

DR. ATAL BEHARI ACHARYA

A less remembered giant and the patriot with the golden heart

by Monojit Mohapatra

Jadunath Bhawan, stands opposite the fish market of Binode Behari, Cuttack (Orissa, India). Etched on a marble sign plate is the name **Dr Atal Behari Acharya, MLA**.



Married to Ashalata Devi (who was an able support in her own right), Dr. Atal Behari Acharya had two sons by the names of Biman Behari and Bana Behari. (His father Dr. Jadunath Mukherjee, earned the title of “Acharya” at the court of the Rajah of Nilgiri where he was the *rajvaidya*) He had two daughters too, by the name of Gita and Gayatri. Biman Behari, married to Shamali, was a doctor like his father (with two sons, Partha Pratim and Binayak) and his younger brother Bana Behari, married to Protima was a pharmacist (with three daughters, Satarupa, Srirupa & Swarupa). Together, Biman Behari and Bana Behari, had taken up the responsibility of running and maintaining their father’s legacy and business.

Atal Babu was a freedom fighter of repute. He was widely known as a kind soul with a zeal to serve the masses. He had started off as an extremist and was later persuaded to work for Orissa to improve its fortunes by joining the Gandhian mode of freedom struggle. Later in life, he came under the influence of Vinoba Bhave and became a torch bearer in the state of Orissa giving the Bhoodan Movement a lot of steam. In the year 1907 militants dominated the Freedom Movement in India. The extremists used to commit political dacoity and were thus referred to as terrorists. Calcutta was the principal centre of their activities. Atal Babu was one of the two from Cuttack who aided the

terrorists of Calcutta to commit one such political dacoity at Chainpur village near Jajpur. He was jailed by the English in 1907 as a result of his revolutionary pursuits in his bahukud residence. Again imprisoned for 6 months in 1921-22 during the Non Cooperation Movement, Dr Atal Behari Acharya and a few others were arrested from Cuttack and sent to Hazaribag jail. While taken to custody at the jail of Cuttack, the police tied ropes around their waists and took a round through the streets under the hot sun (refer H.F.M.O., Vol. III, PP 28-32). His movable properties, bullocks, bullock cart, cows, etc. were confiscated by the English and later auctioned off. During the years 1930-32 he worked as a brave soldier for the Indian Freedom Movement inviting incarceration several times. In 1929 after the historic Lahore Session of the Indian National Congress announced the launch of the Civil Disobedience Movement, the Utkal Provincial Congress Committee decided to break the Salt Law at Inchudi (Balasore District). The National Flag was hoisted in Swaraj Ashram and Loka Seba Ashram on 26th Jan 1930 which was celebrated as the Independence Day as by the historic resolution in Lahore. On the 3rd of March 1930 Atal Babu gave a speech in the evening at a public meeting arranged on the banks of the river Kathajodi. Two days after the Dandi March, on 6th April 1930 twentyone volunteers started from Cuttack. On the way, Dr Atal Behari Acharya alongwith Gopabandhu Choudhury were arrested on the 8th of April. To run the struggle the Congress Party started a system of appointing a Dictator. Dr. Acharya was the first one to be appointed as a Dictator and was therefore arrested by the English.

As a loyal Congressman(a lifetime one at that) he was the President and Treasurer of the Cuttack Congress Committee and as a State Member of the Congress his work stretched for many years. He was an elected member of the Cuttack Zilla Board and had served the masses for many years as the Chairman of the Sadar Local Board. In that office he managed to construct a village road from Cuttack Chandbali Road to the Kendrapara Canal embankment thereby improving road transport. In the year 1937 he was elected from Salipur under a Congress ticket to the State Legislative Assembly with an overwhelming margin of votes.

In his lifetime he showed tremendous philanthropy donating some 80 acres of land and a lot of other property and businesses. He had tremendous energy and business acumen owning a fleet of buses for public transport(holding office in the Jagatpur Motor Association and many such private and social organizations), a salt factory, a medicine factory(at Jagatpur), medicine shops by the name of Swaraj Medical Hall (the first medicine shop in Cuttack in the year 1923)in Cuttack and Berhampur.

