

# NRUSINGHA GURU: A PROFILE

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Sambalpur as an ancient kingdom has a prolonged and glorious past. The pictographic writings in the Vikramakhhol cave belonging to proto-historic period have been placed by Prof. K. P. Jaiswal in a period intermediary between the script of Mahejadar and Brahmi. During ancient times the district formed a part of South Kosala, which roughly comprised the modern districts of Raipur and Bilaspur of Madhya Pradesh and undivided Sambalpur, Balangir and Sundergarh districts of Orissa.

The region finds mention as Kosala in Ramayan, Mahabharata, Vatsyana's Kamasutra and the Angutara Nikaya. Ptolemy, during in his Geographike' has referred to the town of Sambalaka on the bank of Manada (Mahanadi). As per Allahabad Pillar Inscription, Samudragupta during his southern campaign defeated Mahendra, the king of Kosala. Hieun Tsang has given the exact geography of Kosala with greater details.

Since then the region continued to exist as a powerful kingdom, which finally succeeded in uniting entire Orissa during the Somavamsi period. The Somavamsi dynasty has contributed a lot towards the social, political and cultural life of Orissa.

As such Sambalpur has produced many great things. It is believed that diamond was first found at Sambalpur. Even the Roman world used to collect diamonds from Sambalpur (Decline and Fall of Roman Empire). Diamond is the hardest stone ever found. I think the firmness of character of the people of Sambalpur is a gift of nature closely asso-

ciated with diamond. Similarly Sambalpur is famous for its 'tie and dye' fabric. The Sambalpuri patta has popularized Orissa all over the world.

Diamonds as well as the patta were important items of export. The river Mahanadi with its many navigable tributaries abundantly contributed towards the overseas trade of ancient Orissa. Ptolemy (2nd century A.D.) has referred to Manada or Mahanadi, which is a positive indication of commercial interaction. The merchandise from Sambalpur reached the sea ports of Orissa through Mahanadi. The famous Bali Yatra of Cuttack is a symbolic representation of a Haat or market place nearer to the sea, where articles from far off places were available for the Sadhavas to choose from. Then it was taken to the east as well as west. The opulence of south Kosala was due to its participation in the Maritime Trade.

We find traces of overseas activities in the festivals and ceremonies of western Orissa even today. In the 'Dal Khai Osha', 'Kalasi Osha', 'Karama festival' etc. boat in some form or the other is worshipped. Very few districts have undergone so much of administrative changes as Sambalpur. The Marathas occupied it in April 1800. The British occupied Orissa in 1803. The Marathas who were ruling over Orissa only made a show of resistance. The British occupied Sambalpur on 2nd January 1804. In 1833 the state was placed under the Agent of the Governor General for the southwestern Frontier. In 1849 Sambalpur was placed under the direct rule of the British administration, when the last Chauhan ruler Narayan Singh died without any issue. In 1860 Sambalpur was transferred to Orissa Division of rec-

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The spirit of nationalism, which was gaining ground in India, found sudden expression in the form of resistance against foreign authority in the second half of 19th century. Orissa did have its share of contribution towards this national cause. An organised fight was given by the people of Sambalpur much before the Indian War of Independence, 1857. This organised attempt headed by the tribal Chief, Veera Surendra Sai in and around Sambalpur caused uneasiness among the rank and file of British Administration.

During 20th century the people of Sambalpur had to fight on two fronts. When the whole nation was struggling for freedom they had to join the same with full vigour and at the same time they had to fight for their own existence against the British policy of dismemberment and imposition of Hindi as the official language.

On 15th January 1895 the Chief Commissioner of Central Provinces abolished Oriya as the court language and introduced Hindi as such in Sambalpur. This evoked protest and the widespread

language agitation started. The people met Sir Andrew Fraser, the Chief Commissioner of Central Provinces during his visit to Sambalpur in 1901. He was convinced and recommended for the change. Hence in 1903 Oriya was restored as the official language and finally in 1905 the bulk of the district was transferred to Orissa under the province of Bengal, which remained as such till 1st April 1912 when the province of Bihar and Orissa was constituted. Thus while fighting for the freedom along the national mainstream, the people of Sambalpur had to fight against the dismemberment and protection of Oriya language as well.

