

## **Decency movement (*Sovaniya Andolan*): timeless movement from Odisha, India**

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### **Abstract**

Odisha is a coastal state in the eastern part of India. Several pioneering movements have hitherto spread over Odisha through the eras and Decency Movement is one of them, which began in Odisha in 1962. From the last five decades, the movement continues with the mission to bring a blissful reform, to set up global peace in the society and to establish a decent world. This study tries to know the genesis of the movement, its objectives and activities, the process of mass mobilization and its institutionalization, and its need of the hour and acceptance. History gives an account of the mission of the movement, the nobility of the mission, and its timelessness. After bereavement of Kumar Bhai, the founder-leader, the movement still continues. This qualitative study is based on the historiography method. Going through the old records of the movement and diaries of Kumar Bhai, it is found that the very essence of decency movement i.e. *Atma-Suddhi* Sangha (Self-Purification Society) has slowed down and *Sovaniya Sikshyashram* (School of Decency) has been geared up.

**Key words:** *Decency movement, School of decency, Self-Purification society, India*

### **Introduction**

Odisha, an eastern state in India is diversified in terms of social and cultural life as there are hundreds of castes and tribes in the state and every caste or tribe has its own social and cultural life. The state has experienced a number of movements since time immemorial. The first movement i.e. a peace movement was started by Ashoka, the king of Kalinga (modern Odisha) after the devastating Kalinga war of c261 BC. One of the edicts at Dhauli, Odisha refers to the conquest of Kalinga, the terrible massacre in that war, the king's remorse, his desire for true conquest - the conquest by means of dhamma and not by force of arms- and his efforts in ensuring that end. Kumar Bhai is a name to reckon with in Odisha for the simple reason that the movement he started was a novel phenomenon throughout the world. The movement is named as International Indecency Prevention Movement (IIPM) and popularly known as the Decency Movement (*Sovaniya Andolan*- in Odia). Truly speaking, unlike any other movement in the world, this movement proclaims international brotherhood and a movement for introspection and self-purification. With this ideological stand, Kumar Bhai started his first school named *Yugashrasta*

*Sovaniya Sikhyashram* (National School of Decency) to spread the knowledge of decency in Udayagiri- the Buddhist heritage in the early seventies of the twentieth century.

Kumar Bhai speculated a blissful change in the society by reforming minds and tastes in the field of education, literature, art, drama and in the entire publicity media. Reformation began with the ‘National School of Decency’ with its famous heritage teaching analogous with two other famous schools viz, Gopabandhu’s *Satyavadi Vana Vidyalaya* in Puri district and Chintamani’s *Madhusagar Vidyalaya* in Kendrapara district of Odisha. Subsequently, International Centre for Ideal Education was set up in Cuttack in 1984. Presently, there are about fifty schools of Decency Movement running across India. These schools are governed and administered by dedicated lady teachers. Apart from schooling, they intervene in the social issues and spread the global message of peace and decency.

Students, children and youth can create a new decent society. So, Kumar Bhai ignited them in various forums, even visited different schools and clubs. Once he was invited by the Students’ Union of Visva-Bharati University and his inspiring speech and psycho-drama *Navayatra* (The New March) amazed all. The-then president of the students’ union had said that that auspicious visit of Kumar Bhai would be recorded in the University of Visva-Bharati as the visit of a prophet. Kumar Bhai has visited every corner of Odisha to spread the message of decency. But it is a matter of great regret that Kumar Bhai was an unrecognized educationist throughout his lifetime, though many educationists pay frequent visits to the institutions set up by him in the seventies and eighties.

When the world was rapidly heading towards industrialization, imbalanced economic growth, new trendy media and modernization, many intellectuals raised the question on the philosophy of Kumar Bhai- whether it could help the progress and prosperity of the nation. Kumar Bhai justified that progress might be slow, but it should be real and blissful. Development without decency will not sustain. ‘Prosperity without peace’ and ‘development without decency’ is harmful for human society. Development of a certain community will be enriched with its social cohesion and cultural promotion.

