

## Dr. Harekrushna Mahatab: Pioneering Collective Consciousness for Social Justice

Mayadhar Sethy

### ABSTRACT

*Dr. Harekrushna Mahatab, affectionately known as "Utkal Keshari," stands as a pivotal yet often underappreciated figure in India's independence movement, embodying the spirit of a freedom fighter, social reformer, and the first Chief Minister of Odisha. This paper explores Mahatab's multifaceted contributions—his early life, significant role in the independence struggle, leadership in regional unification, and enduring legacy in modern Odisha. Through an examination of his political, social, and literary engagements, we aim to illuminate Mahatab's profound impact on the socio-political landscape of India. His life serves as a philosophical testament to the principles of social justice, collective identity, and the ethical responsibilities of leadership. In an age marked by social fragmentation, Mahatab's vision encourages contemporary society to embrace dialogue, foster empathy, and actively participate in the pursuit of a more equitable and unified future. Dr. Mahatab's ideas, relevance as a philosopher of social change, emphasizing the need for current generations to cultivate a collective consciousness that transcends individual aspirations in favor of the greater good.*

**Keywords:** Utkal Keshari Harekrushna Mahatab, Independence Movement, Social Reform, Collective Identity, Ethical Leadership

### Author Details:

Mayadhar Sethy is Doctoral Fellow, Nabakrushna Choudhary Centre for Development Studies, Bhubaneswar, Email: mayadharsethyms@gmail.com

### I. INTRODUCTION

Dr. Harekrushna Mahatab, affectionately dubbed "Utkal Keshari," emerged as one of the most compelling voices in India's struggle for independence, rising from the rich cultural backdrop of Odisha. Born on November 21, 1899, in the tranquil village of Agarpara, Mahatab transcended the limitations of his privileged upbringing, transforming into a formidable advocate for social justice and regional unity. His life exemplifies the idea that privilege can be a platform for service rather than a barrier to empathy.

Dr. Mahatab's contributions to the independence movement were not mere acts of defiance against colonial rule; they were profound reflections of his unwavering commitment to uplift the marginalized and forge a cohesive national identity. His activism was rooted in a deep philosophical understanding of society's interconnectedness. As historian R. P. Mohanty astutely notes, "Mahatab was not



### Suggested Citation:

Sethy, M. (2025). Dr. Harekrushna Mahatab: Pioneering Collective Consciousness for Social Justice, *Journal of Studies in Dynamics and Change (JSDC)*, 12(1). 9-20.

DOI: [www. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15610230](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15610230)

Published on: 01 January 2025

just a political figure; he was a visionary who sought to integrate diverse cultures into a cohesive identity” (Mohanty, 2015). This vision of unity amid diversity is especially pertinent in today’s fragmented world.

In an era marked by social fragmentation and cultural dissonance, Mahatab's legacy offers crucial insights into the cultivation of collective consciousness. His philosophy emphasizes that true strength lies in recognizing and celebrating our shared humanity while respecting individual differences. This perspective is vital for the current generation, which faces challenges of polarization and divisive ideologies. Mahatab’s approach encourages us to engage in dialogue, foster empathy, and cultivate a sense of belonging that transcends cultural and social divides. His dedication to social equity serves as a powerful reminder of the responsibilities that come with privilege. For today’s leaders and citizens alike, Mahatab’s life teaches us that true progress is not measured solely by personal achievements but by our collective ability to uplift and empower those who are marginalized. As we navigate complex socio-political landscapes, his vision for inclusivity and social justice offers a guiding framework, urging us to actively participate in the creation of a more equitable society.

This paper aims to illuminate Mahatab's life and legacy, underscoring his relentless pursuit of progress for both Odisha and India. By exploring his philosophical contributions to social change, seek to demonstrate his enduring relevance in today’s socio-political landscape and the potential for his ideals to inspire a more unified and compassionate society.

