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When East Meets West: Revisiting the Relationship between Harekrushna Mahtab and M.K. Gandhi

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Abstract: *The autobiographical sketch, Sadhanara Pathe (1987), by Harekrushna Mahtab (1899-1987) indicates that although he was three decades junior to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948), it was a relationship between him and Gandhi which was dotted with exchange of ideas, where mutual reverence reigned supreme. The study reveals that after he returned from South Africa, M.K. Gandhi was on the mission of Bharat Darshan on the advice of his political guru, Gopalkrishna Gokhale. Harekrushna Mahtab was merely a school-boy, aspiring for higher education from Ravenshaw College, Cuttack. But Gandhi's visit to Orissa in April 1921 changed the outlook of many; college-going Mahtab was one among them. He found Gandhi's speeches like 'electric shocks', which eventually changed the course of his entire life. However, Mahtab, 'Utkal Kesari' of later years, heavily influenced by Gandhian political philosophy, repaid his moral and intellectual debt with a brilliant suggestion to his political guru, i.e. M.K. Gandhi. During Gandhi's visit to Bhadrak in Orissa in 1927, Mahtab informed him about the poor economic condition of the peasants of Orissa and the basic need for salt, which was taxed by the British Government, in their lives. Although M.K. Gandhi is generally credited with the novel idea of Salt Satyagraha to abolish the salt tax, it seems from the claim of Harekrushna Mahtab that Gandhi took the idea from Mahtab. It may thus be claimed that, along with Gandhi, Mahtab's role should also be acknowledged for the Salt Satyagraha, followed by the Civil Disobedience movement, an important crossroads in the nationalist movement of India.*

Keywords: *Civil Disobedience Movement, Nationalist Movement of India, Salt Satyagraha etc.*

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Introduction

According to the historians of the Annales School, the 'inner spirit' of a particular age in one particular country leads to the emergence of the central figures of history. It was the Indian

nationalist movement that also altered many equations at many levels, and some prominent figures rose to the occasion to usher in important changes in different quarters of public life. There is no doubt that after coming back from South Africa, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi became the central figure of the grand narrative of the Indian nationalist movement. However, at the same time, it is also to be admitted that due to Gandhi's over-arching leadership and refreshingly new political ideology, the voices of most of the other prominent leaders lost their significance. Those leaders, in the process of following Gandhi, were overshadowed by Gandhi himself. Harekrushna Mahtab (1899-1987), later the Chief Minister of Odisha, was one such rare example who, although an ardent follower of Gandhi, could leave an emphatic impact on the Gandhian political programme during the nationalist movement of India. His work exemplifies how individual contributions can shape the broader narrative even in the shadow of a 'charismatic' figure, influencing challenging moments and sustaining the momentum of collective action in a transformative time.

The first half of the twentieth century saw an emerging political consciousness among the people of Orissa. From the foundation of the *Utkal Sammilani* in 1903, led by Madhusudan Das, to the formation of the separate province of Orissa in 1936, in the context of active participation in the Civil Disobedience as well as apprehending the Quit India movement within a span of few years, marked a journey where regional pride, social reorganisation and a commitment to the cause of India's struggle for independence, all came together and laid the foundation of political and cultural identity of modern Orissa (now Odisha). Based on the urge to voice grievances, the 1920s remained a decade of political experimentation in colonial India. The reaction against and opposition to colonial rule was expressed and eventually consolidated through political strategies and new methods like *Ahimsa* (non-violence), *Satyagraha* and rising mass movements.

Following the withdrawal of the Non-cooperation movement, the politics within the Indian National Congress manifested itself in different directions. Although Gandhi was imprisoned for six years, he was released early because of his poor health condition, and he retired to Sabarmati to get himself engaged in the constructive programme like *Khadi*, or possibly to reflect upon the impact of his new political methodologies on Indian soil. It was in Gandhi's absence that the Indian National Congress was divided into two ideological camps, i.e. the 'no-changers', who were willing to stick to the Gandhian path of mass movement and the 'pro-changers', who wanted to revert to the earlier method of

constitutional political agitation.[1] It was in this context that the Swarajist Party, under the leadership of C.R. Das and Motilal Nehru, but within the ambit of the Indian National Congress, emerged intending to jeopardise the functioning of the Legislative Council by joining it. By that time, the Indian people had already got the taste of mass movement, which in turn ensured the failure of the council-entry like elitist politics of the Swarajist Party. The Party and its politics did not get the support of Gandhi either. In another development within the Congress, young leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose raised their voices to support socialist ideas, thereby giving voice to the people belonging to the typically ignored section of Indian society.