### **Research Questions and Objectives**

Being a part of the movement ever since my graduation days, I have observed most of the activities of the movement for last ten years in a participatory way. After being part of the movement for such a long time, some questions are there to ponder over. Firstly, how and why was this movement originated, and what has been its ideological stand over the years? Secondly, what are the objectives

and activities of the movement, which help in the sustenance of the movement in the last half a decade? Thirdly, how was it accepted by the people and what was people's perception of it?

The main objective of the study is to sketch an outline of the history of such a novel movement in Odisha in the early sixties of the twentieth century by throwing light on the above mentioned research questions. The specific objectives were to

1. Study the genesis and the process of institutionalization of the movement,
2. Know the objectives and activities of the movement, and
3. Find out people's perception of the movement and its contemporary relevance.

### **Methodology**

Evidence was collected from the primary sources with proven authenticity, especially from the records of the movement, diaries of Kumar Bhai and some of his followers, and magazines and literature produced by the movement for the reliability and validity of the study. It was possible because of the researcher's inclination and accessibility to as well as familiarity with the primary sources (Dhanagare, 2006). They are critically analyzed and narrated keeping the social science model in mind as per the exigencies of the time. The story is not merely narrated chronologically as to why and how something happened. Moreover, the present study is carried out by analyzing both structurally and textually with the larger framework of historiography.

### **Genesis of the Movement**

The questions arise, who is Kumar Bhai and why did he start this movement, which are the inspiring events and who are the helping hands that stimulated him to start such a novel movement, what incident may be called as the starting point, from where the movement started and geared up, and how it was transformed from mass mobilization into institutionalisation. Before answering the key question i.e. mass mobilization to institutionalization, let me narrate two brief stories i.e. how decency movement was born from an indecent incident in Mumbai and how a sixteen year old solo actor Gouri Shankar was transformed into a soul reformer by Kumar Bhai.

### **Decency Born from an Indecent Incident**

Examining genesis of the movement it was found that the decency movement commenced because of resistance to an indecent dance programme in Mumbai - the commercial capital of India. Kumar Bhai had been to Mumbai (Bombay) to participate in a cultural nite on the auspicious occasion of Ganesh Puja as he was an extraordinary solo actor. He was only 16-years-old then. He saw that a half-naked girl was dancing on the stage. He condemned this sleazy show and was pelted stones but, at last was able to change the girl's heart. She promised never to take part in such intoxicating vulgar dance anymore. Kumar Bhai said – eureka, eureka!!

Kumar Bhai returned to Odisha and toured to schools and colleges to bring a change among the student and youth masses. Padmashree Dr. Laxminarayan Sahoo, a member of the Servants of the India Society came forward voluntarily to help and cooperate him to start a movement, after hearing his speech. On the 8th April, 1962, which was the sixteenth birthday of Kumar Bhai, Laxminarayan organized a meeting at Shri Ramachandra Bhavan in Cuttack to declare the launch of Bhai's Unhealthy Literature, Art, Drama, Film Prevention Movement. Scientist Pranakrushna Parija, the then vice-chancellor of Utkal University presided over the function. Great personalities like Vinoba Bhave, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, K. M. Munshi blessed the movement. Kumar Bhai made *padayatra* (foot march) through the villages. The Self-Purification Programme was launched. Vulgar unhealthy books, magazines, posters, transparent tempting dresses were burnt. Interest was marked in foreign countries for the movement.