## **II. EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION**

### ***Family Background***

Harekrushna Mahatab was born into an aristocratic Khandayat family, a privilege that afforded him access to education and resources. However, rather than allowing his background to shield him from the struggles faced by his community, he harnessed this privilege to cultivate a deep sense of duty. His upbringing prompts a philosophical reflection on the ethical dimensions of privilege: how one’s advantages should be employed for the collective benefit rather than mere personal gain. Mahatab realized early on that true education must extend beyond academic achievement; it should be a tool for uplifting society and addressing its myriad challenges. This commitment to service became the cornerstone of his philosophy and activism.

### ***Educational Journey***

Dr. Mahatab’s academic journey began at Bhadrak High School, where he not only excelled but also demonstrated a burgeoning interest in political thought and social issues. Later, at Ravenshaw College in Cuttack, he was influenced by the broader currents of political change sweeping across India. The philosophy of education as a societal tool resonated deeply with him, leading to a decisive moment where he chose to abandon his studies to join the freedom struggle. His conviction that “Education must serve society, not just individual aspirations” (Mahatab, 1951) encapsulates his belief that personal success should be intertwined with the

upliftment of the community, setting the stage for his future endeavors in the independence movement.

**Image 1: A capture from early Cuttack city where Dr. Mahtab spent a part of his student life**



Source: Google

**Image 2: Dr Harekrushna Mahtab while studying at Ravenshaw College**



Source:  
[http://hkmahtab.in/image\\_gallery.html](http://hkmahtab.in/image_gallery.html)

### III. ROLE IN INDIA'S INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT

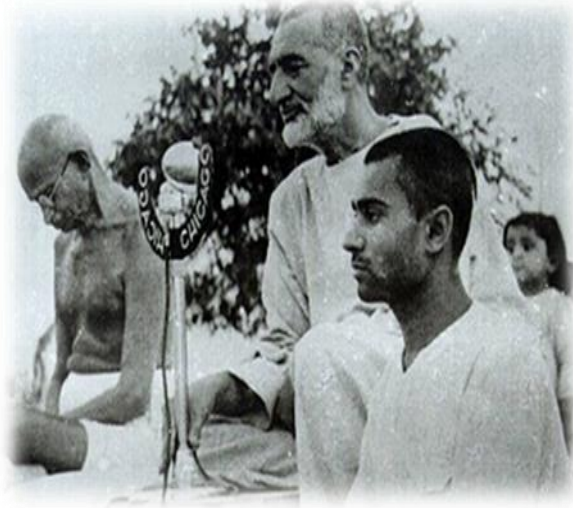
#### ***Early Activism***

Dr. Mahatab's immersion in the independence movement accelerated significantly after he began attending sessions of the Indian National Congress (INC) in 1920. This exposure ignited a fervent desire to serve his nation, crystallizing his commitment to activism. His transformation of passive sympathy into active participation illustrates the philosophical concept of moral agency, where individuals recognize their responsibility to contribute to societal well-being. By 1924, he became Chairman of the Balasore District Congress Committee, mobilizing local support for various national movements.

#### ***Non-Cooperation Movement***

During the Non-Cooperation Movement, Mahatab's leadership flourished. He effectively coordinated boycotts of foreign goods, passionately advocating for the use of Indian-made products. This campaign fostered a spirit of self-reliance and galvanized the masses, uniting them in their resistance against colonial oppression (Das, 2019). His activism, marked by unwavering courage and resolve, led to his arrest for sedition—an act that underscored his willingness to endure personal sacrifice for the greater good. This experience not only solidified his status as a leader but also deepened his resolve to fight for India's independence.

