



## THE PIONEERING ROLE OF ODIA WOMEN IN THE FREEDOM MOVEMENT

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### **Abstract:**

*Mahatma Gandhi once said “As long as women of India do not take part in public life, there can be no salvation for the country. As long as women do not come to public life and purify, we are not likely to attain Swaraj, even if we did, it would have no use for that kind of Swaraj to which women have not made their full contribution”.*

### **KEY WORDS:**

Babasaheb Ambedkar , social reformation movement , philosophical framework.

### **INTRODUCTION-**

The complete history of the freedom movement is replete with the saga of heroism, sacrifice and political sagacity of great men and women of the country.<sup>1</sup> This struggle which gained impetus and momentum in the early twentieth century, threw up stalwarts like Mahatma Gandhi, Lala Lajpat Rai, Motilal Nehru, Abul Kalam Azad, C. Rajagopalachari, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Jawaharlal Nehru and Subash Chander Bose. Their number and stature often gives us an incorrect impression that it was only a man’s movement. But it is not so. Many prominent women played a leading and important role in the freedom movement of India.<sup>2</sup> In this context, the role of women in Odisha can’t be totally ignored. Though Odisha is considered as a conservative society, the women took very active role in the annals of national liberation struggle against the British Raj with high sense of emancipation and participation.<sup>3</sup> Their passionate patriotism, exalted courage, gifted heroism, organizational abilities and capacity of raising the movement are written in golden letters archives of India’s freedom movement. They fought with true spirit and unafraid courage and faced various tortures, exploitations, and hardships to earn us freedom. When most of the men freedom fighters were in prison the women came forward and took charge of the struggle. Moreover in this movement not only elite women but women from lower strata, caste and creed were also participated in large numbers<sup>4</sup>.

The women of Odisha who had played very important role in the freedom movement of India were stalwarts like Rama Devi, Sarala Devi, Malati Choudhury<sup>5</sup>. Other women's of Odisha from the undivided Balasore, Cuttack, Ganjam, Koraput, Puri and Sampulpur district were Kokila Devi, Nirmala Devi, Kshetramani Devi, Sulochana Devi, Hemalata Devi, Kuntala Kumari Sabat, Sashibala Kanungo, Haramani Kanungo, Sobhabati Panda, Kundalata Devi, Haramani Bisoi, Rasamani Devi, Chitrbhanu Devi, Khara Parbati, Radhamani Devi, Nishamani Devi, Bimala Devi, Pravabati Devi, Parbati Giri, Haramani Devi etc participated in the freedom movement of India<sup>6</sup>. On the other hand, the ordinary woman like *Pari Bewa* also faced the police bullet at *Eram* in the struggle for freedom against the British Raj.

### Women and Non-Cooperation Movement:

The political participation of women in Odisha began with the visit of Gandhiji to Odisha in 1921. Gandhi reached Cuttack on 23 March and made a direct appeal to Odia women to join in the Non- Cooperation Movement. The ladies like Rama Devi, Sarala Devi, Sarijini Devi, Haimabati Devi and many others attended the meeting. It was the first political conference of Odia Women. In this meeting, Gandhiji discussed about the causes of backwardness and low status of women in the society. His speech had so much inspired the Odia women present there that in response to his appeal many of them had donated their golden ornaments to the *Tilak Swaraj* Fund for freedom struggle.<sup>7</sup> Being influenced by his speech many Odia women had determined to join the National Movement. One of them was Rama Devi, the wife of Gopabandhu Choudhury. Rama Devi had declared her decision to join the freedom movement and had handed over all her golden ornaments to the Mahatma for the National Fund. Surprisingly, the contribution of women to the *Tilak Swaraj* Fund was highest in the country. Further women also received training in preparing khadi. On 27th March 1921 Gandhiji addressed another women's gathering at Puri.<sup>8</sup> On his arrival in Puri, he was greeted by a large crowd of men and women amidst the sounds of conch-shells and of *Hulahuli* by women. The non-cooperation movement became widespread in Odisha in 1921. Picketing before the shops selling foreign clothes was mainly done by women. The use of *Charakha* also became very popular with women. Picketing before the foreign cloth shops and liquor shops formed another part of the movement where women participated and made it successful.<sup>9</sup> These women leaders mainly participated in the positive programme of *Charakha and Khadi*, although no women leader from Odisha was jailed but Sarala Devi took a very active part in this movement. Kuntala Kumari Sabat, a revolutionary poet per excellence challenged the British hegemony and authority through her revolutionary poetic words. Her poems like, *Anjali*, *Archana*, *Awahan* and *Sphulinga* were powerful in arousing national consciousness and combating injustice, inequality and exploitation. The writings of Kuntala Kumari inflamed nationalism among the women of Odisha<sup>10</sup>.

