



Arnapurna Devi

The women of Orissa played a significant role in all phases of national movement. They had made momentous contribution to the freedom struggle by demonstrating their indomitable courage and unflinching patriotism. But Gandhiji was the chief architect of women's participation in the National Movement. Because he, for the first time, involved women in the freedom struggle which gave a new dimension to the movement.

During pre-Gandhian era, barring a few ladies of royal, aristocratic and political families, Oriya women in general were not taking part in politics. But Gandhiji's leadership aroused self-reliance and self-confidence amongst them and they came out of their seclusion to join the



Malati Choudhury

Gandhiji visited Orissa, for the first time, on 23rd March 1921. Before addressing a public meeting in Cuttack City on that day, he spoke to a small gathering of

movement despite opposition from the family. This mass participation of women in the freedom struggle provided renewed impetus and vigour to the movement.

Oriya Women in National Movement

Prabhukalyan Mohapatra

Oriya women at Vinod Vihari. That was the first public meeting Oriya women had ever attended and that was also the first occasion where a great political leader of Gandhiji's stature addressed them separately. Never before Oriya women had this kind of experience nor had they been given so much importance by any other leader earlier.



Kuntala Kumari Sabat

The Gaya session of Indian National Congress was held in 1922. Prominent Oriya women luminaries like Rama Devi (wife of Gopabandhu Choudhury who resigned from the post of deputy magistrate to dedicate himself to the nationalist movement), Hiramani Devi (mother of Nirajan Pattanaik, the prominent Congress leader of Ganjam district) attended the same. Likewise, Calcutta session of National Congress in December 1928 was represented by Rama Devi, Sarala Devi (wife of Bhagirathi Mohapatra, the first Secretary of Utkal Pradesh Congress Committee), Sarojini Choudhury (daughter of Fakir Mohan Senapati and wife of Munsif Gagan Bihari Choudhury), Janhavi Devi and Kokila Devi

(daughter of Choudhury Bhagabat Prasad Mohapatra, M.L.C., Bhadrak and sister of Kantakavi Lakshmikanta Mohapatra) and Rasamani Devi. On the other hand, Karachi Congress held in March 1931, was attended by fourteen women delegates from Orissa. Gandhi was extremely pleased to see such an appreciable number of women delegates from Orissa.

The Salt Satyagraha marked the beginning of a true political career for Oriya women, bringing into lime-light a large number of lady luminaries.



Rama Devi

Inchudi of Balasore district and Kujanga of Jagatsinghpur district were the two important centre of salt satyagraha when women played a vital role. Women leaders like Rama Devi, Sarala Devi, Malati Devi (wife of former Chief Minister Nabakrushna Choudhury), Janhavi Devi, Kokila Devi, Kiranbala Sen, Bhagyabati Pata Mahadei (Rani of Kujang), Sarojini Choudhury, Laxmi Devi, Arnapurna Devi, Binapani Devi, Sunamani Devi, Chandramani Devi, Subhadra Mahatab, Maina Devi, Prafulla Kumari Devi etc. made immense effort for the active participation of women in the Satyagraha. They organised women's gatherings and enlightened them about various progressness of the movement. The first batch of women satyagrahi led by Rama Devi, Malati Devi, Kironbala Sen joined Inchudi Satyagraha on 20th April 1930. Thousands of women followed them in a long procession defying government law. The women leaders persuaded the rural women folk to break the salt law. The

response was so overwhelming that, illiterate women of the lower strata of society came out of their static indoor life resisting the opposition of the family. Hence the mass participation of women in the freedom struggle provided a new dimension to the movement. A large number of women collected salt in places like Kasaba, Basta, Bhadrak, Astaranga, Marichpur, Rusulpur, Laxmipur, Pallibondha, Ganjam, Humma etc. More than fifteen hundred women took part in the salt satyagraha at Inchudi on 20th April 1930 under the leadership of Rama Devi. Towards the middle of May 1930, more than five hundred women joined the Salt Satyagraha of Kujang at the call of Bhagyabati Pata Mahadei (Rani of Kujanga), Rama Devi and others.