### **Freedom Movement**

The Nagpur session of December 1920 marked a new era in the Indian freedom struggle. The non-violent, non-cooperation movement resolution was passed there. It was attended by Gopabandhu Das, H.K. Mahatab, Jadumani Mangaraj, Niranjana Patnaik, Bhagirathi Mahapatra, Jagabandhu Singh, Mukunda Prasad Das with Chandra Shekhar Behera, Dasarathi Mishra and Dharani Dhar Mishra from Sambalpur as members of Bihar and Orissa Provincial Congress Committee. It was here that the suggestion for forming a separate Congress Committee for Orissa was approved and Orissa was recognized as Utkal Provincial Congress Committee.

Chandra Shekhar Behera took the leadership at Sambalpur. He presided over the meeting of the Utkal Union Conference at Puri in 1919. The Chakradharpur session of the Utkal Union Conference was very vital for Orissa. It was decided to fight for the unification of the Oriya speaking tracts through the Indian National Congress not with a separate identity under the banner of Utkal Union Conference.

### **Nrusingha Guru A Profile**

Nrusingha Guru was born on 24th March 1902 at the interior village of Gurupali as the eldest

child of Ganesh Ram Guru and Laxmi Devi. He had the rare astrological combination of being born on a full moon day (Dola Purnima) and died on 2nd January 1984, a new moon day (Bakula Amabasya). Very few people have such rare astronomical combination and one of them was another famous man of Sambalpur, Gangadhar Meher.

Nrusingha Guru was a very bright student from the beginning; was awarded scholarship at Class-IV and at Class-VII or M.E. levels. He was liked by all his teachers and was admitted to Zilla School for matriculation. Here, Sri Krushna Chandra Sen, an ideal teacher and the Superintendent of the Hostel gave him proper guidance. In 1920 he was in Class XI. It was a great year not only for Nrusingha but also for the entire family. The poverty-stricken family, which had toiled hard and spent their entire fortune for his education had been waiting with high hopes and expectations for the completion of his education, which was but natural. He was a good student and had won scholarships at all levels. By then matriculation was enough to get a good job. Very few students were coming out successful at that level and the few who were succeeding their names were being published in newspapers. Hence in 1920 it was only a question of time as to when he would complete his education and come to the rescue of the family.

But man proposes and God disposes. The role of the parents in shaping the future of the children is very limited. The parents only contribute their might. The parents of Gautam Buddha failed to distract Gautam from becoming a Buddha. The astrologers had warned them, yet failed.

In 1921 January Mahatma Gandhi gave the call for Non-Co-Operation with the British in any manner. He was shocked by the Jalianawalabag massacre. Hence the British have to be sent back. He gave a call to the students to boycott schools and colleges, as these were British institutions. The leaders carried the message of Non-Co-operation

to the nook and corner of the country. The whole country was enthusiastically involved in the movement.

By 1920 Nrusingha Guru was only 18 years old and on the verge of completing his school education. Neither the condition of the family nor his personal ambition came on his way. The students of Zilla School gathered at the foothills of Budha Raja on 2nd January 1921 and decided to join the movement and discontinue the studies. Since the next day i.e. the reopening of the School after the X mass holidays, the students did not go to the school. About forty students made a procession and moved throughout the town with slogans. Shyam Sunder Chakrabarty of Bengal has described this incident in his paper, 'The Servants' as one of the first in the country where the School students boycotted the school.

The entire town was awe stricken. The Head Master, Madhusudan Dash and the Teachers of the school were totally helpless. The situation was beyond their imagination. In this Sri Guru was having the company of co-students like Laxmi Narayan Mishra, Arun Dash, Md. Hosain, Abdul Majid, Chandrasekhar Panigrahi, Benimadhaba Supakar and Gourishankar Sahani etc. Later leaders like H.K. Mahatab and Nabakrushna Choudhury left Ravenshaw College and joined the movement.

