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A forgotten pioneer from Kanpur: Sir Har Govind Misra (1867-1962)

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Abstract

This article aims to bring to light the many achievements Sir Hargobind Misra, one of the pioneering industrialists of pre-independent India. He was one of the three people recognised by the British government for his contributions to industry and innovation. He was a multifaceted personality with interests in language, philosophy and sports. However, he remains an unsung personality in the annals of Independent India. This article aims to profile this forgotten industrialists from the city of Kanpur.

Keywords: Kanpur, hosiery, industrialist, unsung hero

Introduction

Pre-independence Kanpur was a centre of prosperity and urban development, playing a significant role in India's freedom struggle. It witnessed the inception of India's initial struggle for freedom in 1857, and was an important centre of revolutionary activities in the 1930s and labour activism in the 1940s. The first fifty years of the twentieth century were a period of growth of Indian industry and the city of Kanpur, emerged as a major centre for Indian business and industry in north India. In the early years of independence, the city proudly housed one of the earliest operational Ordnance factories, a functioning parachute factory, and several leather and textile mills. The subsequent decay of industry in the city has unfortunately obliterated the memory of this period of intense activity and enterprise in the city.

One such overlooked personality is Sir Har Govind Misra, a pioneering industrialist, businessman and innovator. Har Govind Misra was not only a successful businessman, but was also a philosopher, a Sanskrit scholar, a journalist, an avid patron of cricket, and a public personality who commented on crucial issues to the day, from economic policy to communal relations. He was one of the three citizens from Kanpur to be conferred with Knighthood by the Viceroy of India. In the post-independence years he remained in public like as a member of the Bihar Vidhan Parishad.

Early Life

Sir Har Govind Misra was born on June 17, 1897, in the house of Pandit Jaigopal Misra in the village of Sodar Puriye Digaon in Darbhanga, Mithila, Bihar. The family was attached to the Darbhanga Raj as purohits and were Maithil Brahmins of simple means. Sir Misra's father, Pandit Jaigopal Misra, was a philosopher and a learned scholar of Sanskrit. He taught grammar at the Vishudhanand Sanskrit College, Varanasi. Born in a family steeped in ancient knowledge of India, Har Govind Misra practiced Sanskrit literature, *Vedshastra* and astrology at home from a very tender age. At the age of eight, he displayed a talent for writing *kundlis*. The mettle of the young Har Govind was tested by the virulent plague that affected India in the early years of the twentieth century. His father passed away and he, along with his widowed mother, grandmother and four-year-old brother had to migrate from Darbhanga. Their bullock cart caravan moved through jungles, ultimately stopping in the Gwaltoli area of Kanpur which subsequently became his home.

Innovator and Industrialist

Kanpur was a leading industrial city of the United Provinces (present Uttar Pradesh), second only to Calcutta by the turn of the twentieth century.

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It was known as the Manchester of the East, and was renowned for its the cotton textile industry^[1]. This was the period when the lead was taken by the Elgin Mills, the Muir Mills, the Victoria Mills, the Swadeshi Cotton Mills. The celebrated trademark 'Lal Imlī' printed on products of the Cawnpore Woollen Mills, has become a household name. Gwaltoli, where the Misra family settled was an area adjacent to this mill district. Indeed, in 1908, at the young age of eleven years old, Har Govind started his working career with dyeing department of the Elgin Mills, at a salary of Rs 3 a month. The work was hard and involved standing long hours in the acidic dye, which made his legs swell up painfully. Soon, however, his prodigious aptitude for mathematical figures was noticed by a staff member, which led to his promotion to an accounting position, as a *munshi*. His salary also increased to Rs 18 a month. This was the starting point of his bright future.