*Oh you men, if you do not rise up this time  
We will march forward clad in warrior's dress  
We, women, coming out of the seclusion,  
Will take up the sword of non-cooperation  
In the thick of fight of peaceful Satyagraha  
Will march in procession batch by batch  
What though our heads are hung on the gallows  
We fear not the funeral pyre or fire pit.*

*To-day the commander has called  
Rise ye, the heroic sons of India.  
Into this unique battlefield of non-cooperation  
Enter ye one by one girding up your loins.  
Ye all the famous heroes of India  
Come forward at the call of the Commander.  
Gandhi, the greatest Yogi, is your leader  
ye men and women rise up thinking of Siva.  
No use there is of guns and cannon in this  
The only weapon is your life.  
The drops of your blood are shots and powder  
Come ye armed with this weapon  
Your commander has called  
Come who will first offer his life  
Come together ye Hindus, Mussalmans.  
Sikhs, Parsis, Buddhists, Jews and Christians.  
Your home is in Hindustan  
Insult to it is insult to you<sup>11</sup>.*

Thus, Odia women remained at the forefront of Non-Cooperation Movement till such time it was withdrawn by Gandhiji as a protest against Chauri Chaura incident. So, the visit of Gandhiji to Odisha opened the door for women to get integrated to the national liberation struggle.

#### **Women and Civil Disobedience Movement:**

The second phase of national movement started with the violation of *Purna Swaraj* in December 1929 in the Lahore Session of Indian National Congress. To achieve the goal Gandhiji declared Civil Disobedience in the shape of Salt Satyagraha. The role and participation of Odia Women in the Civil Disobedience movement (1930) was also quite remarkable. Unlike *Dandi*, *Inchudi* in Balasore coast was finally selected as the place for breaking the salt act of British Government. Gopabandhu Choudhury led the first batch of Satyagrahis from Cuttack on 6th April 1930 and the second batch on 9th April morning. The Satyagrahis were supported by women. An important meeting of women was held in the house of Gopandhu Choudhury and in this meeting Sarojini Choudhury appealed to join this movement. At the end of the meeting Rama Devi and Malati Choudhury offered sandal wood paste and decorated all the Satyagrahis. One of them gave her gold bangles which were auctioned for the reason. The arrival of Rama Devi with Malati Devi and Krishnabala Sen at *Inchudi* galvanised the Salt Satyagraha and made it more effective. Like men, the women leaders were also proceeded to Balasore to break the salt law. On 18th April Rama Devi and Malati Devi arrived at Balasore and a meeting of women was held there. In this meeting Rama Devi addressed the women and made them conscious about their duties and responsibilities in the society. Appeal was also made to boycott the foreign goods<sup>12</sup>.

Meanwhile besides *Inchudi* other villages like Srijang, Rasalpur, Bardhanpur, Bhimpur, Tundra, Kuanrpur, Ratai, Boita, Parikhi, Kherang, Mandari etc. became centres for manufacturing salt. Rama Devi after her arrival at *Inchudi* went to *Srijang* and persuaded the ladies of *Srijang* to come forward to manufacture salt. The local ladies agreed to the proposal. Around one thousand five hundred women gathered in that area to

see this novel endeavour. Sixty women came with Rama Devi to take salt-soil and accomplished the task. The activity of Rama Devi gave moral boosting to the ladies of that locality. The Satyagrahis adopted a novel method at Balasore to manufacture salt. The ladies manufactured salt with other Satyagrahis. A Satyagraha Committee was formed in Sambalpur and four batches of women Satyagrahis went to different parts of coastal Odisha to help the Salt-Satyagrahis. Just after this Civil Disobedience Movement Rama Devi, Malati Devi, Kokila Devi along with Surendra Patnaik came to *Srijang* village of Balasore district to boost up the morale of the people of that area in the abolition of *Choukidari tax*. Rama Devi also influenced *Pata Mahadei of Kujang* to organise Congress activities. She inspired women to stage demonstrations against foreign clothes and organised picketing before liquor shops. On 28th May at *Eram* a large number men and women proceeded to collect salt. Among them were as many as fifty women of village *Suagaon*. So many examples are there in which women of Odisha participated in the freedom movement and courted imprisonment and harassment.

In the constructive programme of Gandhiji the women volunteers also showed their interest. From 1934 to 1942 the women workers remained busy in organisational work. Abolition of *Untouchability*, *Harijan Upliftment*, and Popularization of *Khadi* were given prime importance. The historic '*Padayatra*' of Mahatma Gandhi in Odisha began on May 1934. The responsibility for its arrangements largely rested with the women. Gandhiji advised the women to fight against the evils of liquor, boycott of foreign cloth and untouchability. Rama Devi followed the instruction of Gandhiji and along with her husband she established an Ashram at Bari. Gandhiji named it as '*Sevagarh*'. It undertook constructive work such as promotion of Khadi, service to Harijans, basic education, prohibition adult education, giving medicine to sick and eradication of untouchability and the like. Parbati Giri and Pravabati Devi were taken to this '*Sevagarh*' by Jambubati Devi and Bhagirathi Patnaik of Barapali. The inmates of the Ashram like Rama Devi, Gcdabari Devi, Sushila Devi, Tulsi Devi, Annapurna Devi, Mangal Sengupta welcomed them and made them thorough in Gandhian programme. Gandhiji created '*Kasturba National Memorial Trust*' and each state sent one representative to manage it. Rama Devi represented Odisha<sup>13</sup>.