### **A Journey from Gouri Shankar to Kumar Bhai**

A boy was born on the 8th April 1947 in the Dhenkanal town of Odisha and named as Gouri Sankar by on his 21st day as usually happens in Hindu rituals. According to Hindu rituals a child's name was given by his or her maternal uncle on the 21st day. When Gouri Shankar was only a nine months' child, his mother Punyaprava died in snake bite. He was brought up by Reba Debi, the founder of the women's education in Odisha and the editor of the first children's magazine. He heard about the lives of Rama, Krishna, Christ, Ramkrishna Paramhansa in his childhood from Reba Debi and his maternal grandfather. At the age of three, one day when he was listening to the life of Shri Ramkrishna, he said on his own, 'from today my name shall be Ramkrishna'.

Ramkrishna was admitted in the St. Josephs Convent School in Cuttack at the age of four. He was popular among his friends and teachers for his humble polite behaviour, honesty, sincerity and intelligence since his childhood. His father died of cancer. But, he received the greatest shock of his life when Reba

Debi whom he took as his mother, father, guide and everything passed away. He was twelve at that time. He started living with his grandfather Nilamani Dhal and continued his studies. He was a very good actor. Receiving an invitation from Mumbai, he went for solo action on the occasion of Ganesh Puja in 1961.

On the occasion of Ganesh Puja, Ramkrishna had an invitation to present his solo acting performance. At the place of the programme, he found a teenage girl dancing on the stage wearing a transparent dress and making vulgar postures. He felt this would make the future generations weaker, indisciplined and unrestraint. People threw stones at him shouting, ‘... This boy has come to become second Gandhi. She wants to show her vulgar dance and we want to see it. Get out of the stage. Otherwise, we will beat you to death if you will not leave the stage’. Being stoned and drenched in blood, he said, ‘I may be stoned to death but I shall not allow the ‘tasty poison’ to be distributed here. ...’. It changed the mind of the dancing girl named Vimla. She came to Ramkrishna wrapping her body in a shawl and said, ‘*Kumar Bhaya, main aisi nangi naach kabhi nahi naachungi* (Kumar Bhai, I will never dance in such vulgar posture)’. Kumar Bhai was born in Mumbai.

### **Mass Mobilization Leading to Movement: Process of Mobilization**

On 25 June 1962, Kumar Bhai sat in meditation for a day and realized the aim of his life and wrote the book- ‘Secrets of Life’. Then, first he decided to prepare some real, ideal and dedicated workers to activate the movement. Kumar Bhai used some modalities for motivating and mobilizing ‘followers’. Especially, speeches and stage craft communication by visiting from village to village, school to school helped him find followers at the grassroot level. And at the same time, he assembled some supporters through journalistic and satirical writings. He used less action-oriented programmes like demonstrations, protests and agitations etc. since he gave importance to intellectual activities. The movement emphasized on the role and social responsibility of media and communication. After a certain growth of the movement out of cultural imagination, social networking and collective action (Lindberg, 1998: 248), the movement was registered as International Indecency Prevention Movement in 1966. Shyam Sundar Mishra, Kalindi Charan Panigrahi and Sailen Ray joined hands to carry the movement forward. The National School of Decency was set up in Udayagiri on 1st January, 1974 and International Centre of Ideal Education was established in Cuttack on May Day in 1984 for research and training for ideal and dedicated workers from various professions, who would give new blissful leadership and bring blissful reformation in different walks of life. The Centre had Gurukul Ashram, Yoga Centre, Educational Institute for National Integrity, International School for World Peace, All Religions Prayer

Hall, Tower of Humanity and International Brotherhood, Creative Theatre and Educational Film Centre and many other faculties.

Since then, the movement has been running to bring a blissful change in the society and using children, students and youths as tools. The movement has set up an orphanage to bring them up as good humans providing all the facilities including motherly affection by dedicated lady teachers. Many primary schools have been opened under the banner of the movement to bring changes among children at a tender age. These schools are the conglomerations of Satyabadi, Santiniketan, basic and modern educational systems. Children are imparted intellect-building teaching in the residential campuses. In the name of non-formal education, the movement works for the old and spreads the message of the movement and provokes the social and moral consciousness among the masses through meetings and cultural functions.