**Image 3: Young Dr H.K Mahtab after the release from jail with Mahatma Gandhi and Khan Abdul Gafar Khan (Simanta Gandhi) in 1923**



Source:  
[http://hkmahtab.in/image\\_gallery.html](http://hkmahtab.in/image_gallery.html)

**Image 4: Empowering Unity- Mahatab's Leadership in the Non-Cooperation Movement**



Source: Google

**Image 5: Inspired by Gandhi's iconic Dandi March, Mahatab organized a salt satyagraha in Odisha**



Source: Google

**Image 6: Dr Harekrushna Mahtab with Rabindranath Tagore**



Source:  
[http://hkmahtab.in/image\\_gallery.html](http://hkmahtab.in/image_gallery.html)



### ***Salt Satyagraha***

In 1930, inspired by Gandhi's iconic Dandi March, Mahatab organized a salt satyagraha in Odisha, galvanizing public support against unjust British salt laws. This grassroots movement served as a rallying point for the people and highlighted the philosophical notion of civil disobedience as a moral duty in the face of injustice. His subsequent imprisonment during this critical campaign elevated his stature as a committed leader, igniting widespread support and solidarity among those he inspired.

### ***Social Reforms***

Dr. Mahatab's commitment to social reform was evident in his participation in anti-untouchability movements. His courageous act of opening the gates of his ancestral temple to all castes in 1934 challenged deeply ingrained social hierarchies. This transformative step resonated with Gandhi's vision for a united India and underscored Mahatab's belief that inclusivity was fundamental to national progress (Patnaik, 2018). His actions served as a clarion call for social equity, urging others to recognize the importance of unity in the struggle for freedom.

### ***Quit India Movement***

His unwavering dedication to the cause peaked during the Quit India Movement in 1942, resulting in his imprisonment in Ahmednagar Fort Jail from 1942 to 1945. His experiences during this critical juncture solidified his reputation as a committed leader willing to endure hardship for liberation (Mohapatra, 2011). This confinement reinforced his resolve to fight against colonial rule and advocate for a free and equitable India, illustrating the philosophical themes of resilience and ethical commitment to a cause greater than oneself.

**Image 7: Involvement of Dr. Harekrushna Mahtab in the Quit India Movement**



Source: Google/ the Quit India Movement in 1942

**Image 8: Dr. Harekrushna Mahtab at the first welcome speech of Indian PM, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru at Parliament Central Hall in 1948**



Source: [http://hkmahtab.in/image\\_gallery.html](http://hkmahtab.in/image_gallery.html)

#### IV. CONTRIBUTION TO CONSTITUTION MAKING

##### *Role in the Constituent Assembly*

Following India's independence, Mahatab's election to the Constituent Assembly representing Odisha marked a significant chapter in his life. He played a crucial role in integrating Odia-speaking princely states into the Indian Union, emphasizing cultural and linguistic ties. His participation involved advocating for policies that recognized and respected Odisha's unique identity within the broader national framework, illustrating the philosophical notion of collective identity as vital for social cohesion.

##### *Policy Influence*

Although Mahatab did not engage extensively in assembly debates, his influence was palpable in shaping policies defining Odisha's future. He believed that "a cohesive identity is essential for the progress of a region," a mantra guiding his efforts to unify diverse communities under a shared vision of progress (Mahatab, 1953). This belief in unity not only fostered belonging among the people but also laid the groundwork for Odisha's development in the years following independence.

**Image 9: Dr H.K Mahatab at Rajya Sabha on Jan 19th 1966 for the participation of voting for Prime Minister of India**



Source:  
[http://hkmahtab.in/image\\_gallery.html](http://hkmahtab.in/image_gallery.html)

**Image 10: The Prime Minister of Odisha, the Hon'ble Dr Mahtab with H.E. Shri C. Rajagopalachari and H.E. Shri Asaf Ali, Governor of Odisha at Puri Shree Naara in 1947**



Source:  
[http://hkmahtab.in/image\\_gallery.html](http://hkmahtab.in/image_gallery.html)

##### *Political Leadership and State Unification*

###### *Chief Ministership*

Dr. Mahatab's political career flourished in the post-independence era, serving as the first Chief Minister of Odisha from 1946 to 1950 and again from 1956 to 1960.

