



DESHBANDHU CHITTARANJAN DAS



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Among the galaxy of stalwarts born in the nineteenth century, who played a pivotal role in shaping the destiny of free India and left an indelible imprint on our national life and polity, the name of Chittaranjan Das shines like a star. Chittaranjan Das attained the pinnacle of glory neither by luck nor by chance but by sheer force of his personality, struggle, sacrifice, selflessness, dedication and devotion.

Affectionately called 'Deshbandhu' by his admirers and followers, Chittaranjan Das was born on 5 November 1870 to Bhuban Mohan Das and Nistarini Devi in Central Calcutta\*. His father was a reputed solicitor of the Calcutta High Court and was also well-known for his intellectual and journalistic pursuits.

In 1878, Chittaranjan Das joined the London Missionary Societies Institution at Bhowanipore in Calcutta. In 1886 he passed the entrance examination of Calcutta University and enrolled himself in the Presidency College. He studied Rabindranath Tagore and was an admirer of Keats, Shelley and Browning. In 1890, he graduated from the Presidency College.

Within a few months of his graduation, he was sent by his father to England to compete for the Indian Civil Service. Chittaranjan Das, however, turned his attention to the study of Law and joined the Middle Temple. He was called to the English Bar in 1893.

In 1894, Chittaranjan Das came back to India and enrolled himself as a Barrister in the Calcutta High Court. The turning-point in his career came in 1908 when he was called upon to appear on behalf of Aurobindo Ghose in the Alipore Bomb Case. It was due to his brilliant handling of the case that Aurobindo was ultimately acquitted. Success in this case brought Chittaranjan Das to the forefront of professional and political platform.

Chittaranjan Das was also the defence counsel in the Dacca Conspiracy Case (1910-11). He was as adept in civil law as in criminal law. Within a very short period, he built up a fabulously lucrative practice.

On 3 December 1897 Chittaranjan Das was married to Basanti Devi, the daughter of Barada Nath Halder, Dewan of the Bijni Estate in Assam.

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\*Now known as Kolkata.

Right from his childhood, Chittaranjan Das was deeply influenced by the Vaishnava poets. As a writer, Chittaranjan Das started with Bengali poetry at the tender age of sixteen. Some important poems were published as *Sagar-Sangit* (The Songs of the Sea) in 1913. The next book of poems, *Antaryami* (The All-perceiver) was published in 1914 and *Kishor-Kishori* (The Youth) in 1915. He founded and edited for five years a very high class literary journal, 'Narayan', which also contained some of his poems.

Chittaranjan Das had deep connection with *New India* and *Bande Mataram*. His participation in the freedom struggle was a notable phenomenon. He joined the Indian National Congress as a delegate in 1906, but took no active part in politics until 1917, when he was invited to preside over the Bengal Provincial Conference of the Congress in Calcutta.

In 1917, Chittaranjan Das worked very hard to get Mrs. Annie Besant elected as President of the Indian National Congress for its Calcutta Session. In 1918, both at the Congress Special Session in Bombay\* and at the Annual Session in Delhi, Das opposed the scheme of Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms.

On 18 March 1919, the Rowlatt Act was passed which gave extraordinary powers to the Government of India for the suppression of the political movement and any other action aimed against the State. There was a great deal of opposition throughout the country to the Rowlatt Act. Mahatma Gandhi declared that the country should observe Satyagraha on 6 April 1919. Accordingly, a *Hartal* was observed throughout the country on the same day. Addressing a mammoth meeting in Calcutta on 6 April 1919, Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das said:

*Satyagraha is spiritual force. It is the power of love. With love we shall conquer the self. We shall give up selfishness, hatred and envy and shall be self-controlled. This is no doubt the message of Mahatma Gandhi but it is the time-honoured message of India, the message of Prahalad, Meera Bai and Vasistha. The Rowlatt Act is an obstacle to the movement for freedom. We cannot attain freedom unless we remove the obstacle. For that we have to enkindle love for our country, we have to be Satyagrahis and give up hatred and envy. Rise, brothers, prepare yourselves and rest assured that the goal cannot be attained by persons of weak mettle.*

In 1920, at a special Session of the Congress held at Calcutta, Mahatma Gandhi presented his five-fold programme of Non-cooperation with the Government. Chittaranjan, a believer in the policy of obstruction from within the Legislatures, opposed Mahatma's resolution, though it was adopted by the Congress.