“After release from jail, in 1925, I opened Swaraj Medical Hall and started my career as a General Practitioner. At that time Dr. Rai Bahadur Anandlal Bose, Dr. Ekram Rasul, Dr. Mangobinda Sahu, Dr. Akhay Kumar Ghose, Dr. Rajanikanta Ghose, Dr. Charu Chandra Mitra and Dr. Surendranath Sahu commanded allopathic practice at Cuttack. Considering my financial condition many of them dissuaded me to practice at Cuttack. But with help from my village friends and some town friends I commenced my career as a Chemist cum Druggist. In those days allopathic medicines were not popular and people dreaded to go to the hospital because of great number of mortalities and for the superstition of losing ones caste!

There was no spinal anaesthesia for abdominal operations and no antibiotics to check infections and treat successfully the dreaded diseases of typhoid, pneumonia, tuberculosis, etc. There were no mass vaccination programmes against smallpox. There were very few specialists in those days. Doctors in Government Services were few and they were fully occupied. As a general practitioner we had to treat all kinds of cases. For diagnosis we kept a microscope and examined urine, stool, sputum, blood, etc. We were to treat medical as well as surgical cases. We used to operate Phymosis, hydrocele and abscesses and attend delivery cases too. We also took up examining eye cases, administer medicines, prescribed and supplied spectacles!...”

In those days Malaria was widespread in the state of Orissa. For this, Atal Babu invented through his own research an *Antimalarial Mixture* which was later patented. From its inception, Dr. A. Acharya, M.B. (Regd. No. 1311 B. & O., Regd. No. 6 Orissa) was an elected member of the Indian Medical Association, Cuttack Branch and was elected as the President of Cuttack Branch and Orissa State several times by the medical graduates of Orissa. He worked as one of the main volunteers distributing medical relief on behalf of the I.M.A. during the *Dalei Ghai* by the banks of the Kathajodi river(1957). From the very beginning he took active part in establishing and founding the Subhas Seva Sadan at Oriya Bazar, Cuttack (birth place of the noted freedom fighter Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose.) He was a member of the Trust Board of Janakinath Bose, President of the Medical Board of Netaji Subhas Seva Sadan and also the Treasurer of the Trust Board. He was also elected into a high office of the Drug Technical Advisory Board, New Delhi. For this he earned a lot of fame in the country.

He also had some landed property at Bahugram and therefore went into farming in an inspirational way in the days of food shortage in India, thus exposing another facet of his personality- he always took up tasks and causes according to the demands of the time, making him a social worker of relevance at all times. With the help of the Sadar Board and the Agriculture Department he managed to sink tube wells for irrigation and daily use in many villages. He also worked in collusion with the Fishery Department to clear filth filled uptanks and dug up nursery tanks to develop fries for Pisciculture at Singmapur and at Kendupatna. He won several tanks for pisciculture in his own village and also other villages of his area. In agriculture, he set examples of improving yields by the Japanese method of cultivation of paddy. He got the second and first prizes for the highest yield in Salipur and Kendrapara agricultural exhibitions. As a horticulturist he got a First Class Certificate for a luxuriant growth of red pepper plants and the best of grafted mangoes in his village Agricultural Exhibition and at Cuttack.

He took under his care many a person who were not necessarily his relatives as he was a very generous and hospitable man. Some of the stories about him are legendary. There once was a cartoon that humourously extolled this large heartedness (in the *Niankhunta* magazine) about his brushing aside the incident of his entire crop of pineapples taken away by robbers with the observation that it may not have brought benefits to him, but must have benefitted the robbers at least ! Such was the attitude he bore towards all, good or bad people alike.

Atal Babu was born in the year 1887 and passed away in 1961(on 22nd May at 11.50 p.m.). His last journey to Khannagar was via the Swaraj Ashram where he was festooned with flowers on behalf of the District Congress Committee and State Congress Committee. Even if the incident was a muted one, his last rites were attended by such luminaries as Sri Radhanath Rath, Sri Gunanidhi Mohanty, Dr. Sanatan Mukherjee, Sri Govind Chandra Mishra, Dr. Sudhakar Acharya, Sri Narendranath Chatterjee, Sri Madhusudan Dash, Sri Brundaban Behari Palit, Advocate Ashok Dash(Freedom Fighters Association), Sri Advaitaballav Ray, Sri Ramesh Chandra Mohanty(Prajatantra), Sri Bholanath Mohanty(Madhusudan Gramudyog and Khadi Kendra) and others. Swaraj Medical Hall was a place of inspiration and service for freedom fighters (one of them being Ramakrushna Nanda who later became a children's literateur and printer).