
SATYABADI BANA VIDYALAYA OF PANDIT GOPABANDHU DAS: A CASE STUDY IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

Satyabadi Bana Vidyalaya was a school established by Utkalmani Pandit Gopabandhu Das, a freedom fighter, scholar, educationist and social worker from Odisha, along with his colleagues during the British rule in the village of Satyabadi near Sakhigopala temple, in the district of Puri. The residential cum day boarding school was popularly known as “Man Manufacturing factory” -- the founders envisaged not only mental but also holistic development of their students based on India’s rich heritage and culture. It aimed to foster future leaders dedicated to the uplift of Indian society, especially the people of Odisha. The school ecosystem was modelled on the *Vedic Gurukula* system of education, but it also embraced the then modern developments in pedagogy as well. The paper focuses on the hallmarks of the institution: disciplinary way of life, democratic value system, social service and engagement, nationalistic spirit, free thinking, political awareness, individual support, etc. It draws upon recent empirical studies in educational leadership and analyses the various leadership traits of the founders and the teachers of the Satyabadi School, which helped in the optimization of resources, growth of innovative means and ways, delegation of responsibilities, supervision, creation of a familial environment and interpersonal bonding for working towards shared aims and objectives. Its widespread popularity as another “Nalanda” and its success within a short span of time is well recorded, despite operating in a hostile climate of political servitude, economic poverty and social backwardness.

Keywords: Educational Leadership, School Leadership, Satyabadi Bana Vidyalaya, UtkalmaniGopabandhu, Student, Teacher

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Tat karma yat na bandhāya sā vidyā yā vimuktaye^[1]

T rue education emancipates an individual and right action liberates one from the bondages of the world. It leads to faith in one's own self, which translates into self-reliance. It is the doorway to the awakening of the Brahman or the universal consciousness within an individual. This philosophy has been the mainstay of the Indian system of education since ancient times. We see that India's downfall and colonization were simultaneous to its decaying education. In Swami Vivekananda's words: "The chief cause of India's ruin has been the monopolizing of the whole education and intelligence of the land, by dint of pride and royal authority, among a handful of men."^[2]

In early 20th century colonial India, many areas of the present state of Odisha were under the then Madras, Bengal and Central provinces (Panda 1997, p.305). The socio-economic condition of the Odias was precarious, much like the other parts of the country. Most people couldn't afford even two square meals per day. But it was also a time that saw the rise of revolutionary ideas and revolutionaries in India.

One such person was Pandit Gopabandhu Das, popularly known as Utkalmani—the jewel of Utkala or Odisha. A gifted polymath, he was a social worker, scholar, writer, poet, freedom fighter, lawyer, politician and an educationist. Since his college days, he served people in many ways, notably during droughts, floods, epidemics, etc. Keen on collective uplift of his countrymen, he kept a sharp lookout for like-minded people who would help him in this noble endeavour.

According to him, "Education is life. An uneducated person is not a human but an animal. Education is a blind man's vision, a poor man's sustenance and a helpless person's aid. A person is handicapped without knowledge. Education is the basis of wealth, prestige and fame. If my countrymen aren't educated then they will suffer from poverty, be humiliated by others and will never be equals. In today's India, especially in Odisha, there is no other way to strengthen the backbone of society—education is the only answer" (Tripathy & Tripathy 1928, p.44).

[1] Viṣṇu Purāṇa 1.19.4

[2] Letter written by Swami Vivekananda to Shrimati Sarala Ghosal, B.A., Editor, Bharati, 24 April, 1897. (Translated from Bengali)

But it was a challenge to teach in the midst of acute poverty. Plus, the modern education system was neither holistic nor mass based. It prepared people to look out only for jobs and was more of a business enterprise. There was no scope for physical and moral well-being and students were encouraged to become bookish. The student-teacher association lasted only for a few hours within the four walls of the classroom. Most importantly, modern schools were concentrated only in a few cities. Completely neglected, village life, which embodied simplicity, tolerance, spirituality, virtuousness and dedication, suffered.