His leadership during this transformative period was instrumental in modernizing the state and integrating 26 erstwhile Odia-speaking princely states into the Indian Union. This endeavor required political acumen and diplomatic finesse, urging rulers to accede to Odisha based on shared cultural and linguistic ties (Nayak, 2018). His ability to negotiate and foster relationships with various stakeholders showcased his commitment to regional unity and development.

#### *Diplomatic Acumen*

Dr. Mahatab's diplomatic skills were evident in his successful negotiation of merger agreements with various princely states, solidifying Odisha's governance and regional identity. His dedication to creating a unified state that reflected the cultural diversity and aspirations of its people reflects the philosophical principle of ethical leadership, prioritizing the common good over individual interests.

**Image 11: Odisha PM Dr Mahtab with H.E. Shri C. Rajagopalachari, Governor-General of India, while the latter receives a casket containing an address of welcome from Shri L. M. Patnaik, speaker of the Orissa Legislative Assembly, at Puri in December 1, 1949**



Source:  
[http://hkmahtab.in/image\\_gallery.html](http://hkmahtab.in/image_gallery.html)

**Image 12: The Hon'ble Dr Harekrushna Mahtab, Minister for Industry and Supply for India, addressing Indo-US Delegation to promote Sambalpuri Textile Industry on June 28, 1950 held in USA, Chicago**



Source:  
[http://hkmahtab.in/image\\_gallery.html](http://hkmahtab.in/image_gallery.html)

#### *Infrastructural Development*

Dr. Mahatab was a visionary behind infrastructural development in Odisha, relocating the capital from Cuttack to Bhubaneswar to enhance administrative efficiency and foster regional development. His tenure witnessed significant projects, such as the Hirakud Dam and the Rourkela Steel Plant, laying the foundation for Odisha's industrial growth (Nayak, 2018). These initiatives exemplified Mahatab's forward-thinking approach to governance and development, embodying the philosophical concept of progress as a multi-dimensional endeavor that integrates economic, social, and cultural factors.

## V. LEGACY AND LATER CONTRIBUTIONS

### *Literary Contributions*

Beyond his political achievements, Mahatab was a prolific writer, with significant literary contributions, particularly during his imprisonments. He penned the novel *Nutan Dharma* and the drama *Swarajya Sadhana*, articulating the struggles and aspirations of his people (Mahatab, 1983). These works served as a source of inspiration for future generations, reflecting the philosophical idea that literature can be a powerful vehicle for social change.

### *Media Initiatives*

Dr. Mahatab's establishment of the Oriya daily *Prajatantra* in 1930 provided a vital platform for political discourse and community engagement in Odisha. The publication became an influential voice, promoting democratic ideals and encouraging civic participation. He also founded the weekly journal *Rachana*, modeled after Gandhi's *Harijan*, disseminating Gandhian values among the masses. Through these initiatives, Mahatab nurtured a culture of political awareness and active citizenship, emphasizing the philosophical importance of informed engagement in the democratic process.

**Image 13: Dr H.K Mahtab present from left during oath taking ceremony of Cabinet Ministers by First President of India, at Central hall of President House in New Delhi on May 29, 1950**



Source:  
[http://hkmahtab.in/image\\_gallery.htm](http://hkmahtab.in/image_gallery.htm)

**Image 14: Shri Mahtab, India's Minister for Industry and Commerce with Shri Krishna Menon, Indian High Commissioner in UK on his arrival at the London Heathrow Airport, in October, 1951, to attend the Commonwealth Supply Ministers Conference**



Source:  
[http://hkmahtab.in/image\\_gallery.html](http://hkmahtab.in/image_gallery.html)

### *Recognition and Awards*

In recognition of his literary contributions, Mahatab was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983 for his celebrated three-volume work *Gaon Majlis*,



underscoring his impact on both the literary and political landscapes of Odisha. His commitment to education and cultural development was further evident in his efforts to establish institutions like Utkal University, reflecting Mahatab's belief in the transformative power of knowledge (Sahu, 2016).