Pandit Nilakantha Dash started the National School at Sambalpur with the help of the leaders like Chandrasekhar Behera. Nilakantha Das, himself had given up his established job as a Lecturer in a big College at Calcutta and joined the movement by starting the National School at Sambalpur. It worked almost as a training ground for the nationalist leaders. It imparted regular education along with vocational training like carpentry, weaving, spinning etc. Many well-known teachers joined the school. The students would sell the products of the school in the market on holidays. Nrusingha Guru left Zilla School and joined the National School. Along with pursuing his

studies he received vocational training and was highly influenced by its nationalistic ideas. He appeared at the Matriculation examination from that school and passed along with only two others - Damodar Padhy and Arun Dash.

Three persons and three incidents had great impact on his life and shaped his career. Towards the end of 1921 he had the occasion to meet Gopabandhu. Gopabandhu was to address a meeting at Jharsuguda during the course of the Non-Cooperation movement. The police prevented him and declared 144 there. Hence his written speech was handed over to an enthusiastic young man, Nrushingha Guru to read to the public when opportunity comes. A meeting of the Congress workers was organised at Sambalpur in a private house. Sri Guru read out the speech with all enthusiasm and spirit. This established Sri Guru as a true nationalist.

His first independent work was the protest against the misbehavior of zamindar of Rajpur. The zamindar insulted the workers who were spreading the message of Non-Co-Operation. He organised a mass protest. The people joined with him. That was his first independent assignment, which succeeded.

In 1922 Gandhi suddenly withdrew the Non-Co-Operation Movement and asked the Congress workers to engage themselves in constructive works like spinning and fight against untouchability. Nrushingha Guru concentrated in the Jharsuguda and Laikera area. Under the supervision of the powerful local leader, Mahaveer Prasad he organised the Agharias of the area to start spinning and weaving in every house and persuaded the Congress workers to use only home spun cloth. As a result the sale of such products increased as well as the foreign cloth was not sold in the market. This resulted in the development of the economic standards of the Agharias. Later Mahaveer Prasad became President of the Pradesh Congress Committee.

In 1924 as a part of the national policy of

participation in the local selfgovernment Chandrasekhar Behera became the Chairman of Sambalpur Municipality. Nrushingha Guru was employed in Municipality to assist him. This employment however did not affect his activities as he was permitted to move as and when necessary.

The second incident, which had profound impact on his life, was his meeting with Mahatma Gandhi in 1928. Gandhi stayed in the residence of Chandrasekhar Behera. Nrushingha Guru was given the responsibility of hospitality and arrangement of meeting. He was deeply influenced by Gandhi. He was overwhelmed by his simplicity, soft-spoken ness along with the firmness of character. This had lasting impact on his life.

And since then he became true Gandhian in theory and practice. He changed his attire. Took up knee-deep dhoti and only one chaddar on the body with a bag on the shoulder and without shoes. After all shoes were made in foreign factories. Even he did not use an umbrella as that used foreign cloth. Hence he took the help of palm leaf Chatri through the year. He did not take sugar for it was foreign made. To move in the sun without shoes must have been really difficult for him. But that was what he did till his death.

The third important incident of his life was his meeting with Madhusudan Das, who visited Sambalpur in 1929. A meeting was organised in the Municipality office to honour him. Sri Guru organised everything. Madhusudan Das sought the help of the people of Sambalpur towards the formation of Orissa province. This turned Nrushingha Guru and since then he engaged himself in it. He visited Khadial, Phuljhar, Padmapur and Chandrapur areas and worked for the formation of Orissa province.