However, later on Chittaranjan threw himself wholeheartedly into the non-cooperation movement and gave up his immensely lucrative practice. Henceforth, he renounced all the comforts and luxuries that go with the wealth and started leading the life of a political and spiritual *Sanyasi* (ascetic). A few years later he made over his entire property

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\*Now known as Mumbai.

to the nation for the institution of a medical school and a hospital for women. His house was converted into a political institution—a place for consultation, organization and propaganda. The heart of India was deeply moved by these acts of sacrifice, and therefore, he came to be lovingly called as Deshbandhu, the friend of his country.

In 1921, Das founded a National University at Dacca.\* His chief activity in 1921, however, was the organising and directing of the Congress Volunteer Corps. To accelerate the non-cooperation movement, the All India Congress Committee asked for the recruitment of ten million national volunteers and for the raising of ten million rupees. In Bengal, Chittaranjan's appeal was answered by hundreds of young men and women. The volunteer corps swelled rapidly and showed signs of developing into a tremendous mass movement. Getting panicky, the Government declared the movement subversive and banned all public meetings. Congress retaliated by deciding to disobey the law. It was supported in its decision by the Khilafat Committee. Chittaranjan's wife, son and sister too were arrested, and he himself was sentenced to six months' imprisonment. In the meantime, he had been elected President of the Congress Session of 1921, but could not preside over it as he was an undertrial prisoner at that time. After his release in July 1922, he was elected President for the Congress Session at Gaya.

In 1922, Subhas Chandra Bose attended the Gaya Session of the All India Congress Committee along with Deshbandhu. At this Session, Deshbandhu moved the resolution of supporting entry into the Legislative Council. However it failed to receive the majority of votes.

Consequently, on 31 December 1922, at a meeting held at Tecori Palace, Deshbandhu announced the formation of a new political party named as Congress Khilafat Swaraj Party. In 1923, the party was renamed as Swaraj Party. Prominent Congress leaders such as Motilal Nehru were included in the Party. Gradual mass support gathered towards Deshbandhu's Swaraj party. To keep the Congress strong and to avoid a division, a compromise was ultimately formulated. The resolution of Council entry was finally passed by the Special Session of the Delhi Congress.

The Calcutta Municipal Act of 1923 was one of the major contributions of Sir Surendra Nath Banerjee to the development of Local Self Government in India. Deshbandhu decided to contest the elections to the Corporation in the name of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee. He was made the first Mayor of Calcutta. The programme of work for the Corporation that he laid down included free primary education, free medical relief to the poor, purer and cheaper food and milk supply, better supply of filtered water, better sanitation in business and congested areas, housing for the poor, development of suburban areas, improved transport facilities and greater efficiency in administration at a cheaper cost. In order to ensure success in administration, Deshbandhu chose Subhas Chandra Bose to be the Chief Executive Officer.

\*Now Known as Dhaka.

In 1923, he promoted the Forward Publishing Company in which he had Pandit Motilal Nehru, Sarat Chandra Bose, Tulsi Goswami and P.D. Himatsingka, as fellow Directors. Publication of a daily paper titled 'Forward' commenced on 23 October 1923, which established new standards in Indian journalism and greatly influenced public opinion. From the beginning, Deshbandhu had laid it down that the paper should not only give political news but should also contain a few pages devoted to art, literature, science, architecture, painting, sports, the stage and the screen. The wide range of coverage and bold and fair criticism soon made the 'Forward' a popular newspaper.

Deshbandhu realised, quite early in his political life, that friendship and understanding between the Hindus and the Muslims were an essential condition for the attainment of India's independence. He was disturbed by the communal riots which occurred from time to time in U.P., Bihar and Punjab.

