

Women's Role in the Freedom Movement in South Orissa

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It is a well known fact that South Orissa played a significant role in the freedom movement of India. People belonging to the cross section of the society participated in the movement extending their whole-hearted support to the national issue. In this movement the services, sufferings and sacrifices rendered by women in particular forms an interesting and important study of history.

During the first quarter of the 20th century after the visit of Mahatma Gandhi to Orissa in 1921 a great awakening took place among the women in Orissa. Their entry into politics after 1921 is one of the most amazing events of the contemporary Orissa history. In this struggle for freedom unmindful of all hardships they faced the police atrocities and went to jails willingly. In their participation they showed not only unusual courage but also wonderful organizing capacity. Moreover in this struggle not only elite women but women

from lower strata, caste and creed also participated in large numbers.

Since Gandhi's first visit to Orissa in March, 1921 on the event of the non-cooperation movement there was great resurgence among the local women. The programme of non-cooperation of Gandhi had negative and positive aspects. The negative aspect of the programme consisted of boycott of British goods, legislative councils, offices, educational institutions.¹ The positive aspect included the promotion of Swadeshi, removal of untouchability, prohibition, national education etc. When the movement was launched in Orissa, a very few women participated mainly in the programme of Charkha and Khadi. On that occasion in Berhampur several brave women of Giri family including the mother of V.V. Giri, Subhadrama played their selfless role in the non-

cooperation movement, supporting the active male members.²

Meantime, the birth and growth of a number of women's associations and organization in Orissa created a favourable atmosphere for women's general awakening and emancipation.³ In 1924, the first session of Utkal Women's Conference was organized at Berhampur which was the first of its kind in the initiative of the women of South Orissa. The conference was attended by women belonging to different class, caste and sect. The occasion created great excitement among the women.⁴ Thereafter the Oriya women continued to organize many public gatherings and conferences.

The visit of Utkal Bharati Kuntala Kumari Sabat, the celebrated Oriya poetess, in 1926 to Berhampur and different other adjoining areas provided further impetus to the women on South Orissa. She addressed separately women's gatherings at Surala and Berhampur narrating them the greatness of their ancient culture and tradition including the story of Karubaki.⁵ Thus her visit was a great event as it had a great impact on the women of South Orissa. It gave a new fillip

and inspiration to women's liberation movement.

In 1927 during the second visit to Orissa, Gandhiji addressed a mammoth gathering at the Barracks ground, Berhampur, inspiring the people to reinvigorate their efforts for the freedom of the country by joining the Civil Disobedience Movement. This address in fact created a great stir among the women to go ahead on the path of freedom struggle braving all the obstacles and hurdles that they may confront.

There is no denying that the freedom movement became a mass movement due to the active participation of women. The non-violent peaceful Satyagraha movement of Gandhi attracted women of South Orissa as elsewhere in India from the beginning.

In the district of Ganjam under the auspices of the UPCC a batch of fifteen Telugu Satyagrahis from Berhampur led by Ramalingam Pantulu, Chairman, Berhampur Municipality started on 20th April 1930 to manufacture salt at Kotabambali. Some women volunteers from Parlakhemundi and Chicacole joined with them. Smt. P. Tamma and Suryamma were the main

women leaders in that team.⁶ The other prominent women Satyagrahis were A. Laxmi Bai, T. Arahalu. Baralaxmi and her two daughters. During the time of Salt Satyagraha Smt. J.V. Narayanna led massive women's processions singing patriotic songs and addressed public meetings against the Government. As a result she was arrested along with the above mentioned ladies.

During the time of the Civil Disobedience Movement the Salt Satyagraha in Ganjam took the shape of a mass upsurge due to the effective leadership of Niranjana Pattnaik and Smt. Malati Devi, Sarala Devi and Kishorimoni Devi (the wife of Niranjana Pattnaik) who did extensive tours to the interiors of the district enrolling volunteers and collecting money for the Congress fund.⁷ They in fact drilled the ideals of Satyagraha into the minds of the rural mass, particularly among the women folk of Ganjam.⁸

In the mass Civil Disobedience Movement organized at Ganjam in May 1930 at least one thousand women participated. Among them most prominent were Kundalata Devi and Kishorimoni Devi who were arrested and imprisoned for disobeying civil law, Kundalata

Devi helped Sarala Devi by donating all her golden ornaments at Gobra meeting for the national cause. She moved to different places of Ganjam with Sobhabati Panda and Purnabasi Devi to popularize the Congress ideals.¹¹ Similarly Kishorimoni Devi set up 'Pragati Ashram' at Berhampur for the purpose of providing training and orientation to the young Satyagrahis. She led Satyagraha processions and addressed public meetings and rallies in support of the universal demand for national independence. She played a significant role in spreading the message of the freedom movement all over Orissa.