In 1925, Har Govind Misra was recommended for special training in textile engineering by the Superintendent of the Elgin Mills, Kanpur. He was sent to Nottingham University in Britain supported by a state scholarship. His granddaughter, Mrs Meenu Mishra recounts a story that he used to recount about his first trip to the United Kingdom. Apparently, on the ship he met a stranger who blessed him and predicted his meteoric future^[2]. He was the first Indian to take special training in hosiery work. After the successful completion of his training, he was invited by the University of Nottingham to speak on the hosiery trade of India and was also elected a member of the Textile Institute of Manchester. Misra had done his internship with Messrs. George Blackburn and Sons who were specialists in building hosiery machines in Great Britain. Pleased with his work, the British firm decided to open a demonstration hosiery factory at Cawnpore under the charge of Mr. Mishra. Mr. Mishra was appointed as their sole agent of the firm for introducing machinery specially adapted to the needs of Indian industry. His success at Nottingham was reported in papers like the Bombay Chronicle^[3]. Indeed Hargovind's success on his return to India was swift and did seem blessed.

In 1927, after training in textile technology, he came back to Kanpur. As noted above, Kanpur had emerged as a premier centre for cotton textiles in north India, aptly called the Manchester of the East. Coming into its own during the inter-war period, the textile industry grew steadily during the 1920s. From the late 19th century the textile industry in Kanpur was owned and operated by British industrialists, led by the Gavin Jones and Alexander McRoberts. The reduction in international trade during the Second World War led to a substantial accumulation of capital in the hands of Indian speculators and traders, who oriented it towards the domestic mass market^[4]. Kanpur was an important centre of this process. Indian businessmen like Juggilal Kamalapat Singhania Gangadhar Bajinath and Har Govind Misra emerged in this period to take on the competition.

¹ S. P. Mehra, *Manchester of the East: The Rise and Fall of Industry in Kanpur*, Bloomsbury Publishing 2000

² Personal Interview with Ms Meenu Mishra, New Delhi,

³ 'First Hosiery Expert of India: Mr Har Govind Misra's Success,' *The Bombay Chronicle*, Nov 10 1927, p. 10

⁴ B. Chatterjee and M. Chakrabarty, 'Business Conduct in Late Colonial India: European Business in Kanpur 1900-1939,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 41, Issue No. 10, 11 Mar, 2006

New mills invested in new improved machinery, as they made inroads into new consumer products that were earlier imported. Thus the industry was well able to withstand foreign competition in the domestic market^[5].

One such product was hosiery, known earlier as the "knitting industry." The first hosiery factory was the Oriental Hosiery Limited, established in a Calcutta suburb in 1892. The factory was managed by British experts and utilised imported machinery. The Swadeshi Movement of 1905 gave an impetus to the industry, and many factories were established in different parts of the country. The industry received further impetus with the first World War when hosiery goods fetched very high prices. The result was an enormous boom in production and profits till 1926^[6]. At this juncture, Har Govind Misra returned from England as the only hosiery expert with formal training in England. He started the business of hosiery knitting in Kanpur and established the Misra Hosiery Mill, the flagship company of the family. By 1938, the Mill employed "over 300 operatives and posted an annual production of over 1,50,000 dozens of undervests and socks"^[7].

The hosiery mills also provided clothing for the army during World War II. Kanpur Textiles, JD Cotton Mills, Pakka Hosiery and Misra Hosiery became the four hosiery mills that operated from the city and catered to this demand. The result was that the hosiery industry in Kanpur emerged quite strongly before Independence^[8]. It is this success and help to the British war effort that got him the title of the "Most Excellent Order of the British Empire to Shri Har Govind Misra, Esq., Proprietor, Misra Hosiery Mills, Cawnpore, United Provinces," on June 12, 1941. Further, on Aug 18, 1945, under the authority of a Royal Warrant, the Viceroy of India conferred the honour of Knighthood, at The Viceroy's House, New Delhi, to Shri Har Govind Misra, Esq., O.B.E., Mill owner Cawnpore, United Provinces^[9].

It is little wonder that when in 1945, the Government of India set up a Panel of Experts to make recommendations for the post-war development of the Hosiery industry in India, it chose Har Gobind Misra as Chairman^[10]. In fact, the government report also praised the Chairman for "his constant interest in the work of the panel"^[11]. Unfortunately though in the post-independence period, the hosiery industry of UP was inherited by the Oswal group of Ludhiana, Punjab. As a small and medium scale industry, hosiery still is an important industry in Kanpur, with five hundred cotton hosiery units and over a thousand small knitting, processing and stitching units spread all across the city^[12].