### **Later Political Career**

Dr. Mahatab's political journey continued through various parties, reflecting his steadfast commitment to Odisha's development until his retirement in 1977. His disillusionment with the Congress Party's leftward shift under Indira Gandhi prompted him to establish the Orissa Jana Congress, seeking to uphold the principles he championed throughout his life. His later years were marked by continued advocacy for regional development, ensuring that the needs and aspirations of the Odia people remained at the forefront of political discourse.

**Image 15: Dr Mahatab, Industry and Commerce Minister of India discussing with his US counterparts Mr Hughes at Chevrolet workshop at Chicago in 1950**



Source:  
[http://hkmahtab.in/image\\_gallery.htm](http://hkmahtab.in/image_gallery.htm)

**Image 16: Dr H.K Mahtab taking his dusty as Governor of Bombay state in 1955**



Source:  
[http://hkmahtab.in/image\\_gallery.html](http://hkmahtab.in/image_gallery.html)

## **VI. DR. HAREKRUSHNA MAHATAB AS A PHILOSOPHER OF SOCIAL CHANGE**

Dr. Harekrushna Mahatab's philosophical contributions to social justice serve as a vital foundation for addressing systemic inequalities in contemporary society. His commitment to equity and inclusivity reflects a moral imperative that emphasizes the upliftment of marginalized communities. Mahatab's assertion that "true progress is measured by our ability to empower the oppressed" (Mahatab, 1953) resonates profoundly in today's discourse on social justice, highlighting the ethical responsibility of individuals and institutions to actively confront and dismantle structures of oppression. By situating social justice as a collective endeavor rather

than an individual pursuit, Mahatab provides a compelling framework for understanding the interconnectedness of societal well-being.

In exploring the dynamics of collective identity, Mahatab adeptly navigates the complex relationship between nationalism and regionalism, advocating for a synthesis that celebrates diversity while fostering unity. He posits that a cohesive identity emerges from the recognition and appreciation of cultural plurality, encapsulated in the principle of unity in diversity. This perspective is particularly relevant in a global context marked by cultural fragmentation and identity crises. As noted by historian R. P. Mohanty, Mahatab's vision serves as a "beacon for a society grappling with its multiple identities" (Mohanty, 2014), urging a re-examination of how we define ourselves in relation to one another amidst growing polarization.

Moreover, Dr. Mahatab's philosophical reflections on education as a social tool underscore its critical role in community empowerment. He championed the idea that education should extend beyond individual aspirations to serve the collective needs of society, asserting that "knowledge must be a means of liberation, not just a pathway to personal success" (Mahatab, 1951). This advocacy for educational reform intertwines with his emphasis on civil disobedience and cultural renaissance, promoting a vision of activism that is rooted in historical consciousness and ethical leadership. By intertwining these themes, Mahatab articulates a comprehensive philosophy of progress that advocates for a balanced approach to development—one that integrates economic growth with social equity, ultimately providing a roadmap for a more just and cohesive society.

Table 1 provides a summary of the above aspects.

**Table 1: Dr. Harekrushna Mahatab as a Philosopher of Social Change**

Theme	Key Concepts	Implications
Social Justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Equity and inclusivity</li> <li>Upliftment of marginalized communities</li> </ul>	Emphasizes the moral imperative of addressing systemic inequalities.
Collective Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nationalism vs. Regionalism</li> <li>Unity in diversity</li> </ul>	Explores how diverse cultures can converge to form a cohesive identity.
Education as a Social Tool	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Education for social responsibility</li> <li>Knowledge as empowerment</li> </ul>	Advocates for education that serves community needs, not just individual ambitions.
Civil Disobedience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Non-violent resistance</li> <li>Moral duty to oppose injustice</li> </ul>	Highlights the ethical responsibility to challenge oppressive systems through peaceful means.
Cultural Renaissance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Revival of local literature and art</li> <li>Celebration of regional identity</li> </ul>	Encourages a deep connection to cultural heritage as a catalyst for social change.