The motto of the movement was very impressive. Kumar Bhai writes-

Honesty and sincerity in every work

With good behaviour, love and kindness,

Humanism and Society's interest

Above all -isms and selfishness.

The aim of the movement is very clear in a poetic form to build an honest, sincere, disciplined society which will be replete with peace, bliss, love and kindness.

Though there are thousand followers of Kumar Bhai and the movement, now it is not as active as it was under his charismatic leadership. After the bereavement of Kumar Bhai, the founder-leader, the movement has taken diverse directions. Leafing through the old records of the movement and diaries of Kumar Bhai, I found that, the very essence of decency movement i.e. *Atma-Suddhi Sangha* (Self-Purification Society) and *Sovaniya Sikshyashram* (School of Decency) has been deviated. The process of institutionalization has been fragmented. The movement has three leading Schools of Decency at Udayagiri, Cuttack and Konark led by three first generation disciples of Kumar Bhai. Socio-cultural ideas and values, and aspiration to lead the movement of these disciples may have affected the organizational structure of the movement. No doubt, Kumar Bhai has transferred the authority to his disciples for the survival of the movement. But the transformation of the charismatic authority into a legal and routine authority has affected the activities of the movement. Though the transfer of authority has failed in many movements and movements have

ceased to exist, such situation has not turned up in the case of the Decency Movement.

### **Timeline of the Movement**

1962, 8 April: Sixteenth birthday of Kumar Bhai, Inauguration of ‘the Unhealthy Literature, Art and Film Prevention Movement’.

1965, 25 June: Sat in meditation and wrote the book ‘Secrets of Life’.

1966, 19 September: Registered as ‘International Indecency Prevention Movement’.

1974, 1 January: ‘National School of Decency’ was set up at Udayagiri, Jajpur, Odisha.

1977, 23 September: *Sovaniya Sikhyashram* was set up in Cuttack, Odisha.

1984, 1 May: ‘International Centre of Ideal Education’ was set up in Cuttack, Odisha.

1993, 9 June: Kumar Bhai passes away.

### **Ideological Stand**

The framework of the movement is very clear and states to bring a blissful change in the human society. This value framework seems to be a barrier to development. But, it is a barrier to the degradation of culture and development without cultural life. Sometimes it seems the goal of the movement is indefinite and raises questions whether it can be achieved in the existing context of the society. Though it is a one-of-a-kind movement, the invention of Kumar Bhai, it seems that the movement has put together all the progressive and positive values from different movements across the world. It may be predicted that the peace concept was incorporated in the movement from Buddhism, as Ashoka, the King of Kalinga initiated the decent religion extending it across the planet. The movement has also adopted non-violence and truth concepts from Gandhian movements. Kumar Bhai proclaimed non-violence as a tool for social change as Gandhi, Mahavira, Buddha and Martin Luther had done. His nonviolence is beyond physical, psychological and moral. His disciples cite that Kumar Bhai’s non-violence is spiritual and it is reflected in his writings. Kumar Bhai says,

If you can't help someone – at least do not harm him,  
If you can't praise someone – at least do not scandalize  
him,  
If you can't love anyone – at least do not hate him,  
If you can't be kind to someone – at least do not be rude  
to him,  
If you can't encourage someone – at least do not  
discourage him,  
If you can't save anyone – at least do not destroy him.

Apart from these world famous views of Gandhian movements, the movement also adopted Khadi, especially white cotton dresses to be used by the members. White is the symbol of peace, transparency and sanctity and handloom made cotton is the symbolic promotion of cottage industries in rural India. Arundhati Devi, the dedicated disciple of Kumar Bhai quotes, “white is also a gorgeous colour.” It took the gist of subaltern movements to set up a casteless society. So, it promotes not to write surnames as it does not believe in division among the human community. All the schools set up under a banner which follows the doctrine of the Decency Movement to establish a casteless society. Kumar Bhai once said:

‘Our family is human family; our nation is human nation,  
Our party is human party; our religion is human religion.’