Interestingly, another industry pioneered in India by Sir Har

⁵ Chitra Joshi, *Lost Worlds: Indian Labour and its Forgotten Histories* p. 49

⁶ *Handbook of Textile Industry*, 1948, p. 64-67.

⁷ Upper India Chamber of Commerce, p 17

⁸ 'H. G. Misra Hosiery Mills,' Upper India Chamber Of Commerce Cawnpur 1888-1938, p. 21

⁹ Dr. Rajaram Jaipuria, *Textile Legend Unravels*, Jaipuria Publishing House, 2007, p. 187.

¹⁰ Tulsi Ram Sharma, *Location of Industries in India*, Hind Kitab Limited, 1948

¹¹ Report on the Panel on Hosiery Industry, Government of India, Department of Industry and Supplies, 1946

¹² 'Kanpur hosiery industry caught in time warp,' *Business Standard*, October 7, 2015 https://www.business-standard.com/article/companies/kanpur-hosiery-industry-caught-in-time-warp-115100700862_1.html

Govind Misra was the parachute industry^[13]. Har Govind was interested in any new technology and innovation. Kanpur was (and remains) a hub of defence procurement. During the Second World War, the British Government asked him to attempt making a parachute. He was successful in his attempt and the parachute was sent for testing. Sir Misra was confident of his product and reassured the British brigadier who had come for the inspection, that no harm would come to it. His confidence in his product proved true. The experimental parachute was successful. The British Brigadier congratulated and thanked Sir Har Govind in a long telegram. However, despite getting government permission for the parachute factory Har Govind Misra opened a plastic factory on the same land. In this way, he also became the pioneer of the plastic industry in Kanpur, through the firm IRCO Plastics.

Sir Har Govind Misra had a keen interest in innovative technologies and used to travel to European countries every year to bring new technologies and experiments to the country. In the city of Kanpur, he was part of the Fourth All India Cotton Textile Conference, 1947. Among a galaxy of dignitaries from the city, he was chosen to preside over a session on technology and statistics^[14]. He was one of the founders of the UP Merchant Chambers, and later also served as its President. Along with this, he was also the founder of the Employers Association and a member of the Labour Inquiry Committee, Government of India. He was deeply interested in the industry-labour relationship and was also associated with the International Labour Association. In 1947, he was nominated to represent the Employers as one of the Employers' Advisers at the Preparatory Asian Regional Conference of the International Labour Organisation.

Sanskritist and Maithil Enthusiast

Sir Misra was a man of many talents and wide-ranging interests. He was a businessman who steered his family business legacy and an innovator who brought new technology to the county. Along with this, he was also interested in archaeology and history, especially in Indian knowledge traditions. In 1951, he became the first non-official Chairman of the Archeological Museum Mathura, and was instrumental in getting the museum's impressive collection catalogued^[15].

As noted, Sir Har Govind Misra had mastered Sanskrit literature, grammar and Vedanta. He was chosen as the Chair of the All-India Sanskrit Literature Conference for many years. He remained associated with the Banaras Hindu University and also served as the chairman of the convocation ceremony of the Sanskrit Department. He made a trip to Germany, to consult the Sanskrit collections held by the library in Munich.^[16] He was particularly fond of Jaidev's

Geet Govind, and corresponded with his scholars-friends in Sanskrit. His scholarship is evident from his foreword to the *Brahmasutra Shankar Bhashya* of Pandit Laxminath Jha of Kashi Hindu University which was written in high Sanskrit.^[17]

Besides being proficient in Sanskrit and English, he loved his native language Maithili.^[18] He maintained deep connections with the Uttar Pradesh Maithil Sahitya Sammelan. In 1954, when the All India Maithili Mahasabha was held in Agra, Maharaja Darbhanga Kameshwar Singh was the President and Sir Har Govind served as the chairman of the Welcome Committee. It was due to his efforts that the Maithili Book Fair was held in Azad Bhavan in Delhi and was inaugurated by Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. Like Nehru, Har Govind Misra was an intellectual confident in both Western modernity and Eastern tradition. Be it within India or in European countries, he did not leave his cultural responsibilities.