By the middle of the 1920s, the much-celebrated Hindu-Muslim unity was also gone. It was only the announcement of the 'all-White' Simon Commission that scattered trends of Indian politics were galvanised into a concerted protest by all the political parties. This political break of five long years helped Gandhi to redesign his future course of political action. This was when his readings, reflections, and interactions with a few people ignited some novel ideas he was considering implementing in his future programmes. His interaction with Harekrushna Mahtab was one such example which definitely left a mark in the history of the nationalist movement in India. During this changing political scenario, the person who not only comprehended the shifts in the political trend of India, but also remained instrumental in mobilising people in Orissa towards that shift through national education, rural reconstruction and the promotion of *Khadi*, was Harekrushna Mahtab. By engaging more people in the anti-colonial agitation in Orissa, he sought to connect local hopes with national ideals, believing that the true national development could only be achieved through national integration.

Mahtab's Initiation to Politics

Harekrushna Mahtab was born on 21 November 1899 in Agarpara, in the Bhadrak sub-division of Balasore district in Orissa.[2] His father, Krushna Chandra Das, was the son-in-law of Jagannath Mahtab, the *Zamindar* of the Agarpara estate. Since Jagannath Mahtab had no biological son, Harekrushna was adopted by his grandfather and conferred with the maternal surname 'Mahtab'.[3] Mahtab received his primary education from the school, started by his father, Krushna Charan Das, in Agarpara. At the age of twelve, he was sent to Bhadrak, where he passed his matriculation examination in 1917. Mahtab was keenly interested in

studies and aspired to continue his education after matriculation. However, his father disapproved of Mahtab's plan for higher education and wanted his son to take over managing their family estate instead. To dissuade Mahtab from pursuing further studies, Krushna Chandra even got him married immediately after he matriculated in 1917, hoping that the responsibilities of married life would anchor the young Mahtab to family obligations. However, despite facing initial resistance from his family, especially from his father, Mahtab's unwavering determination to pursue a college education eventually led him to Ravenshaw College in Cuttack.

Mahtab started to develop a rational outlook early in his life, during his high school years at Bhadrak, where he came in contact with the monks of the Ramakrishna Mission.[4] His growing acquaintance with the writings and speeches of Swami Vivekananda instilled an aspiration that transcended the idea of merely becoming a custodian of the family estate. The idea of serving society was further boosted after Mahtab joined Ravenshaw College to pursue his degree in I. Sc. It should be mentioned in this context that H.K. Mahtab initially had taken admission to Ravenshaw College to pursue a Bachelor's Degree in science, but his preoccupations with several socio-political activities utterly affected his preparation for the I. Sc. examination, and he somehow managed to pass the examination in a second division. Later, he opted for a Bachelor's Degree in Arts with Economics and Sanskrit as subjects at the graduation level.[5] However, H.K. Mahtab commenced his college education when India was witnessing a unique shift in its resistance against colonial rule, marked by the rise of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and his idea of *Ahimsa* or non-violence. The political philosophy of H.K. Mahtab although was heavily influenced by several aspects, including the ideals of Jatindranath Mukhopadhyay, revolutionary activities in Bengal, the protest of Bal Gangadhar Tilak against the Rowlatt Act, Annie Besant and the Home Rule League, and the teachings of *Yogi* C.R.D. Naidu or 'Utkal Gourav' Madhusudan Das and his advocacy for the unification of Oriya-speaking regions played a significant role, but it was rooted in the Gandhian principles of non-violence, self-reliance, and social reform.

H.K. Mahtab's college days synchronised with an era of intense political upheaval, not only in India but also on the global stage. The outbreak of World War I (1914-1918) had shaken the foundations of the empires, and the changing power dynamics were reflected in the re-drawn political boundaries in the world arena. Revolutionary ideas were also taking root, with the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 in Russia indicating the rise of communism on

the one hand, and, on the other, with the authoritarian political ideology, aggressive nationalism was setting the stage for major global conflicts in the years to come. In India, the struggle for independence against British rule was gaining momentum with a transforming trend in national politics, where the practice of non-violent protest and mass movement was to play a decisive role.

Early Phase of Mahtab's Political Career

The nationalist politics profoundly appealed to H.K. Mahtab for the first time in 1920 when, as a representative of *Bharati Mandir*,[6] he was entrusted with attending the special session of the Indian National Congress in Calcutta. During that session, he could listen to the speeches of prominent figures such as Chittaranjan Das, Motilal Nehru, Lajpat Rai, Madan Mohan Malaviya and Mahatma Gandhi. Malaviya's call to spread the message of non-cooperation even to the country's core deeply inspired young Mahtab. His political convictions received further encouragement when Gandhi explained the concept of non-violent non-cooperation and referred to it as the most effective political tool to achieve *Swaraj*. Although Gandhi's speech invoked intense debate, the eventual recognition of the Gandhian philosophy and political programme, and the formal launch of the Non-cooperation movement under Gandhi's leadership left a lasting impact on Mahtab.