The Congress-League Pact of 1916 was intended to settle the outstanding issues between the two communities. It was against this background that Deshbandhu formulated his famous Hindu-Muslim Pact to promote permanent peace between the communities and provide a basis for joint demand and joint action. The Pact provided that representation in the Bengal Legislative Council would be through joint electorates on the basis of population. It also provided that special weightage would be given to Muslims till they made up their deficiency in the services and attained a proportion commensurate with their number.

The Pact was conceived in the best of spirits but it became the nucleus of political controversy. However, certain sections among the Hindus and Muslims were against it. Deshbandhu had to fight hard in order to remove their differences. Swarajya, he explained, could not be attained without non-violence, non-cooperation and such a programme could be effective only on the basis of unity of outlook and action between the Hindus and the Muslims.

In May 1924, a session of the Bengal Provincial Congress was held at Serajgunge. The Pact was again the subject of debate, but after Deshbandhu replied to the critics in a speech which lasted for almost four hours, it was accepted with acclamation. The Pact continued to be the accepted programme of the Bengal Congress during the lifetime of Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das.

On 2 May 1925, the Bengal Provincial Conference was held at Faridpur (Now in Bangladesh) over which Chittaranjan Das presided. The Conference was attended, among others, by Gandhiji. Giving a lucid picture of what he had in mind regarding the position of India *vis-a-vis* the Commonwealth, Chittaranjan Das observed:

*The idea of Commonwealth has a deep significance for me. I believe in world peace in the ultimate federation of the world and I think that the great Commonwealth of the nations of the*

*world—a federation of diverse races, each with its distinct life, distinct civilization, its distinct moral outlook—if properly led by statesmen at the helm, is bound to make a lasting contribution to the great problem, the problem of knitting the world into the greatest federation the mind can conceive, the federation of the human race.*

Supporting that India should continue to strive for the cause of freedom for all nations and all peoples, he continued:

*I think it is for the good of India, for the good of the Commonwealth, for the good of the world that India should strive with the Commonwealth for the freedom of all people of all countries and thus serve the cause of humanity.*

When Chittaranjan Das came back to Calcutta on 5 May 1925 after attending the Bengal Provincial Conference at Faridpur, his health was in a very poor state. It was in the House of Sir Nripendra Nath Sarkar at Darjeeling that he ultimately breathed his last on 16 June 1925.

In a condolence meeting, Mahatma Gandhi described Deshbandhu as 'greatest of men' and observed:

*The closer I came to him, the more I came to love him. I saw during my brief stay at Darjeeling that no thought but that of the welfare of India occupied him. He dreamed and thought and talked of freedom of India and of nothing else... He was fearless. He was brave. His love for the youngmen of Bengal was boundless and even his adversaries admitted, there was no other man who could take his place in Bengal. His heart knew no difference between Hindus and Mussalmans and I should like to tell Englishmen too, that he bore no ill-will to them.*

*The body that held Deshbandhu has perished, but his soul will never perish. Not only the soul, even the name of him who has served and sacrificed so much will remain immortal. His service and sacrifice were matchless. May the memory ever remain with us and may his example inspire us to noble effort. Everyone who follows his example to ever so little an extent will help to perpetuate his memory. May his soul rest in peace.*

Subhas Chandra Bose, the greatest of Chittaranjan's political disciples, in his book, 'The Indian Struggle', wrote on his guru as:

*The death of Deshbandhu on June 16, 1925 was for India a national calamity of the first magnitude. .... His rise had been phenomenal. With the reckless abandon of a Vaishnava devotee, he had plunged into the political movement with heart and soul and he had given not only himself but his all in the fight for Swaraj. When he died, whatever worldly possessions he still had, were left to the nation. By the Government he was both feared and admired. They feared his strength but admired his character. They knew that he was a man of his word. They also knew that he was a hard fighter, he was nevertheless a clean fighter, and further, he was also the man with whom they could bargain for a settlement. He was clear-headed, his political instinct was sound and unerring and unlike the Mahatma, he was fully conscious of the role he was to play in Indian politics. He knows, more than anyone else, that situations favourable for wresting political power from the enemy do not come often and when they do come, they do not last long.*