Utkalmani Pandit Gopabandhu Das along with Acharya Harihara Das, Pandit Nilakantha Das and Pracharaka Ananth Mishra took a vow— “We shall not accept government jobs after studies. We shall do something for this country. We shall die seeing the nation in better condition than what we saw at our birth” (Das 1963, p.21).

Thus, against all odds, in 1909 CE, Pt. Gopabandhu and his colleagues laid the foundation of the Satyabadi Vidyalaya at Bakula Churriana forest near Sakhigopala temple in Puri, Odisha (Samal, 2020). It was far from busy towns, in the lap of nature and amidst serene village landscapes. The place near the ancient Sakhigopala temple was soaked in the Hindu tradition, and had basic facilities like a post office and a railway station (Tripathy & Tripathy 1928, p.47). Educational leaders must always be informed of current theories and practices of effective schooling (Marzano et al. 2005, p.52-53). The founders were no different; they were inspired by the Fergusson College in Pune. The models of Eton, Harrow and Rugby public schools in England were studied (Das 1963, p. 66).

Mission and Ideals

According to Hindu philosophy, the ultimate goal of a person is attainment of *mokṣa* or enlightenment.^[3] Truth is not created, rather it is to be discovered or realized. Attainment of truth is the foundation of the Indian civilization. Thus, striving for truth is the purpose of an educational institute; in other words, seeking truth in its field of operation.

Leadership is considered to be vital to the successful functioning of a school. Researchers of effective school leadership have hypothesized that an effective institution must have “a clear and focused mission” (Bamburg & Andrews 1990).

[3] Enlightenment here means ‘The Fire of Knowledge’ that burns down all desires, ignorance and actions, thereby liberating one from *karmic* cycles, as per The Bhagavad-Gita Chapter 4, verse 19, 35-38. It doesn’t refer to European Enlightenment ideas.

Gopabandhu wanted to create an institution based on the values and lifestyles of the ancient *gurukula* system of education, while taking into account modern-day circumstances for personal and societal development. He aimed for holistic growth--physical, mental, moral, and societal--of his students, which would reflect in their lives. The school was established for creating a society that would be impossible for the British to rule. The teachers would overcome their self-interests and work for establishing truth by building future leaders for the country. Such ideals and beliefs of the leadership groups paved the way for future success.

Pt. Gopabandhu and Pt. Nilakantha scouted for teachers of high calibre and integrity for this noble act. An educational leader or founder must be able to communicate his mission and values to the teachers. "Good communication is a critical feature of any endeavor in which people work in close proximity for a common purpose" (Marzano et al. 2005, p.46). Many teachers left their government jobs and came to be a part of the vision of Utkalmani. The teachers received salary as per their basic needs and not as per the standards set by the then government, which was not affordable for an independent institute like the Satyabadi. The "awareness of the personal lives of teachers" and "maintaining a personal relationship" is "central to the effective execution of any of the other responsibilities" by a school leader (Marzano et al. 2005, p.58-59).

Language and Literature

Pt. Gopabandhu also understood that a nation's development is impossible without the development of its language and literature. A language, through its "images and symbols," gives us "a view of the world" and has "a beauty of its own." For colonizers "bullet was the means of physical subjugation, language was the means of spiritual subjugation" (Thiong'o 1987, p.9-11). The literature that bloomed in the Satyabadi School, especially in the writings of *Panchasakhas* (five friends)--Pt. Gopabandhu Das, Pt. Nilakantha Das, Pt. Godavarish Misra, Acharya Harihara Das, and Pt. Krupasindhu Misra, heralded a new age in Odia language (Mohapatra 2012, ch.7, p.19). It encapsulated the glorious past of the nation and the new aspirations. The Satyabadi monthly magazine that was printed in the school, which was a pillar of this rebirth, had special sections for the writings of students, who took active part in discussions, debates and documentation of the literature.