The movement gathered substances from the nature related movements or ideas from the writings and philosophy of Wordsworth, Tagore and Meher. It suggests worshipping nature and even not to pluck a leaf or flower from the tree and spread the message of reforestation. The movement he helped to establish in the early sixties of the twentieth century was a novel phenomenon in Odisha. Since that day the movement has been spreading its fragrance to every nook and cranny.

### **Objectives and Activities of the Movement**

With this ideological stand, the movement has fixed its objectives and activities. The movement has a wide range of activities from micro to macro level. At the micro level, it promotes to build local institutions i.e. *Atma-Sudhi Sangha* (Self-Purification Society) for the old, women, youth and students. The Self - Purification Society can be started at home or at any place with two or more members. All the members vow to obey the rules and regulations of the self-purification society sincerely. No wrong and filthy discussions are allowed in



this social forum. All thoughts, discussions, writings, dresses and actions should be restraints, decent and blissful. All religions' self-purification prayer meeting and introspection meeting are held once a week on Sundays or any other day suitable for the members of the society. After prayer, introspection and oath for correction of one's own faults, and decisions are taken for some noble work. The spirit of introspection through self-purification society arouses moral consciousness among the members of the society. The most senior and efficient member of the society works as the *mukhya-sevak* (president) and selects other members of the governing body. The movement says that this is probably the greatest need and most noble perseverance of the hour. Nevertheless, the time has come to study the status of self-purification society and its need of the hour. Kumar Bhai has defined introspection. He said, 'what is the value of that intelligence, talent, strength, wealth, power or fame, if they cannot lead me and the society to real peace, bliss, happiness and good name?'

The movement and its well-wishers observe International Indecency Prevention Day on 8<sup>th</sup> April throughout the world with different themes every year. The movement organizes seminars and conferences on different themes such as New Education to discuss and spread the message of decency. Especially, youth are given priority in the conferences as they are the agents of change and a bridge between the old generation and the new generation.

The movement has turned its school education into vocational education. The educative cultural programme is one of the major weapons used for the spread-out of the messages of the movement.

The movement has its own publication units, which bring out magazines, souvenirs, reports, leaflets and movement literature.

The movement organizes health camp for rural people, relief camp at the time of disaster, youth camp for their mind building. The movement also organizes world peace march at the time of crisis and conflict.

The movement awards a youth for his decent work every year.

The movement is spreading throughout the world. Visitors from United States of America, Taiwan, Singapore, and other countries throng at its Udayagiri, Konark and other branches to know more about the movement.

Women can bring a blissful change. Hence, the decency movement is led by dedicated lady teachers, which is symbolic of women empowerment.

Kumar Bhai dedicated his entire life to bring about reforms and to save the society from the jaws of indecency, greed, corruption, crime, violence and

destruction. His message is ‘if we can bring a blissful change in the thinking process, mental attitude, belief and taste of the people, our actions and way of living, we can surely change and we can have a better, happier, healthier, disciplined, blissful future. \*\*\* This is possible only if we can bring about a sea-change in education, literature, art, drama, all publicity materials, radio, television and films by strong legislation, clear definition, proper checking and administration, systems and steps to arouse public consciousness’.

He appeals to all to introspect with a view to self-purification which is the only way to save the society from violence, crime, corruption and destruction. First, he appeals all to accept perseverance of love and the need to achieve individual peace, family peace, world peace, national integrity and international brotherhood. He lovingly calls people of all strata of the society to be apart of real blissful thought and action. He appeals all not to lose humanism, fighting for -isms or power and to all people to keep the interest of the human society above individual, family or party’s interest. He finds some real, ideal, efficient, honest, sincere, determined, noble, dedicated workers those who can visit door to door and arouse the social and moral consciousness of the people and do honest, sincere social service. They espouse the cause of humanity, love, honesty, sincerity and world peace. He says, “The progress may be slow, it must be real and blissful”.