Public Figure

When the British Government prepared a formidable front against the Japanese in India, it was important to get the news and views across to the citizens of the country. Various regional newspapers also pitched in to help Indians in defending India without falling into the trap of Japanese. For this purpose, Sir Har Govind Misra brought out two newspapers, the *National Front* in English and the *Rashtriya Morcha* in Hindi from Kanpur. These papers also contained poems, stories, literary news and commentaries along with political news. Towering literary personalities like Pandit Vishwambhar Nath Sharma Kaushik, Acharya Gaya Prasad Shukla Sanehi and Pandit Girija Shankar Awasthi Shastri etc. were Har Gobind Misra's literary associates and regular contributors to the papers.

As any industrialist, Har Govind Misra had cordial relations with the British. However, as the freedom struggle progressed, he could not remain entirely aloof. There are reports that he was injured while protesting against the colonial government in Calcutta in 1933. He and other members of the Congress were at a meeting at the Esplanade tram shed when the police attacked them with batons and lathis. He was hurt near his eye and had to undergo eye surgery. But he did not make a police complaint. However, people knew of the attack because the newspaper *Amrit Bazar Patrika* reported it, and the government was questioned in the assembly. The Bihar Vidhan Mandal archives have many documents on topics where he questioned the government over various issues between 1937 to 1948.

After Independence, Har Gobind Misra served as a member

Misra "It was a small room, in which only a chair and a table were placed. Hitler welcomed him and signalled him to sit but he himself kept roaming like a caged lion. My grandfather did not sit. He asked him permission to see the Munich library, which he immediately gave in writing. There was no talk of politics, but he did say that you Indians are also of pure Aryan blood and your country is being ruled by Britain, isn't it cowardice? Doesn't your blood boil? And saying this he rang the bell to end the meeting." Oral Interview, Mrs M. Mishra with the author.

^[17] Brahmasutrasankarhashyam with Praksh and Vikas Commentaries of Pandit Lakshminath Jha, Hindu Vishwavidyalaya, Kashi, Suprabhatam Press, 1952

^[18] Ramakant Jha (ed), Uttar Pradeshia Maithili Sahitya Sammelan Kanpur: Sir Har Govind Misra Smriti Granth, 1967

¹³ Shri O.P. Chadha, 'Jab Shri Babuji ne Parachute Banaye,' in Ramakant Jha (ed), Uttar Pradeshia Maithili Sahitya Sammelan Kanpur: Sir Har Govind Misra Smriti Granth, 1967, p.85.

¹⁴ L.P. Tripathi and N.P. Arora, Kanpur Ka Itihas, vol 2, Kanpur Itihas Samiti, 2004 reprint, p. 34. See also Handbook of Textile Industry, 1948, p. xxix-xxxii

¹⁵ Annual Report on the Working of the Archeological Museum, Mathura, for the Year Ending March 31, 1951, Lucknow, Superintendent, Printing and Stationery, (U.P.) 1956.

^[16] Family lore believes he met the German Fuhrer Hitler on his trip to Munich. As he recounted to his family, Hitler had given only five minutes for the meeting. In the words of Mrs Meenu

of the Bihar Legislative Assembly. In the Assembly, his interventions show his concern about the worsening situation in the country in the aftermath of the Partition. He questioned the government of Sri Krishna Sinha about gun licenses being issued or rejected, and the effect of this on the law-and-order situation.

When the First Five Year Plan was announced, Sir H G Misra was of the opinion that they should be modest in design, rather than flashy. He wanted agriculture and industry to progress along with each other. He agreed with the vision of the plan that industrial progress depended upon the progress of agriculture.

