

UMA CHARAN PATNAIK ON HILL TRIBES OF ODISHA: SOME ANTHROPOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

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Abstract: The name of Uma Charan Patnaik often comes up in the public memory of Odisha for his immense and erudite contribution in conceiving the contemporary naval base at INS Chilika or for the incisive report he submitted as member of parliamentary committee on defence indicating China's intention to invade India much before it actually took place in 1962. Besides, those who knew him closely would recall with awe and reverence his parliamentary skills not only for his persuasive power and richness of narratives that often marked his speeches, but also for his grip over the facts and figures to support his arguments. The archival records of all the questions raised by him in the parliament are testimony to this quality of him. But very few, or rather none, would ever imagine that he had a thorough understanding of the complexities of social structures and the political economy of the so called adivasi or indigenous communities of Odisha which has withstood the test of time and holds key to the contemporary problems of insurgency and extremism engulfing the hill communities spreading violence.

Keywords: Uma Charan Patnaik, Hill Tribes, Holistic Perspective, Nationalism, Odisha.

Introduction: Uma Charan Patnaik (1902-1961) was one of the luminaries in the public life of South Odisha. His father Abhimanyu Patnaik served as District Collector of various districts in Madras presidency. Needless to mention that before the formation of the separate state of Odisha in 1936, part of it came under the administrative control of Madras presidency. After completing the pre-university course, the Intermediate in Arts, from the prestigious Khallikote College of Berhampur he obtained B.A. degree from Presidency College at Madras. On returning to Cuttack, he took admission in the historic Ravenshaw College and completed Master of Arts (M.A) and Bachelor of Law (B.L). In 1922, he became an ardent follower of Gandhi and undertook several social welfare initiatives for *harijans* and the marginalized communities of Ganjam. In 1927 he started practicing law at Aska, a smaller town near Berhampur, the major business city in South Odisha. When Mahatma Gandhi visited Ganjam in 1928, Uma Charan moved with him translating his Hindi speeches in vernacular Odia. This was the time when his oratory skills which kept the public spellbound came to the forefront. In 1930 Uma Charan participated in Civil Disobedience movement, rejected foreign clothes and strongly advocated for creation of a Swaraj Fund. He also worked for promotion of khadi and established Swaraj Ashram in Ganjam. Under the influence of Gandhi's call to nation he organized protest marches against sale of liquors thereby creating a *nashamuktor* liquor free society. He was deeply concerned with the spread of liquor trade leading to the innocence tribal's dependence on them. Many of his inspiring speeches were published in Odia newspapers, the 'Dainik Asha', 'New Odisha' and the 'East Coast'. In 1936 on creation of the separate state of Odisha he was appointed as the first

public prosecutor of Ganjam. Uma Charan was one of the top criminal lawyers of his time. The fact that he never lost a case or an election runs deep down the public memory. He was associated with Indian National Army in terms of fighting their cases. This exposure gave Uma Charan a thorough understanding of India's defence needs. In 1939 he was elected to the provincial assembly of Odisha from Ghumusar Udayagiri defeating the King of the Princely State of Kanika. In 1941 because of his individual satyagraha, he was imprisoned in Chhatrapur jail for six months. In the second half of 1942 he was again arrested for participating in Quit India Movement and was detained in Berhampur Jail for few years. It was on 17 June 1945 that he was released and joined the public life. During his imprisonment he was continuously writing in Sashi Bhushan Rath's newspaper 'Danik Asha.' In 1946 he was elected to the provincial assembly of Odisha from the Berhampur constituency. After differences with the Congress party, he contested as an independent candidate from Berhampur parliamentary constituency in 1952 election and won with huge margins. In 1956 he was a member of the parliamentary committee that visited China under the chairmanship of Shri Iyengar when Shri V.K. Krishna Menon was Defence Minister of India. On their return to India Uma Charan was quick to inform the Government of India about the possibility of Chinese aggression in future. In 1957 he again contested the election and got elected as Member of Parliament from Berhampur. Unfortunately, he died of a cardiac arrest in Delhi while he was still a member of parliament.

