

Biju Patnaik and Women Empowerment

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Abstract

Biju Patnaik (1916-2016) was a towering personality of Indian political life who was a link between the freedom struggle days and nation building process during the post-Independence era. He was all in one - freedom fighter, pilot, politician, industrialist, entrepreneur, airlines promoter, diplomat, Chief Minister, Central Cabinet Minister, newspaper owner, visionary leader and one of the makers of modern India. He contributed a lot towards women empowerment and gender parity and equality. Biju Patnaik, a dynamic leader with unprecedented mass following is remembered in his birth centenary year.

Key words: Politic, Diplomacy, Development, Decentralization, Equality, Women empowerment.

Biju Patnaik was a versatile genius. He was a living legend of his time. He belonged to that dare-devil genre of patriots who shirked no challenge to respond to any call of adventure for the cause of our country. And he also went far beyond the geographical boundary of India and directly participated in the freedom struggle of Indonesia against the Dutch which later on crowned him with that country's highest civilian honour i.e, the *Bhumiputra* or son of the soil.¹ Biju Patnaik, who has been very active in numerous fields of our socio-economic and political life, possessed a unique personality which might be described as larger than life. He was all in one – Freedom Fighter, Pilot, Politician,

Industrialist, Entrepreneur, Diplomat, Chief Minister, opposition leader, Union Cabinet Minister, Newspaper Owner, Visionary Leader and one of the makers of modern India.

Biju Babu, as he was popularly known, was generous to the neck and was quite open minded and pragmatic towards everything and everybody. He was brutally frank and outspoken which often landed him into trouble and complications. Perhaps this was the single-most important reason for his not becoming the Prime Minister of India in spite of having all the requisite qualifications. Few of his contemporary politicians could match the political acumen of Biju Babu.

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Bijayananda, the second child of Laxminarayan Patnaik and Ashalata Devi, was born on 5th March, 1916. He spent his childhood at Anand Bhawan in Cuttack, the commercial capital of Odisha. His ancestral place was Rasolkonda (Bhanjanagar), a part of the then Madras Presidency. He had two brothers and one sister. Laxminarayan was a judicial officer under Bihar-Orissa province. Biju was brave, fearless and adventurous from his childhood days. There are numerous stories regarding his daring activities in school and college. While he was a student of first year science in Ravenshaw College (now a Unitary University) Cuttack, he went to Peshawar (now in Pakistan) in 1932 on a bicycle covering a distance of thousands of kilometers. Biju and two of his friends braved inclement weather, forests, rough terrain and many odds to reach Peshawar and even Biju had to fight with a Royal Bengal Tiger on the way! He introduced pole vault game in Odisha and was its reigning champion for a long time.

Biju Babu joined the Indian National Air Ways, a constituent of British Royal Air Force in the Indian sub-continent. He was not meant to serve the imperialist power.² As per the suggestions of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and Loknayak Jaya Prakash Narain, Biju used the British plane to carry Indian freedom fighters during the Quit-India Movement to different parts of the country under the most difficult flying conditions and used to land in unorthodox grounds. During this period, he came in close personal contact

with leaders like Achyut Patwardhan, Ram Manohar Lohia, Ashoka Mehta, Aruna Asaf Ali, etc. Soon, he was sacked from the Air Force Service and was imprisoned on 13th January, 1943. He was put in different jails in Punjab and Odisha. After his release, he set up B. Patnaik & Company, one of the pioneering business concerns in pre-Independence period.

Biju Babu became the Chief Minister of Orissa in 1961. He was the main organizer of the AICC Session in Bhubaneswar in 1964 where in the famous resolution on 'democratic socialism' was adopted. During the next two decades, Biju Babu remained one of the most prominent leaders of the non-Congress parties and political formations that resulted in the rise of the Janata Party which assumed power at the Centre in 1977 following the black days of national emergency (1975-77) and in turn putting an end to thirty years of uninterrupted Congress rule. Biju Babu became the Union Minister for Steel and Mines. During 1980-90, he was designated as the unofficial national crisis manager in Indian politics by the media. Be it the issue of Rama Krushna Hegde as the Chief Minister of Karnataka or Vishwanath Pratap Singh to become Prime Minister that depended upon the peculiar support of the BJP on the right and the Left Front on the left, Biju Babu was always ready to mediate. And, in fact, Biju has visited New Delhi twelve times to sustain the V.P Singh Ministry for eleven months. In fact, when Mr. Singh resigned, Biju Babu was

approached by Mr. Rajiv Gandhi at his Aurangzeb Road (now renamed as Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam Road) residence in New Delhi to be the Prime Minister with outside support of the Congress-I which he declined. This offer was grabbed by Mr. Chandrasekhar who was in office only for a period of forty four days.