He was convinced about the hazards of taking wine. It was the cause for the ruin of many families. Being influence by the principles of Gandhi Sri Guru and his friends sat on dharana in front of the wine shops and created a human wall. This did not

permit the people to reach the shops. So much so during the year 1928-29 many shop owners surrendered their licenses before government for not being able to sale properly. The income of the government was adversely affected. The Deputy Commissioner was penalized for this. This effort however was a grand success. Pandit Jawaharlal Neheru wrote a letter of appreciation to Sri Guru and others for this. In this Sri Guru had the company of Chintamani Pujari, Bhagirathi Patnaik, Ghanasyama Panigrahi, Mahavir Singh etc.

The people of Sambalpur were greatly influenced by the salt satyagraha of Gandhi in 1930. Though Sambalpur doesn't have the scope for the preparation of salt yet representatives were sent to Balore and Sore to encourage the workers there. A batch of workers under the leadership of Ghanasyama Panigrahi went to Inchudi to strengthen the hands of Harekrushna Mahatab. During this time in March 1930 Sri Guru was arrested and imprisoned for two years working for the salt satyagraha. He was released in August 1932.

The eradication of untouchability and the upliftment of the Harijans were some of his most important works. In this work, Sri Chabndrasekhara Behera ably guided him. In 1932 after being released from the jail Sri Guru attended the meeting of the provincial Harijan Welfare Samiti at Cuttack. As such Harijana welfare was in the agenda of Mahatma Gandhi. A number of meetings were organised to create awareness among the people to discard untouchability. Kirtan parties were taken out in the mornings and afternoons involving Harijans in it. A night school was opened in the village Phatapalli to give elementary education to the Harijans. Later similar schools were organised in different parts of the district. Wells were dug inside Harijana villages and they were allowed to other public wells. They were advised to maintain cleanliness and hygienic habits. Amritlal Thakkar (popularly known as Thakkar Bapa), the President of All India Harijan Welfare Committee visited Sambalpur and expressed his sat-

isfaction with the Harijana Welfare activities there.

On 5th May 1934 Gandhiji visited Orissa again. Thakkar Bapa arranged his visit to Sambalpur to see the progress of Harijana Welfare there. In fact Gandhi was taken to the Harijana village of Telkopada. He was extremely pleased to see the cleanliness, the steps taken for education, the construction of the well etc. He donated all the money that was given to him as gifts at various places of Sambalpur for the construction of a Hostel for the Harijana students. Nrusingha Guru was entrusted to manage the hostel. This hostel worked successfully for quite some time. Some of its inmates, like Mohan Naag have become ministers in the later life and many others have become high Govt. officials. The leaders of the hostel addressed him as Guruji and had very high regards for him. The fact admits no doubt that he was a staunch Brahmin. He performed daily worship with all sincerity. During Durga Puja he used to make *Chandipath*. Yet he worked hard for Harijan welfare and removal of untouchability. So much so on the *Sradha* ceremony oh his father he used to invite the students of the Harijan hostel only, none else, certainly no Brahmin. As such he was ostracized by the society as a Jahalia, one who had gone to the jail and did not have the recognized status of a staunch Brahmin. The Quit India Movement of August 1942 was a test case for Sri Guru. Samblapur like rest of India joined the call given by Gandhi - Do or Die. Sri Laxmi Narayan Mishra of Sambalpur was arrested on the way while returning from Bombay after attending the Bombay Session of the Indian National Congress. Leaders like Sri Nrusingha guru, Sri Dayanidhi Satapathy, Sri Durga Prasad Guru and Sri Ram Raksha Shukla carried the message to different places. The government started false cases and arrested Sri Guru and others under Nation al Security Act. On the day of his arrest his six-year-old daughter was down with high fever. His friends advised him to appeal to the government for few days of respite. He did not do that. It was a rare case of sacrifice. Unfortunately the sick daughter died three days after. What a sacrifice for the nation. Under some plea or the other he was detained in the jail

up to July 1944 even though the original case against him was dismissed much before. He was arrested under NSA, which was generally applied to people against whom there was no cognizable case but was important enough to be detained.