I never read anything on Uma Charan in my childhood or even during my college days. I was a student of Khallikote College, Berhampur, South

Odisha around late 1970s when I completed my B.Sc with honours in anthropology. That was the time when Khallikote College was celebrating its centenary, completing hundred years in 1978. We were made to feel proud of the institution in which we were growing up, but unfortunately there was no discussion on or remembrance of the builders of the social space of Berhampur in which the college was located. In the family I remember my mother talking about him as her maternal uncle who was a freedom fighter and who represented his constituencies in state assembly and Indian parliament winning elections four times from different parts of south Orissa. But that never conveyed anything special about Uma Charan. There were many freedom fighters, rather the whole country fought for freedom and there are many elected representatives in state assemblies and Indian parliament exceedingly more than few thousands at a particular point of time. So that piece of information never engaged my attention in any significant way. But it was only in July 2012 during my short stint in South Asian Study Centre at Heidelberg, Germany that I encountered Uma Charan in print for the first time in my life which not only changed my ideas on him and his capacities but also touched a chord in the very core of my being. What family could not do, an institution in a western country on an alien land could connect the cord. Absence of such institutions are grossly felt by all of us in Odisha, but very few of us admit that much needs to be done on the front of institution building especially in terms of deriving inspiration from the path our leaders travelled during their life journeys. During my graduation in Khallikote college we were required to write a dissertation on contemporary social issue of any community based anthropological field work. Our teacher Professor Geetanjali Nayak took us to tribal villages adjoining the Upper Kolab river dam project in Koraput. She had mentioned about a book on Hill Tribes of Jeypore written by Shri Lakshmi Narayan Sahu in 1942. The early nature of work attracted my attention and I started searching for it but in vain. Even during my doctoral research at the University of Delhi I could not locate that book in any of the libraries. The search never ended nor did it continue, it became dormant in me.

Deconstructing the Stereotypes : On one of the fine afternoons in July 2012, I was browsing through the catalogue in the library of the South Asian Studies at Heidelberg, suddenly I spotted the book *The Hill Tribes of Jeypore* published by the Orissa Mission Press of Cuttack in 1942. And it contained a brief article by Uma Charan carrying his reflections on the book. Lakshmi Narayan Sahu, the author of the book was a dedicated member of Servants of India Society which started 'aborigine service work' in hill areas of Orissa as early as 1939 under which more than 40

schools started in tribal and hilly areas, medicines were freely distributed and other welfare measures were adopted. This was the time when 'Congress Constructive Program' was targeting the welfare of harijan, aborigines and other marginalized sections of Indian society. The construction work focused on training the *dalit* and *adivasi* communities to train them in non-violent struggle to achieve India's freedom. The recently formed Kasturba Memorial Committee was committed to the cause of women, especially of the weaker section of the society.

Most of the sections of the nation, especially the intellectuals of the time, were celebrating such initiatives with a lot of contentment. The Head of the Department of Anthropology, Calcutta University Professor K. P. Chattopadhyay had then returned from United Kingdom with a degree from Cambridge, dismissed the whole issue of studying the unexplored hill tribes of Orissa by just making a complimentary note on Lakshmi Narayan Sahu's book " I have read your work on Jeypore Tribes. It is a *useful summary* of some social and economic facts about them and of other details required for *welfare work*." (P:244)

However, Uma Charan was one of those few ones who was aware of the onerous responsibility of social reconstruction, the associated difficulties, and challenges. He was very candid about it when he used the metaphor of 'a drop in ocean' to assess the work done in the field so far. Uma Charan wrote:

"But what has actually been done so far in this direction is but a drop in the ocean, when compared with what has yet to be done. The purpose of Shri Sahu's book and his brief article will be served if Indian public opinion can be focused on these uplands and the hill tribes thereof."
(P:239)

Insights for Tribal Policy: While anthropologists of the time reflected complete lack of empathy for the marginalized hill communities of the nation, Uma Charan was passionate about their upliftment. But his passion was strongly grounded on academic considerations. His view points on tribal issues and problems truly reflect his expertise on the subject and his ability to capture the essence of an academic discipline which he never studied formally. Many of his trajectories to understand tribal life is beyond imagination not only at that juncture of intellectual history but also for many of the academicians of present generation. Since independence the discipline of anthropology has been marching on the path of specialization and super specializations, but paradoxically it has maintained its stand on integration of various branches such as biological, social, archaeological and linguistic anthropology. Uma Charan transcends the narrow boundaries of these sub disciplines to arrive at an integrated and

holistic understanding of the issues concerning tribal communities. His approach has been holistic but it does not regard hill tribes as isolated. Examining the works of western scholars he concludes the pattern of migration of tribes of Orissa in prehistoric and historic times, but at the same time points towards the relevance and usefulness of *Puranas* and other Indological text as source material for understanding such processes. (P:241). Looking towards Indian text for an anthropology of India is academic trend these days. Uma Charan's idea of holism is grounded in the total existential time and space of these communities. It touches upon, migration history and connection with early civilizations, linguistic and ethnic variations, environment including forest and mineral resources, health practices and medicinal plants, formal education and changing literacy rate, indebtedness and consequent exploitations among many others.

Quoting the author of 1931 Census Report, he analyses the causes of alcoholism to the dietary pattern among the tribal communities. The Hill tribes cannot grow sugar and are too poor to buy it. In hot weather their bodies need more sugar intake and they get it from large quantity of light liquor. Uma Charan questions that can we really blame them for seeking glucose from mild drinks in the given environmental condition. He is not being hedonistic or romantic in his approach to tribal cultures. He believes in sharing the responsibility and help them come out of this habit.