Resources

The functioning of an institute needs resources apart from values. Being a popular leader in Odisha and beyond, Pt. Gopalbandhu was able to garner help from the then kings of princely states, zamindars and other able persons. The “outreach” to the community at large and partnerships are vital responsibilities of an educational leader (Marzano et al. 2005, p.58). The living example of sacrifice and selflessness by the school’s founders attracted people far and wide. Many kings of princely states, heads of renowned *mathas* and other leaders of Odisha, like UtkalaGaurava (the pride of Utkala or Odisha) Madhusudan Das, used to visit the campus, inspire the students and pledge funds.

The hostile British government looked at the growing popularity of the institute with suspicion. They delayed granting affiliation to the school and tried to put restrictions on its independent status. The students of some early batch could take exams only by enrolling themselves in other schools. But the guardian presence of Pt. Gopabandhu made sure of the unhindered functioning of the administration and academics. The act of “buffering” and “protection” of the school teachers and students from non-instructional works by the leader is a sign of healthy school (Marzano et al. 2005, p.48-49).

The many responsibilities of Pt. Gopabandhu kept him away from the school premises. Yet, when among students, he immersed himself in their company. He was always involved and aware of the school curriculum, instruction and assessment. Such involvement is a characteristic trait of efficient schooling. The “visibility” of a school leader, which includes his contacts and interaction with students and teachers, has quantifiable effects on students’ incremental achievement (Marzano et al. 2005, p.53,61).

While participating in weekly debate competitions, he used to observe each student and then guide him according to his strengths and weaknesses. The students were encouraged to shed the fear and inhibitions of their poor backgrounds. Such traits restrict one from unravelling the self-potential within and strive for perfection. He encouraged each child to fix a goal in life and work accordingly from a tender age. Many stories, for example of James Abram Garfield, the former president of United States of America who was born into poverty, were narrated for instilling self-confidence (Mishra 1953, p.30). This way the goal of each child was aligned to the larger goal of the institute to build public leaders.

***Gurukula* rules and regulations**

Without the undue influence of the government, the institute was able to chart its own path. High academic standards, disciplinary lifestyle, character building measures, community service and the corresponding fame led to the influx of students of various backgrounds from far and wide. Within seven years of its establishment, the strength in the boarding reached nearly 700 (Acharya 1963, p.26).

“Order,” vital for a school, is established through “clear structures, rules and procedures” (Marzano et al. 2005, p.57). Each big room in the boarding had a designated monitor chosen for good character and merit. They were responsible for maintaining discipline, helping boarders in studies and keeping an eye on their conduct. They had powers to punishing deviants. Teachers stayed with the students and refrained from private tuitions. Monitors reported to their designated teacher regularly. Any student could directly approach the teacher on any issue--this acted as a check on the monitors. Thus, teachers were role models outside the classrooms too. The power and status of the monitors inspired others to emulate their conduct and improve their studies.

The *gurukula* rules were laid out in detail and parents of prospective students were notified. A regular day started at four in the morning with a wake-up bell. It was followed by regular bells for daily chores, prayers, exercises, study hours, school hours and play time. The day ended with a final bell for retiring to bed at ten p.m. The morning prayers included translated works of *Vedas* and *Upanishads* by the school headmaster. A special trainer was recruited for helping out students and teachers in various types of exercises.

The kitchen and mess hall functioned under students’ supervision, thereby strengthening the democratic and self-sufficient culture. The selected mess volunteers apprised the accounts to a democratically elected secretary who was further responsible to a designated teacher. The food was usually local cuisine. On cultural functions and sacred days, special dishes were prepared.

Every care was taken for the children to feel at home. The disciplined routine and the Hindu philosophy of *karma-yoga* (detached work) that leads to Ishvara were practised with ease.

Pt. Gopabandhu was of the view that in a complete, successful education, children did all the day-to-day activities by themselves. He was not impressed

by his visit to Shantiniketan, Rabindranath Tagore's school, where peons took care of the kitchen and the mess. He was against mere theoretical knowledge. A school where teachers act as rulers and students as subjects was no school. He created a culture that had a decided, positive effect. According to Marzano et al. (2005), some of the positive influences of a school's culture are "promoting cohesion, a sense of well-being, developing an understanding of purpose and a shared vision of what the school could be like." Satyabadi possessed them all.