In 1990, the people of Orissa gave a massive mandate to Biju Babu in the Assembly elections. Under his leadership, the Janata Dal got 123 seats in a house of 147 and the outgoing ruling party Congress-I got only ten seats. Biju Babu became the Chief Minister of Orissa for the second time. In 1996 , after the fall of the 13-day old BJP Government led by Atal Vihari Vajpayee, the United Front, supported by the Congress-I from outside, assumed power at the Centre under Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda and Indra Kumar Gujral in succession. Biju Babu was a sure entrant into the Union Cabinet; may be as the Prime Minister. But due to the treacherous designs and unpardonable backbiting by a few of his own party men, Biju Babu was not included in the Ministry. He was admitted to Escorts Hospital, New Delhi on 30th March, 1997 and he breathed his last on April 17, 1997. But like all great personalities, the man who succumbed to heart failure, continues to live in the hearts of millions of people.

Biju Patnaik was instrumental in the establishment of a large number of institutions and organizations that include, among others, the Orissa Textile Mills, Kalinga Tubes, Kalinga Industries,

Kalinga Airlines, Kalinga Publications, Kalinga Refrigeration, Paradeep Port³ and Express Highway, Orissa Industrial Development Corporation, Ferrochrome Plant in Jajpur Road, Cement Factory at Bargarh, Sponge Iron Factory at Barbil, Regional Engineering College (now NIT) at Rourkela, Sainik School in Bhubanewar, Panchayat Industries throughout Orissa, Balimela Dam, MIG Factory at Sunabeda, Thermal Power Plant at Talcher, Charbatia Air Base, Orissa Flying Club, CRP Centre, Radio Training Centre in Ravenshaw College, Medical College in Berhampur, Engineering College (now University) in Burla, Regional College of Education in Bhubaneswar (now renamed as Regional Institute of Education under the NCERT, New Delhi), Orissa University of Agriculture and Technology in Bhubaneswar, Tikarpara Multipurpose Dam, Mahanadi Barrage, Samal Barrage, Indravati Dam, National Aluminum Company-NALCO (now one of the most profit making Maharatna Companies) and hundreds of educational institutions for girls and weaker sections of the society. Biju Patnaik set up the Kaling Foundation Trust in 1951 which in collaboration with the UNESCO has instituted the annual Kalinga Prize for the popularization of science in the world through study, research and scientific writings.

Biju Babu was a pioneer in many fields. He was nostalgic about the ancient Kingdom of Kalinga under Emperor Kharavela, the legendary Odia king and warrior. He wanted to develop Odisha

through the promotion of agriculture, education and industrialization. Biju Babu was a class apart. He was always at the centre-stage of both national and state politics, a position he hardly exploited to achieve petty personal gains.

Before going into the issue of Biju Patnaik's contribution to the cause of women empowerment, it is pertinent to discuss the notion of women empowerment per se. To empower means to give somebody the power or authority to act. So, this term is often used in the context of improvement of status, position and authority to some individual, group or community at large. Women empowerment has gained momentum throughout the world as a corollary of the feminist movement or feminism. Because women have not received their due or genuine place in most of the societies and have been the victims of male chauvinism and social stigma, so feminism grew as a reaction or backlash. The situation often gets more complicated as in most of the cases the role of women is either eulogized or underestimated; but seldom appreciated in its proper perspective. It may be kept in mind that notions like feminism, gender and women empowerment should not be studied and analyzed in isolation. Rather these ideas need to be located within the overall structural context and social dynamics both in macro and micro levels. The need of the hour is not to portray women either as victims or as martyrs; but to contextualize the discourse on empowerment. This has to be related to

the theories of social movement, state and development.

Today, many writers have proved that the biological determinism or conventional wisdom of portraying women as the weaker sex is not based on facts or scientific truth. Women's biological, genetic and physical make-up makes them not only men's equal but their superior in many cases. The only issue is that adequate opportunity should be provided to women to prove their worth. Women constitute the bulk of the work force and they also contribute more than half of the wealth of nations. But, at the same time, race, ethnicity and social class shape the working conditions and wages of women which are very often hostile, improper and inappropriate.

The Human Development Reports published by the UNDP during the past few years almost as an annual ritual have presented many negative features regarding the status of women inside the member states of the U.N. In most cases, women are engaged in economic activities; but in return, they are either unpaid or under-rated. More importantly, women put in more labour and are engaged in various types of productive endeavours.

Coming to the situation in India, women with varied cultural, social, economic, political and linguistic backgrounds constitute nearly half of the population. But they all share one common cause-as they, irrespective of these variations, work as productive

members of the society, with or without recognition and reward. Women sustain the family; shape the people's and society's fate; and share the bulk of life's burden. Social attitude, deprivation, unemployment, poverty and lack of opportunity only add to the precarious condition of women in India.