Uma Charan's analysis of the natural resources and their potential use is quite impressive. An accurate description of the available minerals in different parts of tribal Orissa follows with the identification of the high yielding varieties of seeds, forest produce and the potential market links, the mention of business houses involved in mining and collection and sale of forest products, the potential sites of hydroelectric river dam projects such as Kolab river dam project much before the state government started working on it are all testimony to his strong drive to develop this area. However, he was aware of the indigenous knowledge associated with iron smelting by Kammars, one of the local tribal communities and hinted for their upliftment through state patronage. In Uma Charan's words:

"the development of the natural resources of these uplands will not only remove the grinding poverty of the masses, but will also restore India to have proper place among the free nations of the world" (P:240)

Uma Charan was writing it in 1945, probably for the second edition of the book. The year of publication of the book is mentioned as 1942. In early 1940s the intellectual climate of the country was witnessing two

contesting perspectives on tribal policy, the first one favouring the policy of isolation propounded by missionary anthropologist Verrier Elwin and the secondly the policy of assimilation as articulated in R.R Kale Memorial lecture delivered by Shri A.V Thakkar in 1941. Thakkar was also appointed as Chairman of Partially Excluded Areas Committee set up by the Government of Orissa to look in to the tribal problems. Uma Charan has quoted him and his ideas at different places in his article. Thakkar's approach has evoked strong criticism among anthropologists for his stand that tribal societies have superstitions and known for their proverbial laziness and hedonism and therefore need external help from the people of mainstream culture. Uma Charan was writing on tribes during this phase of contested climate and the present book by Lakshmi Narayan Sahu is mainly framed in the academic discourse initiated by A V Thakkar's approach of assimilation. It is clear from the writings that Uma Charan was never in total agreement with Thakkar's ideas. He found an interesting oxymoron in synthesizing his own ideas with that of the dominant one coming from Thakkar and his followers. In Uma Charan's language:

"They are strong, sturdy and brave (very cruel, too, if roused to anger). They are a queer admixture of industry and idleness, courage and docility. Theirs is a peculiar blending of the strength and ferocity of the royal tiger of their forest, with the simplicity of innocent little children. Enjoying the sun, rain and extreme cold of their hills, as they do, they feel at home in dense forest and steep mountains, hunting wild animals, singing and dancing in their Dangadi dens with their natural faithfulness, hospitality and goodness to counter-balance anger and other natural vices, they may indeed be called the 'Children of Nature'." (P :241)

One can clearly see how Uma Charan makes a departure from the dominant stereotypical images of tribal societies by finding *queer admixture* or *peculiar blending* as explanatory devices to bring in his conviction on the nature of tribal communities. He also cites a case where the tribals have been touched by messages intended to reform their undesirable habits. Uma Charan's optimism finds clear expression when he opines that drinking habit is not incorrigible among the Hill tribes of Orissa. He goes on:

"In the early 1930's the Kumudaballi Penu or Gandhi Penu (Penu=God) the Khond of Bissum Cuttack taluq proclaimed a prohibition against liquor and the offering of animal sacrifices. This spread as wild fire and the Khonds faithfully obeyed it. But the local exploiter spread a

rumor that the KumudaballiPenu wanted also that all black cattle and fowl etc. should be killed or sold away in seven days the innocent Khond began selling his pigs and black cattle and fowl at nominal prices. Government official intervened to stop this exploitation. Along with the exploitation, the Penu's good teachings also disappeared. These go to show that the aborigine, though an invertebrate drinker, can, if his reason or superstition is touched, give up drink."(P: 243)

Tribe and the Nation: Uma Charan has no inhibition to compare the revolutionary potential of unexplored tracts of tribal areas of Orissa and its neighboring tracts of Bastar, Surguja, Chottanagpur and Singhbhum with that of the potentialities of the vast tracts of Czarist Russia during World War II. The siege of Stalingrad and subsequent turning of tide of

war has been demonstrated by Siberia, the sleeping giant who came to the rescue of USSR at the most critical periods of Russian history. This shows his belief in the collective agency of the hill tribes. He also visualized a different kind of free India. Uma Charan writes:

"As I sit here near a Khond village at the foot of a hill by the side of the dense forest and pen these few lines to the music of the spinning wheel of my fellow ashramites, I see before me the vision of free India, but one in which the resources of the whole country are harnessed for the common good, and where all communities and tribes march shoulder to shoulder, keeping steps and singing to the tune of same Divine Music." (P: 244)

Uma Charan's humanism has place for all, where diversities were merged in to consensus of difference, the true essence of Indian Nationalism.

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