Free thinking

The school had tight disciplinary rules and regulations. Slight deviance resulted in severe punishment. Yet students were encouraged to speak freely with teachers and put across their ideas. Transformational leaders are flexible and encourage "people to express diverse and contrary opinions" (Marzano et al. 2005, p.49). This is only possible when they are not partisan in their approach and reward the just, and are always focused on the goal. "Systematically and fairly recognizing and celebrating the accomplishments of students" is an affirmative responsibility of a school leader that results in better results (Marzano et al. 2005, p.44).

Students' feedback

Though discipline was the mainstay of the school, it didn't mean a monotonous routine, prescribed top-down. Regular inputs from staff and students resulted in better functioning of the school. It provided an active space for aspirations and encouraged just dissent of each student. The authorities took regular feedback from students about class activities. The students had a say in the timetable, the syllabus and the teaching methods. Errant and incapable teachers were dismissed, based on supervision and feedback.

In one instance, students' feedback resulted in a major change in the functioning of boarding. Three block monitors, instead of one, were appointed in every block and responsibilities were divided among the three. They held regular meetings for stocktaking and informed the superintendent of issues beyond their capability. Thus, pupils were not passive recipients and their horizons were not limited. Without a mechanistic and transactional relationship, teachers took active interest in the studies of the students and went beyond their mandated lectures. In an organic ecosystem, students' dissent does not amount to being disrespectful to teachers.

Social reformation

An effective school leader is a “change agent.” Some specific behaviors associated with it are “consciously challenging the status quo” and “being willing to lead change initiatives with uncertain outcomes” (Marzano et al. 2005, p.44-45).

Since the early days of the school, the teachers, especially the headmaster, Pt. Nilakantha Das, started actively working towards untouchability eradication, removal of blind beliefs and common dining for all students (Das 1963, p.77). A popular example is in order here. Brahmin teachers grew moustaches and shaved their beards. In those times it was forbidden for a local brahmin to grow moustaches. Students of all castes ate at a common place, inviting the ire of the local influential conservatives; the headmaster, however, held his ground and used his mastery over scriptures and debate to good effect. It is believed that miscreants set fire to the *kutchha* house of the school, built through meager funds from charity and donation. Books and other articles were not spared. But the teachers and students renovated the house overnight and classes were held the very next day. A leader is one who portrays “a positive attitude” in times of difficulties and becomes “the driving force” behind a school (Marzano et al. 2005, p.56). When Gopabandhu arrived on hearing the news, he spoke in a comforting tone: “Why feel sad for this? Maybe it is Bhagavan’s wish that this school will get a pucca house” (Das 1963, p.77).

Adversity brings out the best in humans. The construction of the pucca house started despite many obstacles. The labour work was mostly done by the teachers and students. Teachers who were strict in classes behaved like friends while working or gardening. No work was too small or impossible for them. They suffered their sorrows and enjoyed their happiness. Poverty and service were their wings to fly. This created a sense of belonging among the pupils and made them equally tough. The classes were taken in the open air. Blackboards were clamped on to trees and students and teachers sat under them. This is how the Satyabadi Vidyalaya got the name of “*Bana Vidyalaya*” or forest school. This open-air study continued except in the rainy season.

In another incident, the headmaster Nilakantha and the students even stood against the system of forced labour, locally called “*bethi*”, practised by some princely states in Odisha. They stood up to the king’s rule by their sheer audacity and perhaps goodwill.