In a dire desire to serve the country and its people, Mahtab soon got himself associated with the Provincial Congress Committee of Orissa, which was established in Cuttack in 1921. It is interesting to note that it was the activists of *Bharati Mandir* who had floated the idea of a Provincial Congress Committee in Orissa. They stated that establishing the Orissa Provincial Congress Committee would connect Orissa, one of the 'backward provinces' so far as the Congress politics was concerned, to the nationwide independence movement and foster regional unity, enabling the province to play a vital role in India's quest for freedom.[7] Following the Nagpur session of the Indian National Congress, the Utkal Pradesh Congress Committee (UPCC) was founded in December 1920. Gopabandhu Das was appointed as the first President of the Provincial Congress Committee in Orissa.[8] Dr. Ekram Rasul and Bhagirathi Mohapatra were given the posts of Vice-President and General Secretary, respectively. H.K. Mahtab joined as a member of the working committee of UPCC and was put in-charge of the district of Balasore to organise the Congress activities in that area.[9]

H.K. Mahtab, accompanied by Subodh Chandra De, Karunakar Panigrahi, Bhairab Chandra Mohapatra, Surendranath Das, Nilambar Das, Banchanidhi Mohanty, Ghanshyam Sahoo, and Md. Hanif had actively participated in various programmes launched by the UPCC. As a reaction against and in opposition to colonial rule, Mahtab and his associates got involved in the boycott movement. In support of the Non-cooperation movement, denouncing foreign goods as well as picketing foreign liquor shops and cloth shops became their foremost agenda. H.K. Mahtab's active participation in nationalist politics did not take much time to put him under the scanner of the colonial surveillance. Not only was he forced to leave college due to an adverse report filed by the authorities, but he was also sentenced to two-week imprisonment for promoting the Non-cooperation movement in Orissa, showcasing his staunch support for the cause of the freedom movement. After his imprisonment, Mahtab, for a brief period, kept himself away from political activities and retired to his ancestral home at Agarpara to take care of his younger brother, who was suffering from a serious illness. The time he stayed with his family, according to H.K. Mahtab, was a period of introspection. Torn between the responsibilities of a family-man and the urge to serve the nation's struggle for independence, H.K. Mahtab was in a dilemma. However, staying true to his inner spirit, he ultimately chose his country over his family.

Following the Footsteps of Gandhi in Orissa

H.K. Mahtab returned to Cuttack at a time when the Non-cooperation movement was getting widespread in Orissa under the leadership of Gopabandhu Das[10], Raja Krushna Bose[11] and Gopabandhu Choudhury, a former Deputy Magistrate who quit his job to join the Non-cooperation movement. The movement gained further momentum when Mahatma Gandhi made his first visit to Orissa on 24 March 1921.[12] Gandhi's tour to Orissa not only provided the Non-cooperation movement in the region with a powerful surge of energy and enthusiasm, but it also reanimated the local uprisings, which all these times were either suppressed or could not gather enough valour to fight against the oppressors. The development of the Non-cooperation movement and the arrival of Gandhi in Orissa provided the disgruntled local peasantry with a sense of self-assurance, and they came forward valiantly to raise their voice against the oppression of the local *Zamindars* or *Rajas*. A reference can be made to the Kanika Peasant Movement in Orissa, where an uprising against the oppressive feudal practices under Rajendra Narayan Bhanjadeo, the *Raja* of Kanika,

emerged in early 1921.[13] The local peasantry revolted against the excessive taxes, forced labour, and exploitative measures by the *Zamindar* and refused to pay taxes. This movement did not directly connect to mainstream national politics, but highlighted the growing rural discontent and aligned with the broader nationalist struggle for independence. H.K. Mahtab got involved in the Kanika Peasant Movement. His involvement, simultaneously in the Non-cooperation movement and the local peasant protest, 'rewarded' him with a year of rigorous imprisonment in 1922.[14]