Love of Cricket

A little-known fact about Sir Misra was his love for the game of Cricket, and the various endeavours he made to make Kanpur an important centre for the game. He held the post of President of UP Cricket Association and also managed the District Cricket Association and the Kanpur Sports Association. The UP Cricket Association (UPCA) was founded in the late 1920s, with support from Vijay Anand Gajapati Raj Bahadur, better known as the Maharajkumar of Vizianagram ^[19] and Sir Padampat Singhania, another leading industrialist of the city. Along with these, Har Govind Misra staged the first international cricket match at the celebrated Green Park stadium in the city.

Green Park has an interesting history. In the 19th century, the park was a riding place for a small force that was maintained at the military camp. During the British era, a horse riding track encircled the Park. Tall evergreen deciduous trees, dotted by milky eucalyptus at regular intervals and a canopy added to its allure. The Cawnpore Sports Club, which was an all-British club, used the Park for playing football and rugby. After the success of the Indian team at the Berlin Olympics, the park was also opened to Anglo Indians and the game of hockey was added to football and rugby. However, the English were more interested in the royal game of cricket and that became the most important game played at the Green Park. Before independence, Green Park was maintained by British industrialists associated with the British India Corporation.

The first Commonwealth Cricket team came to tour India in 1949-50. Sir Har Gobind Mishra was successful in his efforts to have the Park as a venue for Fifth match between India and Commonwealth II held in Kanpur in February 1951 ^[20]. When the Committee For 'Kanpur Test' was appointed, Sir Har Govind Misra was nominated as the Chairman of the Reception Committee. This Committee was directly responsible to the UP Cricket Association and was given the responsibility to make the arrangements and run the test match. The UPCA president Dr. Vijaya of Vizianagram nominated Misra as chairman of the Reception Committee. Other members included Sir Padampat Singhania, Sir Robert Menzies, Major Caldwell, Messrs K H Natraj, M. N. Kumzur, P. K. Mitra, G Mustaf, Stanley

Norohna and two members of the Kanpur Cricket Association, who were to be selected by Sir Har Govind Misra. He constructed the boundary wall of Green Park Stadium constructed, and the name of the ground was also changed to Vizzy-Misra Stadium. Later on, it was given the name of Modi Stadium, as a mark of respect to the Governor Mr. H P Modi. However this later name did not last long, and the ground went back to being called by its old name, Green Park. In 1952 another English team visited India and played a test at Green Park. This was the first official test played at Kanpur which lasted only 3 days as England won it by 8 wickets ^[21]. The family tradition of playing cricket was inherited by Har Gobind's younger son Ramakant Misra and nephew Arun Misra, who went on to play state level cricket and participated in the Ranji Trophy. ^[22] However, as in other aspects of his life, there is little public knowledge about Sir Misra's involvement with cricket.

Har Gobind Misra was committed to the city of Kanpur throughout his life. The family estate was a spacious bungalow in the Gwaltoli region in Kanpur. Misra Lodge of Tilak Nagar, Kanpur was a place for hosting important personalities visiting the city during his lifetime. With his demise on 6th May 1965, the city of Kanpur lost one of its truly pioneering personalities. His was a life that deserves to be celebrated in the annals of the city.

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¹⁹ Maharaja Vizianagram was captain of the Indian cricket team in the 1930s and a cricket commentator in the 1960s. He is credited with furthering the development of cricket in Andhra and Uttar Pradesh.

²⁰ K. G. Natraj, 'Sir H. G. as a Sports Patron,' in Ramakant Jha (ed), Uttar Pradeshia Maithili Sahitya Sammelan Kanpur: Sir Har Govind Misra Smriti Granth, 1967, p. 14-15.

²¹ 'Where the grass is green,' Times of India, October 17, 2004, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/where-the-grass-is-green-/articleshow/925916.cms?from=mdr>

²² Rama Misra played in the 1954 Ranji Trophy match between UP and MP. He had a long stint as a Chairman Selection Committee of UPCA. Arun Misra, played his first-class cricket between 1955-1966. Cf. i, Ashok Bambi, A History of U.P.'s First Class Cricketers, 2021.

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