While Rama Devi, Malati Devi, Kiranbala Sen, Binapani Devi, Sarojini Choudhury, Arnapurna Devi mostly worked for the movement in Cuttack district, Janhavi Devi, Kokila Devi, Subhadra Mahatab (wife of former Chief Minister H.K. Mahatab) mobilised women for the civil disobedience movement in Balasore district. In 1931 Janhavi Devi and Kokila Devi organised a well-attended meeting of women at Balasore over which nationalist poetess Dr. Kuntala Kumari Sabat presided. Sarala Devi strenuously worked in Ganjam district for mobilising both men and women for the



Pravabati Devi

Satyagraha. Besides, Sunamani Devi (Krupasindhu Hota's younger brother's wife), who spent some months in Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram, actively mobilised women for the civil disobedience movement in Puri district. Moreover, Malati Devi played a conspicuous role

in boycott and bonfires of foreign clothes. In Sambalpur district, Jambubati Devi, wife of noted freedom fighter Bhagirathi Pattanaik led a procession during Quit India Movement despite her illness. In addition to breaking salt law women were also engaged in delivering fiery speeches, felicitating the law-breakers, criticising the government, spinning cotton, anti-untouchability work etc. during different phases of movement.

Sarala Devi had the distinction of being the first lady of Orissa to court imprisonment participating in the National Movement. In the first phase of civil disobedience movement six ladies including Sarala Devi, Rama Devi, Malati Devi, Chandramani Devi, Sunamani Devi and an old lady of Balasore district were jailed. However, during Quit India Movement more than twenty Oriya women were imprisoned.

Harijan movement began towards the end of 1932. Rama Devi played a pioneering role in the Harijan movement and about fifteen ladies carried out the anti-untouchability work under her leadership. During this phase Rama Devi realised that as mother, woman has a great role to play in the society and awakening of the country was impossible without arousing the maternal force. Rama Devi along with eleven ladies took part in Gandhiji's Harijan Padayatra which began from Puri on 9th May 1934. Gandhiji highly appreciated the activities of the Women Padayatris and said, "I have marvelled at the manner in which Smt. Rama Devi and her girls have discharged themselves during the tour. These ladies have not known what fatigue is. There was a naturalness about all they did which show that they have been trained to bear hardship life simply. As soon as the party reached its

destination, these ladies allowed themselves no rest. They immediately went out among the Harijans fearlessly with great freedom. I have had the privilege of mixing with tens and thousands of Indian women. But nowhere I have seen anything quite like what Smt. Rama Devi and her little band have been found to do so gracefully and so naturally."

The sense of commitment among Oriya women was so strong that they were not scared or discouraged by fines, summons, trials, arrests, imprisonment and atrocities by British police in different programmes of the movement. About twenty Oriya women undertook constructive work in the rural area responding to Gandhiji's "Back to the villages" programme. Rama Devi took up rural reconstruction work at Bari, Malati Devi carried on Congress socialist movement at Baji Rout Hostel of Dhenkanal. Sarala Devi became a member of first Orissa Legislative Assembly from 1937-44. A Laxmibai who was also elected to this assembly from Berhampur women constituency became the first lady Deputy Speaker of the House. While Malati Devi was elected to constituent Assembly of India in 1946, after independence Rama Devi, Malati Devi, Sunamani Devi, Arnapurna Devi (Moharana) etc. joined Sarvodaya movement started by Binoba Bhave. Oriya women, by and large, exhibited greater determination and courage during different phases of freedom struggle as expected by Gandhiji.

Writer is a Bhubaneswar based freelance Journalist who lives in Qr. No.-VR-3/2, Unit-3, Behind R.B.I., Bhubaneswar-751001.