However, Gandhi's tour and gospel of non-violence motivated the masses in Orissa to plunge into the Non-cooperation movement. Gandhi's roadmap in Orissa included places like Bhadrak, Cuttack, Puri and Berhampur, where thousands of people flocked to his meetings, eager to have a *darshan* of the Mahatma and listen to his words. H.K. Mahtab, for him, it was an opportunity to observe his idol very closely. He diligently accompanied Gandhi during his Orissa expedition, arranged for Gandhi's accommodation, and coordinated his meeting in Bhadrak. Gandhi's recurrent characterisation of the British Government as 'Satanic' sparked a wave of popular defiance, igniting widespread resistance against colonial rule across Orissa.[15] The piece of advice that profoundly resonated with H.K. Mahtab was when Gandhi, before concluding his tour in Orissa and leaving for Madras, appealed to the local supporters of the Non-cooperation movement to work towards a single task and convert it into meaningful action. The noticeable outcome of Gandhi's visit was that it significantly boosted the morale of the masses in Orissa and gave life to otherwise muted activities of the UPCC. Results were there to be seen, including the broader outreach of Congress volunteers, the formation of District Congress Committees, the establishment of *Swaraj Ashrams*, and the promotion of *Khadi* initiatives.

In 1921, H.K. Mahtab established *Swaraj Mandir* in Balasore to implement Mahatma Gandhi's constructive programmes, focusing primarily on promoting the spinning of *khadi*. In response to Gandhi's call to observe 'National Week', H.K. Mahtab reached Balasore on 5 April 1921 to organise the National Week (6 April 1921-13 April 1921) in the district.[16] To build a national consciousness among the masses, the door-to-door campaign and singing and playing nationalist songs became a part of the 'National Week' observance. At the public meetings in Balasore, explaining the misrule and exploitative nature of the British Government, he preached the importance of attaining *Swaraj*. With zeal, he appealed to the people to rise up and actively contest the dominance of British rule. To mobilise popular

opinion in favour of the Non-cooperation movement and Mahatma Gandhi's method of non-violent protest, H.K. Mahtab started distributing newspapers, like *Servant* and *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, among the locals.

Gandhi and Mahtab: Beginning of Salt *Satyagraha*

Mahatma Gandhi's decision to withdraw the Non-cooperation movement was met with mixed reactions. Some supported Gandhi's moral commitment to the cause of non-violence, while others criticised him for the abrupt termination of a promising struggle, which could bring *Swaraj* within one year. H.K. Mahtab, like many others, was unhappy and somewhat disappointed with Gandhi's decision to suspend the Non-cooperation movement. Initially, he criticised this suspension as a hasty decision by Gandhi, especially when the spirit of the movement was getting more consolidated among the people of India. However, being an ardent follower of Gandhi's political philosophy, Mahtab soon realised Gandhi was not wrong in his decision and appreciated his firmness in adhering to the principle of non-violence. H.K. Mahtab later attended the meeting of the All India Congress Committee (AICC) held at Bardoli. After listening to Gandhi in the AICC meeting, H.K. Mahtab could realise that the withdrawal of the Non-cooperation movement was a strategic pause rather than a political setback for Gandhi. This exemplified Gandhi's commitment to pursue *Swaraj* through non-violence and not losing moral ground in the struggle for India's independence.

Mahatma Gandhi refrained from engaging in direct politics following his release from imprisonment on 5 February 1924. He concentrated more on constructive programmes such as promoting *Khadi*, rural reconstruction, and social reforms, where the eradication of untouchability played the most significant role.[17] During the period between 1922 and 1928, before Gandhi made his comeback to active politics with the unveiling of the Bardoli *Satyagraha*, India's political scene was also nearly in a defunct state. The situation was no different in Orissa as well. After his release from jail in 1923, H.K. Mahtab, when he returned to Orissa, to his utter dismay, found the entire province disillusioned. To resolve the situation, he then dedicated himself to a restoration programme. Besides promoting *Khadi* work and reviving *Swaraj Ashram*, he also started publishing a weekly journal named *Prajatantra* to propagate Gandhian values and popularise constructive programmes across Orissa. It was during this time when H.K. Mahtab was working unremittingly to revive the spirit of the nationalist movement in Orissa that Mahatma Gandhi made another visit to Orissa in 1927. In

his four-day tour to Orissa, Mahatab travelled with Gandhi. Referring to his interaction with Mahatma Gandhi during his Orissa tour in 1927, H.K. Mahtab has written:

> I was in charge of arranging his accommodation and travel which was very difficult in those days because of official resistance. During his stay I had the opportunity of discussing with him many matters such as the scope of non-violence and limitation of boycotting courts etc. I understood how practical his method was. It was not dogmatic. He advised non-co-operation meant some action. It is not only keeping aloof.[18]