A number of social, economic, political, cultural and psychological indicators may be taken into account while analyzing the status of women in India which include, among others, centuries - old tradition, belief systems and norms relating to girls and women and their role; education and literacy among women (again it may further be subdivided into urban and rural settings); employment, unemployment and under-employment of women; low and unequal wage and compensation and gender discrimination at the work-place; female infanticide and maternal morality rate; skewed sex ratio; property and inheritance rights and privileges of women; plight of widows, destitute women, differently able women; women's age at marriage; social evils like dowry, sati and oppressions like physical and mental torture and all kinds of violence and atrocities on women; and, last but not least, political participation of women and their role in the decision-making process.

Many religious, cultural, social and political reform movements have tried to ameliorate the condition of women in India and to bring them at par with men. Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra

Vidyasagar, Mahatma Gandhi, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar, Gopabandhu Das, Madhusudan Das and many other reformers and thinkers have tried to do their bit in this respect in modern times. Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation, was of the view that we should not compromise in the matter of women's rights. To call women the weaker sex is man's injustice to woman. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior. It is needless to mention here that women participated in large numbers in the freedom struggle including the Gandhian programmes like Satyagraha, picketing, bare-foot march and many other direct action programmes at par with men in different parts of India.

After Independence, the Constitution of India was adopted which guarantees equality, fraternity, justice and liberty to all men and women. Article 14 of the Constitution says that the state shall not deny to any person equality before law or the equal protection of the laws. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth; wherein clause-3 states that nothing in this Article shall prevent the state from making any special provision for women and children. Article 16(c1.2) provides that no citizen shall on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth, residence or any of them, be ineligible for, or discriminated against, in respect of any employment or office under the State. Article 19 states that all citizens shall have the right to freedom of speech and

expression and other rights. Besides these Fundamental Rights, the Directive Principles of State Policy as given in Part-IV of the Constitution, also provides a number of provisions for ensuring equality of men and women. Article 39 says that the state shall, in particular, direct its policy towards securing that the citizens, men and women equally, have the right to an adequate means of livelihood; equal pay for equal work for both men and women; and the health and strength of workers, men and women and the tender age of children are not abused. Article 42 provides that the state shall make provision for securing just and human conditions of work and for maternal relief.⁴

During the British regime, a number of social laws were promulgated in India that affected the status, position and role of women in pre-Independence era which include, among others, the Sati System Regularization Act of 1829; the Hindu Widow's Remarriage Act of 1856; the Indian Penal Code of 1860 (relevant provisions relating to award of punishment or various crimes against women); Special Marriage Act of 1872; the Married Women's Property Act of 1874; the Civil Procedure Code of 1908; the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929; and the Hindu Widow's Right on Property Act of 1937. These laws and a few such other Acts were the result of a number of socio-religious and cultural movements that were organized by social reformers and enlightened individuals and groups in different parts of India.

In the post-Independence era, a number of Acts have been adopted in India that affect women and their position vis-a-vis men. Such Acts include, among others, the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 (as amended in 1967); the Hindu Succession Act of 1956 (as amended in 1986); the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act of 1956; the Dowry Prohibition act of 1962 (as amended in 1984 and 1986); the Maternity Benefit Act of 1961 (as amended from time to time); the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1971; the Equal Remuneration Act of 1976; the Family Courts Act of 1984; the Sati (Prevention) Act of 1987; the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act of 1993; and the 74th Constitution Amendment Act of 1993. These laws have been enacted by the Parliament of India in tune with the provisions of the Constitution of India, popular demands, agitation by women groups, and legal necessities. But there is a perceptible gap between the cup and the lip. A vast majority of women in India who are illiterate and who live in the rural areas still remain completely unaware of most of these laws and their relevant provisions which are only pious words and philosophical pronouncements as presented in the bulky law books.

However, the declaration of the decade 1976-85 as the Women's Decade by the United Nations brought about a change in the perception of the position and status of women and the issue of gender equality throughout the world including India. Successive U.N Conferences on Women and

Development, including the one held in Beijing, have emphasized on gender equality, gender equity, women participation in development and women empowerment.

It may be pointed out that women empowerment would be possible through a number of ways and means including those of a change in the mind-set of both men and women in all walks of our socio-economic and cultural life; better primary health care including reproductive health and reduction of maternal mortality rate; expansion of women's literacy, education (including technical and professional education); access of women to ownership of land and property; access of women (mainly rural and urban slum dwellers) to micro credit and marketing facilities; organization of women's self help groups and cooperatives for self-employment and gainful productive endeavours; and adequate and proper participation of women in the decision-making process including the local, state and national level governance. Besides the government, the civil society including grass-roots level women organizations should play a more positive and pro-active role for awareness generation among women throughout India.