Leadership and Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visionary leadership</li> <li>• Ethical governance</li> </ul>	Proposes that true leadership involves a commitment to the common good and holistic development.
Historical Consciousness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding the past to shape the future</li> <li>• Historical narratives as identity</li> </ul>	Stresses the importance of recognizing historical contexts in forming collective identities.
Empowerment through Activism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grassroots mobilization</li> <li>• Engaging communities in political processes</li> </ul>	Affirms that active participation is essential for achieving social change and empowerment.
Philosophy of Progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development as a multifaceted concept</li> <li>• Balancing economic growth with social equity</li> </ul>	Advocates for a holistic view of progress that integrates economic, social, and cultural dimensions.

Source: Author's compilation

## VII. CONCLUSION

Dr. Harekrushna Mahatab's life and contributions to India's independence and the subsequent development of Odisha are not only profound but also resonate deeply in contemporary society. His relentless dedication to social justice, regional unity, and economic progress underscores the vital role that regional leaders play in shaping a cohesive national identity. By advocating for equity, inclusivity, and ethical governance, Mahatab established a framework that remains relevant today, urging current and future generations to embrace their collective responsibilities. His vision of a united and empathetic society serves as a powerful reminder that true progress is rooted in the upliftment of the marginalized and the celebration of cultural diversity.

In an age marked by polarization and social fragmentation, Mahatab's legacy encourages us to engage in meaningful dialogue and active citizenship. His emphasis on education as a tool for social responsibility highlights the importance of nurturing informed and engaged communities. As we navigate complex socio-political landscapes, Mahatab's philosophical insights offer a guiding light, reminding us that the pursuit of a more equitable and unified society requires collective effort and unwavering commitment to the common good. In honoring his legacy, we not only recognize his contributions but also reaffirm our responsibility to continue the work he so passionately championed.

## VIII. REFERENCES

- Behera, B. (2012). *Modern Odisha: A Historical Perspective*. Bhubaneswar: Odisha Publishing House.
- Bhanja, R. (2019). "Cultural and Political Awakening in Odisha: A Historical Analysis." *Odisha Review*, 12(4), 45-60.



- Bhattacharya, S. (2015). "The Role of Regional Leaders in the Nationalist Movement: The Case of Odisha." *Journal of Indian History*, 29(3), 112-126.
- Das, R. (2015). *Odia Sahitya*. Cuttack: Sahitya Akademi.
- Ghosh, A. (2013). "The Gandhian Influence on Harekrushna Mahatab: A Study of Ideals and Actions." *Indian Journal of Historical Studies*, 2(1), 23-30.
- Mahatab, H. K. (1983). *Gaon Majlis*. Cuttack: Sahitya Akademi.
- Mahatab, H. K. (1951). "Reflections on Education and Social Responsibility." *Eastern Times*.
- Mahatab, H. K. (1953). "Unity in Diversity: The Path to Progress." *Journal of Indian Politics*.
- Mohanty, S. (2014). "Harekrushna Mahatab and the Renaissance of Odia Literature." *Odia Literary Review*, 7(3), 75-88.
- Mohapatra, A. (2010). "Harekrushna Mahatab: Historian and Social Reformer." *Journal of Odisha Studies*, 5(1), 15-29.
- Nayak, P. (2018). "Harekrushna Mahatab's Role in Post-Independence Odisha: Governance and Development." *Economic and Political Weekly*, 53(23), 42-50.
- Patnaik, P. (2008). "Harekrushna Mahatab: The Architect of Modern Odisha." *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43(20), 65-70.
- Rao, V. (2016). "The Gadjet Movement: Regional Aspirations and National Politics." *Journal of Indian History*, 45(2), 102-118.