Gandhi's visit to Orissa in 1927 can be considered significant not only for the fact that it boosted the drooping morale of the people associated with the freedom struggle in Orissa, it also was one such instance when Mahatma Gandhi, the central figure of contemporary nationalist politics as well as inspiration for many, was himself inspired by the suggestions given by H.K. Mahtab. Mahtab, heavily influenced by Gandhi's political ideas, repaid his moral and intellectual debt with a brilliant suggestion to his political idol, M.K. Gandhi. When Gandhi visited Bhadrak in Orissa in 1927, Mahtab explained to him about the dire economic state of the peasants of Orissa and further told him about the fundamental requirement for salt, which the British Government had imposed a tax on. Besides agriculture, it was the salt-making industry that upheld the peasantry in the region. He conveyed to Gandhi that the movement against the salt law could be more meaningful in Orissa instead of emphasising *khadi* work. H.K. Mahtab, in his autobiography, has mentioned:

> My own firm impression is that he (Mahatma Gandhi) took up the case here to Salt Satyagraha because salt was a subsidiary industry to maintain the poor peasantry, impressed him a good deal. Then the Salt movement came.[19]

The Lahore Session of the Indian National Congress was concluded with the resolution of *Purna Swaraj* and the launch of the Civil Disobedience movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. H.K. Mahtab, at the same time, was preparing the stage for a mass movement centred on a protest against the salt tax in Orissa. In partnership with Surendranath Das, popularly known as *Sardar*, he made substantial efforts to launch the movement in Balasore. At first, they started meeting to abolish the salt tax in the district. It should be mentioned in this context that salt production along the Orissa coast was a pre-colonial activity and a significant source of income for the Oriya people. The colonial rule, however, broke this source of livelihood by imposing a monopoly on salt production. The salt issue had long been a concern for Orissa's nationalist leadership. In 1918, Gopabandhu Das brought the

issue to the Bihar and Orissa Legislative Assembly. Later, when Gandhi visited Orissa, Mahtab proposed making the salt tax the central point of a mass movement. H.K. Mahtab would later often exclaim in wonderment at how he could even have foreseen that there would be a mass movement around 'salt' before Gandhi launched the Salt *Satyagraha*.[20] However, the location selected for breaking the Salt Law was sixteen kilometres from Balasore town at Inchudi, and Mahtab was put in-charge of organising the regional movement.[21] Although M.K. Gandhi is generally credited with the novel idea of the Salt *Satyagraha* to abolish the salt tax, it seems from the claim of Harekrushna Mahtab that Gandhi adopted the concept from Mahtab. The Salt *Satyagraha* became the defining moment that shaped the image of Mahatma Gandhi as a leader who represented the masses. The British salt monopoly highlighted colonial exploitation through control of an essential life resource, which resonated with people from every social stratum. Thereby creating a mass appeal to the people of India. The Salt *Satyagraha,* which evolved into the Civil Disobedience movement, stands as a significant juncture in the nationalist movement of India, where, besides Gandhi, Mahtab deserves recognition as well.

Conclusion

Like M.K. Gandhi, who throughout his life stressed the importance of participation, contribution, and emancipation of the Indian masses, his ardent follower Harekrushna Mahtab also followed the same trajectory and emerged as ‘People’s Man’ of Orissa. Be it in the Office as the Chief Minister of Orissa, or as a member of the Executive Committee set up by Subhas Chandra Bose in colonial India, be it his concern for the common people of Orissa expressed in his correspondences with all the prominent leaders of contemporary colonial as well as independent India, or as the Editor-in-Chief of *Prajatantra* reflecting upon numerous issues starting from religion to culture, education to politics, social reform to necessity of writing quality children literature, Mahtab envisaged building-up a modern Orissa. Like a true follower of Gandhi, Mahtab also believed in an umbrella-type leadership, where people from all strata of society would come together with a dream of ‘a better tomorrow’. It is the posterity to answer whether Gandhi or Mahtab failed or succeeded in their efforts!

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[5] *Ibid.* p. 6.
[6] H.K. Mahtab and some of the other students, including Naba Krushna Choudhury, Nityananda Kanungo, Jadumani Mangaraj and Bhagirathi Mohapatra of Ravenshaw College, formed a Library Movement in Cuttack during 1919 and 1920. Eventually, their library, *Bharati Mandir*, transformed into an active platform for articulating and disseminating nationalist ideas, primarily among the intelligentsia in Orissa.
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[15] Das, M.N., and Nanda, C.P., *Harekrushna Mahtab*, *op. cit*, p. 10.
[16] *Ibid.* p. 11.
[17] M.K. Gandhi was sentenced to six years of imprisonment on 18 March 1922, following the suspension of the Non-Cooperation Movement. However, he served only two years of his sentence, as he was released early on 5 February 1924, due to ill health.
[18] Mahtab, Harekrushna, *While Serving My Nation*, *op. cit*, p. vii.
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