## As a Journalist

Besides being a freedom fighter and a social worker Sri Guru was also an eminent journalist. He took up journalism very seriously which helped him in his social work. From the childhood he had the scope to read newspapers at his maternal uncles' place, where he read 'Utkal Hiteisini'. During his student days he was good at debate and essay writing. This helped him at his later life in journalism. He was greatly influenced by 'Swaraj' of Tilak and 'Young India' of Gandhi. He received training in journalism in National School itself. The school published two weeklies; *Utkala Sevaka* and *Sadhana* regularly. Nilakantha Das edited a regular weekly; 'Seva' from 18th May 1921. Nrusingha Guru was associated with all these. When Gopabandhu started his 'The Samaj' Sri Guru used to send news items regularly from Sambalpur. In 1932 he was recognized as an official correspondent of 'The Samaj'. From 1932 to 1984, till his death for more than half a century he continued as the official Correspondent for the district. He personally verified every item before sending it. In 52 years not a single item has been proved to be wrong or false. In one occasion, the Editor himself contradicted a news item reported by him, on selfish and administrative grounds even though the item was true. When, once the editor of *Sarna*, Dr. Radhanath Rath took acceptance to his simple attire as the reporter of a leading newspaper, he did not succumb. In 1937 Sri Guru was appointed as the reporter of Associated Press of India, which later become Press Trust of India and acted as such for two decades. In this capacity he came in contact with eminent journalists like N.R. Swamy. He also acted as the Editor of the weekly '*Jagarana*', published from Sambalpur (in 1937) at the initiation of Laxmi Narayan Mishra.

Along with acting as the reporter of *Sarna*, he was also in charge of its distribution in the district.

There was no personal touch in writing a news item - neither against nor in favour. His sincerity and deep insight into the society helped him in becoming a successful journalist. He never failed in any of his responsibilities. On the completion of 51 years of journalism as an official correspondent he was suitably felicitated in a grand meeting at Sambalpur, which was attended by many eminent persons including Sri J.B. Patnaik, the Chief Minister, himself an eminent journalist and writer.

## Love for agriculture

He believed in agriculture as the backbone of Indian economy. He believed in the application of science and technology in the agriculture. When ever he came across some such information immediately applied the same in his own field and later gave it wide publicity. Through his newspaper writings he helped many agriculturists.

## An Assessment

Sri Nrusingha Guru was a true Gandhian in words and deeds and remained so till he breathed his last. There was no change in his dress, which he adopted in 1928 after coming in contact with Gandhi in person, the knee-deep dhoti with a chaddar on the body and without shoes. He was more a follower than a leader. He gave command/order to his people not by his mouth but through his action. As a true Gandhian he never asked others to do something, which he himself couldn't do. Hence he did not like to be in the forefront. Gandhi believed in action and examples rather than on words. He concentrated more on social work and social service.

He was a grass root worker with a mass base. He always worked among the poor and the down trodden. He worked in the midst of the Harijans; He accepted life in all its comprehensiveness. He was religious, humanist and a practical idealist.

He did not have love for power or position. After independence when many staunch Gandhians ran after power he remained contented with his journalistic career. Had he wanted to join politics, with his education, experience and the contacts he might have become a minister. Not that all those who became ministers during post-independence period became corrupt and loved power. There were many sincere and principled political leaders. Some Harijan students of his Harijan hostel became ministers. But he remained aloof from it, unconcerned and unaffected. And this is where he went wrong. When the nation was in difficulty and was in need of his services he came forward even without caring for the life of his daughter but during better days when the nation needed his services for its reconstruction he withdrew himself into oblivion. His solo effort to join politics was half hazard and in true Gandhian spirit for which he miserably failed. In an undisciplined society he was like an appendix that was respected by all but in theory not in practice.

He never changed, neither in attire nor in habit. And that is what is the diamond like firmness of the people of Sambalpur. He was a class by himself. His personal integrity and the spirit of sacrifice for a cause along with firmness and discipline made him stand high above all others.

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