Practice of *Dharma*

Teachers gave equal importance to *dharmic* knowledge. Gopabandhu and other teachers were practitioners of *dharma* and followers of the Hindu way of life. They regularly studied the Odia *Srimad Bhagavata Purana* and *Srimad Bhagavad-Gita*. Many discussions on literature, spirituality, politics and society shaped the worldview of the children. The institution celebrated Shree *Krishna Janmashtami*, *Saraswati Puja*, *Ganesh Mahotsav*, *Maha-Shivaratri* and other cultural festivals, all fully organized by students. The teachers read stories of epics and discussed the ethics and metaphysics in them. Most importantly, they were able to connect those metaphysical concepts to simple day-to-day activities. The spirit of nationalism was based on the *dharmic* cultural milieu and transcended narrow boundaries of ethnicity, caste, etc. It was cultivated in youngsters rather than foisted upon them. Many honourable men and community leaders were invited to the festivals to witness the meticulous planning of such independent and able children.

Ślokānta

Sanskrit was specially taught in the school beyond the mandated course curriculum. Apart from other indoor and outdoor games, a famous pastime was “*Ślokānta*,” devised by the teachers: two teams compete in chanting Sanskrit verses. A team starts a verse and the other has to chant another verse beginning with the last letter of the opponent’s verse. Teachers who were strict in class were like friends in playground. The boarding was thus like a family to the students. The routines, games and academics were formulated by children and teachers alike and the school achieved more than the mandated targets.

English coaching class

Since the school didn’t receive government funds, it was able to enroll poor yet meritorious students who were given concessions in the tuition fee. Examinations were conducted without invigilators. This unique practice was possible only because trust and character building were given primacy. Nobody cheated, and the entire school upheld the values of discipline, mutual trust, patience and abstinence.

Gopabandhu, the headmaster, and other teachers always gave attention to

individual students. On one such occasion, they realized that some older students who joined late weren't able to cope with other students only in the English language classes, thereby creating problems among the teachers and students when instructions were given. This situational awareness propelled the authorities to design a special "English coaching class." But the final examination paper was the same. The school took affirmative action by providing all the required help, but the students had to strive for their success.

Class Library

The main school library had a huge collection of all kinds of books, from ancient scriptures to biographies and works of many Indian and western authors. New books were brought as per students' demands without worrying about the cost. An innovative practice of a class library was soon put in place. Each class library stocked relevant books. The teachers issued books, based on the capacity and likings of individuals. They orally examined the students when they returned books to check whether they had read them or not. "Establishing high, concrete goals, and expectations that all students will meet them" help in remaining focused (Marzano et al. 2005, p.50).

School magazine

The teachers recognized budding talents, encouraged and helped the students to realize them. The culture of free thinking led to many independent initiatives by the pupils. One such activity was discussions on spirituality every Sunday afternoon by the students. Another initiative worth mentioning, which was started by the children and institutionalized bottom-up, was a monthly handwritten school magazine, *Bāñī*. The writings were finally chosen and edited by the teachers before the issue was published. It was later printed when the *Satyabadi* press was set up in the school by Pt. Gopabandhu.

Beyond books

Despite paucity of funds, Pt. Gopabandhu used to scout for poor yet bright students from far off places and admit them in the school. Similarly, teachers with specialized skills were recruited to impart holistic education. An architect named Dhaneswar Maharana helped students in arts and carpentry. The astronomy and astrological calculations were observed under the night sky. The music, especially Odia *Chhanda*, was taught by the Apana Panigrahy, a

blind Odia *Chhanda* teacher. Today, farming and school education are totally divorced. This wasn't the case in Satyabadi Vidyalaya. Farming and agriculture were an integral part of the curriculum.

Saturday Assembly

Every Saturday afternoon an assembly was organized, where each student was encouraged to give a speech on a topic of his liking. Many debate competitions were also organized. Public speaking was a prerequisite if they were to make leaders out of the students. Gopabandhu used to cite many examples such as the Greek orator Demosthenes, who used to stammer in his early days, and overcame it by speaking loudly in open spaces with pebbles under his tongue (Mishra 1953). This particular example inspired many to improve their speaking skills.

