the 1946 election with excellent abilities but also tackled the Zamindars and their interest adequately. In fact, many of them continued to support and remain friendly with the Congress because of Mahatab's excellent rapport with them. Concerning leadership abilities and political acumen of Mahatab, S.N. Bhanja Dev, the leader of the opposition compared him with Bismarck, the iron man of the Germany unification. Thus, the popular measures taken by the Mahatab for the socio-economic causes was quite satisfactory. Being an 'authoritarian' as well as 'clicky' the role played by him was outstanding he enjoyed the undisputed support from the general public.¹² In the field of legislative business and administration he was an excellent organizer in the Party Forum by his capacity and sagacity, the feudatory states merged with Indian Union.

References:

1. K.M. Patra, *Orissa legislature on Freedom Struggle*, (1912-1947) New Delhi.
2. Statesman, 23rd April, 1946.
3. Statesman, 24th April, 1946.
4. Amrit Bazar Patrika, 24 April, 1946.
5. A.K. Pattnaik, *Cabinet Govt. in Orisa*, Bhubaneswar 1988, page-59.
6. Orissa Legislative Assembly Proceedings, 1946, Vol II, pp- 936-1245.
7. H.K. Mahatab, *The beginning of the end*, Calcutta, 1972, pp-125-126.
8. Proceeding of the meeting A.K. Mahatab, *The beginning of the end*, No.36, Appendix – IX.
9. A.K. Pattnaik, *op-cit*, pp- 57-147.
10. V.P. Menon, *The story of the Integration of the Indian States*, Madras, 1961, page-158.
11. Times of India, 24 April 1946.
12. Orissa Legislative Assembly Debadas, 1948, Vol-10, p- 30.