### **Women and Quit India Movement:**

The political activities of the Odia women reached at its apex during the period of Quit India Movement. Many Congress workers including Malati Choudhury represented Odisha in this Movement. The role of women from Odisha in the Quit India movement is another liberation, which was gathering great momentum during the period of freedom struggle. Women in large numbers courted imprisonment in consequence of their active participation in Quit India Movement. After the failure of the Cripps Mission, Quit India Resolution was passed by the All India Congress Committee in Bombay. On 8th August 1942, Indian National Congress held its session at *Gwalior Tank Field* in Bombay. It was attended by two hundred fifty representatives from all the States. Malati Choudhury was one among the five representatives from Odisha. They returned with Gandhiji's message that "Our Country is independent from today, follow the peaceful method, paralyse the Government. You yourself become a leader. This is the struggle. In it there is no compromise." While spreading this "*Do or Die*", message among the people in Odisha, twenty four Congress leaders including the gallant Rama Devi were arrested who exercised effective control over the public in the State. The Ashram at Bari was declared illegal by the British Government. She had to undergo nearly two years of imprisonment

in Cuttack jail. Malati Choudhury along with Surendra Nath Dwivedi escaped the police dragnet and went into hiding in order to keep up the movement active and energetic.<sup>14</sup> On 8th August 1942 at Cuttack and some other places in Odisha, twenty four leaders including Rama Devi were arrested. Malati Choudhury with much difficulty arrived at Cuttack on 12th August 1942 and laid the foundation of August Revolution in Odisha. On account of the revolutionary activities and tireless efforts of women the August Revolution gathered momentum. Malati Choudhury took an outstanding role in the underground activities in the 1942 Revolution. As an underground leader she guided the progress of the Movement at different parts of Odisha. She remained a leading woman in the movement. The British Government followed the policy of suppression by arresting many Congress workers including Rama Devi, Pravabati Devi and Parbati Giri. *Kaipadar* firing took place the gathering of the people who wanted to listen the fiery speech of Annapurna Maharana. The women workers of Odisha along with their male counterparts also dared arrests, convictions, lathi charge, imposition of fines, beating etc. Thus, women like Malati Choudhury, Rama Devi, Sarala Devi, Annapurna Devi, Mangala Devi, Suryamani Devi, Guna Manjari Devi, Champa Devi, Pravabati Devi, Sita Devi, Laxmi Bai and many others contributed immensely in making the Quit India Movement a grand success.

Besides the active involvement in the freedom movement, the women writers also stimulated the common women through their writings to carry forward the freedom movement in Odisha. Sarala Devi wrote poems with a view to create political, social and national awareness among the people of Odisha. In her essays like '*Utkalare Nari Samasya*', '*Nari Jagat*', '*Nari Dabi*' she wrote for the upliftment of women. Among other women writers of Odisha, Sita Devi Khandanga wrote a play named *Mandira Prabesha* which was based on the Harijan Movement of Gandhiji<sup>15</sup>.

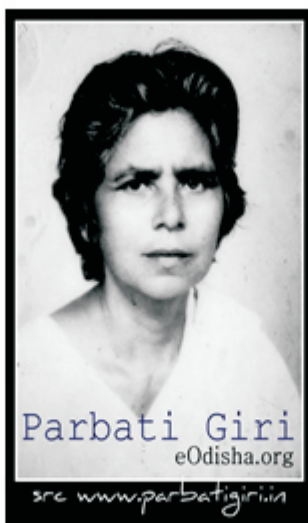
On the whole, it is heartwarming to note that women played a very noteworthy role in the freedom movement of Odisha. By their firm work, support to their male counterparts and carrying out the Gandhian constructive programme, they contributed a lot to make the freedom movement of Odisha a marvelous success. Their role in the freedom movement was in fact, very vital and can never be forgotten and totally brushed aside. They participated in all aspects and phases of the nationalist movements including the constructive programme. Their wonderful saga full of selfless sacrifice will encourage the posterity for all times to come.



**Mahatma Gandhi**



**Kuntala Kumari Sabat**



**Parbati Giri**



**Ramadevi Choudhuri**



**Annapurna Devi**



**Malati Choudhuri**



**Prabhabati Devi**

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