Later, the headmaster Nilakantha Das added various other activities in the Saturday assembly such as poetry and essay competitions to boost students' participation. On Sundays, "History Club" was organized. This was special, considering the limited scope of history in the school curriculum and the importance of understanding the glorious past of Bharata for busting the supremacist ideological foundation of the British rule.

Study tour

Education is best achieved through experience. One also needs rejuvenation and recreation. The teachers took the students on many study tours to historic architectural places such as Khandagiri, Udayagiri and Dhauligiri, near Bhubaneswar, and the Sun Temple at Konark and many other temples. The tours were meticulously planned with proper division of labour among the senior classes. The students went on foot and maintained proper conduct; camps were organized for overnight stays. Each group of students was monitored by a senior, who were under the teachers' supervision. The grand Kalinga architecture of the temples filled the students with pride for Odisha's ancient marvels.

Tours were opportunities to tie the teachings of the classroom with a fresh, direct perspective. Emotional narrations of the Kalinga war of Ashoka and the reign of the King Kharavela contrasted sharply with the sorry rule under the British. These speeches and visits prepared the young minds to dedicate their future to the renaissance of the Indian civilization.

Relief works

Service to the needy was a major part of the education in the Satyabadi School. Service helps in transcending one's limited self and expands one's reach and expression. The teachers took the pupils along with them for treating the needy during cholera epidemics, droughts, floods, fire outbreak, etc. At the time of the Jagannath *Ratha yatra* in Puri, volunteers of the Satyabadi played a major role in serving the sick and the destitute, in an era when medical facilities were next to nil.

Utkal Conference

Political awareness and understanding are vital for leaders of any sector. They are even more pertinent in a colonized society. Under the influence of Gopabandhu Das, the pupils were politically active in the Utkal conference, an organization that worked for the unification of the Odia linguistic areas, socio economic uplift and political freedom. They worked as volunteers and gained first-hand experience of the workings and speeches of political leaders. Their exemplary discipline and organizing capability stunned the stalwarts of the conference (Sahoo 2007, p.23). The young students didn't allow even the leaders of the conference to transgress regulations even by the slightest margin. The students also drafted their own proposals and gave speeches in high-profile conferences.

The Fall

The multidimensional excellence of the school was praised beyond the linguistic borders. Even the Mahatma Gandhi was moved by the "sense of punctuality, love and fraternity" of the school during his visit in 1921 (Das 2007, p.72). Yet the school lost its sheen and closed down within two decades of its glory. The major reason for its failure was its independent nature in a society dependent on a colonial state. Such a school was tough to sustain in a hostile climate.

The teachers and leaders moved on to other schools to work for the preservation of the Odia language; Odia linguistic areas suffered greatly under the British education. The school's commitment to serve the downtrodden despite paucity of funds was too heavy a burden in a poverty-stricken society. The leaders' engagement in political movements and associations was inevitable to attain the prized freedom. But it affected the school's functioning in many ways. All these reasons led to skirmishes within the management. Bana Vidyalaya was

too ahead of its time; perhaps that was why the glorious chapter of an ideal educational institution ended.

Lessons Learnt

The Satyabadi Bana Vidyalaya could have been an exemplary role model for post-independence India. Instead, our education system is beset with ills. The centralized bureaucratic model hardly allows teachers or students to have any agency in curriculum planning, content delivery and innovative engagement practices. On the other hand, it promotes a contractual relationship.

Another major problem is “in the quest for education in English, mother tongue gets neglected, which in turn hampers the student’s language proficiency” (Joshi 2020, p.36). “Teaching and learning in the language of the immediate environment is effective in improving pre-school children’s learning abilities” (Awopetu 2016, p.61). But the number of English medium schools, especially for primary education, has grown exponentially. The complete misuse of the articles 28-30 of the Indian constitution by the state and the Right to Education Act along with its judicial pronouncements have led to the loss of *dharma* in society (Panda 2020).

It is important that the values that Satyabadi Bana Vidyalaya stood for—sacrifice, determination, blend of the traditional and the modern humaneness—inspire the present and the future educational leaders.

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