### **As others have seen the movement**

Nobel laureate Mother Teresa had seen the movement as an instrument to promote and spread God’s peace and love everywhere. Supporting the mission of the movement, freedom fighter and the founder of Bhoodan movement Acharya Vinoba Bhave had said that all departments of human-life should be decent. Then the life of the nation can rise higher. Praising the heroic effort of Kumar Bhai, Morarji Desai had said that this movement was the need of the hour when everyone was fascinated by vulgar elements. Equalizing the educational system of the movement with Tagore’s educational system, Harekrushna Mahatab once said, “Bapuji’s non-violence, love for all religions and Indian culture is not only taught but also practiced in the National School of Decency.” He had anguished that the movement had not received due publicity, though it had created a sensation in the field of education and top educationists had praised it. Biju Patnaik had predicted that the movement could change the future of our nation and hoped that the International Centre of Ideal Education would be the pride of Odisha one day. People from different parts of the world understood the need of the movement and supported it. Many of them had come forward to discuss with Kumar Bhai about the future of the society and this social movement.

## Dissecting the Movement for Further Research

Kumar Bhai is no more for the last nineteen years. But the movement and all the branches founded by him are working for bringing blissful socio-cultural changes in the world. Though he had thought to spread this movement in his motherland and denied the offers to travel abroad to spread it, it has gone widespread in the meanwhile and proved its timelessness. But, the fifty years old movement still remains an untouched area in academic research of social science and humanities, which needs to be probed from various dimensions. I have put forth some ideas, on how the movement can be explored by the scholars of different disciplines and even crossing the boundaries of disciplines.

Scholars of Philosophy may question the definition of ‘decency’. Defining decency is as complex as happiness, love and other abstract ideas. Even, after half a century of the movement there is a need to define and/or redefine decency. Historians may explore the history of the movement commencing from genesis to the present status of the movement. Political scientists may find out the internal dynamics of the movement i.e. ideological conflict, rivalry and change if any, which helped to continue the movement, even after the demise of the founder-director. The degree of internal cohesion or conflict among the leaders and followers of the movement and handling intra-follower differences by the leaders of the movement if any can be explored within the interdisciplinary perspectives. As most of the foreign analysts treat ‘Maoists as terrorists’ (Karki, 2005), how *Sovaniya Karmees* (Decency Workers) are treated- whether as change-makers or as fundamentalists, not necessarily Hindus. The relations of the movement with the state in terms of agitation conducted, and memorandum and petitions submitted to the government may be studied. The reach of the movement and its impact on the next generation including all sections of the society may be studied. Though the movement is run under the leadership of Satyabhama Debi, there may be an emergence of new leadership. Though women dominated leadership was there among the first generation leaders in the sixties of the twentieth century, why and how male dominated leadership emerged among the next generation leaders in some new branches of the movement. When women were taking the leadership of the movement in its first generation, the next generation movement is led by men again with many instances. In the last paragraph of the book, *Where Women Are Leaders*, Ela Bhatt has quoted that she has seen that women everywhere are ready to take leadership. Hence, who are the real second generation leaders of the movement may be found out. What may be the reasons that even after about fifty years of the movement, it has not been as popular as it should have been. Why and how the chief founder becomes more important after his demise than his message in such a reform socio-cultural movement. Sociologists may focus on the process of institutionalization of the movement, its structure and

function, membership pattern and change process within it. Decency is also a cultural term and relating to the indecent aspect of culture in that time. The movement focuses on decent cultural programmes and has produced many songs and dramas, which may be studied by the sociologists. It will be of interest to the scholars and academicians who are working in social movements, sociology and cultural studies to probe into the above questioned assumptions. Relevance of the movement in present day context, the existence of the movement and the future of such a socio-cultural movement in India, the direction of its expansion and consistency of its timelessness may be studied further. Scholars of language and literature may study the movement, literature and its impact.

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