As education including literacy is the main key to social development and women empowerment, Biju Babu was instrumental in setting up a large number of girls' high schools, women's colleges, women polytechnics and women B.Ed colleges throughout Odisha including a good number of such institutions in the

tribal dominated areas. During his tenure as the Chief Minister, a large number of SC and ST girl students were provided with scholarships. Several concessions were declared by Biju Babu for the privately managed but government-aided girls high schools and women's colleges. He gave particular emphasis to science education, skill development and vocational training of girls. During the International Women's Week (01 March to 08 March, 1994), mass awareness camps were organized by the State Social Welfare Board to spread the message of equality, empowerment and entrepreneurship of women. Biju Babu himself participated in a State level Workshop of Women and Science and Technology, a pioneering step in the post-Independence era in the State.

Employment opportunities come next. Biju Babu took a decision to raise the upper age limit by five years for women candidates for various state government jobs and for appearing at various written examinations and interviews in connection with recruitment. And he did not stop at that. He went on to announce 30 percent reservation for women in all categories of government recruitment. Biju Babu's government decided to take over the management of all the government-aided primary, middle and high schools which benefited thousands of lady teachers. Moreover, he took a revolutionary step by making a policy decision that all the posts of primary school teachers in Odisha

henceforth shall be reserved for qualified women candidates.

Biju Babu took a policy decision in 1994 to set up a Sabai Grass Development Corporation. Sabai⁵ grass is used by women belonging to SCs and STs to produce household items including ropes and rope-products. Often these poor women are exploited by the middle men and unscrupulous traders. It was decided that the Corporation would provide improved varieties of Sabai seeds and necessary implement to women engaged in this cultivation and trade. The Corporation would organize technical training of women for skill development and better production. Marketing of the products would also be taken care of by the Corporation. It was decided that the state government and *Youth-Ending-Hunger*, an international voluntary agency, would jointly operationalize the Corporation.

With a view to implementing the National Plan for Women's Development, the Government of Odisha under the Chief Minister ship of Biju Babu established the Odisha Women Development Cooperative Corporation (Odisha Mahila Vikash Samavaya Nigam) in 1991 which is currently working as the apex state level women's cooperative body. It is a joint endeavour by the Government of India, the Government of Odisha and a number of women organizations. Its main aims and objectives are as follows : to integrate all the development plans for women at state, district, block, gram panchayat and

village levels; to build women as a healthy social and economic force for nation building and to facilitate their individual and collective efforts; to train women entrepreneurs for individual, cooperative and joint enterprises; to provide margin money to women for availing loans from banks and other financial institutions; to set up a state level marketing network for the products manufactured by women; and, finally, to create a congenial environment and awareness for the implementation of women development programmes. This Corporation is working as the nodal agency to coordinate and monitor various women development plans. Some of the major activities that are being undertaken by the corporation include income generation schemes for women groups, social training programmes, marketing assistance to women, organization of women self-help groups, facilitating gender equality within the development plans, and organizing meetings of women entrepreneurs. Another area of operation of the Corporation is its financial assistance and easy loan facilities to various women groups, educational institutions and NGOs to open 'Women Study Circles' to impart examination-oriented coaching to women candidates appearing in different competitive examinations.

Biju Babu was the first leader in India to take very bold steps with regard to grass-roots level democracy. It was during his first tenure as the Chief Minister in early 1960s that he restructured the rural

and urban local bodies and brought in suitable amendments to the existing Acts of 1948, 1959 and 1960. But during his second term as the Chief Minister on 5th March, 1990 which eventually came to be celebrated as the Panchayati Raj Day every year, he announced that for the first time in the history of Independent India, women will be given 33 p.c. reservation including SC and ST women in rural as well as urban local self government institutions. Incidentally, Odisha is also one of the pioneering states in India to grant 50 p.c. reservation of seats to women in local self government institutions that became a reality under the leadership of Mr. Naveen Patnaik, the present Chief Minister who is also the younger son of legendary Biju Babu.

Notes

- ¹ He rescued Sukarno in a Dakota plane and flew him to India from Jakarta. Sukarno later on became Indonesia's President.
- ² He resigned from the British air force for the cause of Independence.
- ³ It was during the inauguration of the Port that the then Prime Minister Nehru reportedly scolded Biju Babu publicly for being emotional regarding development projects disregarding standard norms which Biju Babu accepted with a smile.
- ⁴ See the relevant provisions of the Constitution of India as given in Part-III and Part-IV.
- ⁵ It is a part of the livelihood opportunities of the tribal and other poor people in different states of India.

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“I have not failed. I’ve just found 10,000 ways that won’t work.”

~ *Thomas A. Edison*

“If you don’t value your time, neither will others. Stop giving away your time and talents. Value what you know & start charging for it.”

~ *Kim Garst*