In the middle of June 1930 some women Satyagrahis threatened to picket liquor shops in Berhampur town under the leadership of Smt. J.V. Narayanna. But when she was arrested the proposed women's picketing was stopped time being. But on 20th June a procession consisting of volunteers and women went round the town singing patriotic songs and a meeting was held. Thereafter another women's procession was taken around the town with Giri's mother Subhadramma, her daughter-in-law Saraswati, and two daughters, Laxmi Bai

and Sarajoni at its forefront to prohibit the sale of toddy in the town. All of them were arrested for joining the Civil Disobedience Movement. This type of involvement and participation of women in the freedom movement in South Orissa was a unique phenomenon.

When the call for individual Satyagraha by Gandhiji was given in 1940, women gave a quick response. The Provincial Committee nominated 48 persons for offering Satyagraha in the first batch. Very few women were allowed to participate in the individual Satyagraha because during this period the Pradesh Congress Committee opened four departments namely Propaganda, Harijan, Minorities and Charkha. When these departments started the Oriya women completely devoted themselves to this work. However, for individual Satyagraha among the four women, Laxmi Bai and Champa Devi from South Orissa were chosen by Gandhiji. P. Tamma also joined the individual Satyagraha and courted arrest.¹²

The Quit India Movement of 1942 provided women with another

opportunity to prove their ability in organizing mass political movements.

In Ganjam, the Quit India Movement took the usual form of burning and destruction of Government offices. Though Berhampur was the centre of activity in the district, yet the movement spread to remote corners. In the 1942 movement P. Tamma took an active part in Paralakhemundi and was imprisoned for two years and six months. Suryamma joined her hands with her husband during the hartal at Berhampur and was imprisoned in the Berhampur jail.¹⁴ Champa Devi was sentenced to six months rigorous imprisonment in the Bhanjanagar Sub-jail for picketing and organizing hartals in different places. Sobhabati Panda (from Digapahandi) who had received her training from Alaka Ashram was also put behind the bar during the time of Quit India Movement in South Orissa.

During this time when the women activists were busy in launching the Quit India Movement and courting imprisonment, the emergence of some women litterateurs was important. Among those ladies the name of Sita Devi Khadanga is worth mentioning. At that time, she produced a

good number of provocative books which were meant to infuse nationalistic spirit among the masses. She mainly wrote on the theme of liberation propagating the message of Gandhi. Her important contributions in the field of Oriya literature are Nari, Posyaputra, Naistik, Nispatti, Prachinpanth'.¹⁵

In the Koraput district of South Orissa even the innocent hill tribes who had no idea of politics also joined the Quit India Movement. Among the tribals Bauri Sahu and his daughter Sani Sahu played an important role at Kajendni. Santi moved from place to place and gave important news to the revolutionaries secretly.¹⁶ At that time in Koraput the innocent tribal people were oppressed, beaten mercilessly and tortured in many ways by the police and other civil officials.¹⁷ Therefore, some brave women along with some male leaders rose to the occasion and took arms to fight against the British, the name of some brave women worth mentioning are Smt. Mesti Kastani, Subarna, Satank, Aryati, Kumari Jhara, Smt. Jamuna. Smt. Jani, Kumari Tandra and Kuari Draupadi. These ladies worked for the freedom of the country and

dedicated their lives for the Congress movement.¹⁸

It is heartening to note here in this context that in the tribal areas of Ganjam and Koraput women had first raised their voice for freedom and had started a standard of rebellion against the foreign Government as early as the first part of the 19th century i.e., much before the Congress launched the freedom movement in India. The chief of the Gumma division of the Parlakhemundi region (Ganjam district) Krishna Chandra Bisoyee and his wife Hiramani Bisoyee carried on war against the British for long 20 years. When Krishna Chandra died a martyr's death fighting against the British, the war was continued by his brave and intelligent wife Hiramani. She led the guerrilla war of another 10 years with greater determination. The Government had to mobilize all their resources to capture her. Though after a prolonged fight she lost her war, yet she won an honoured place in the annals of freedom history.¹⁹

Similarly, Bangara Devi, the Koya Princess of Malkangiri, in the Koraput district fought with the British troops in 1860. Khar Parvati, a Bonda woman in the same

district carried on guerrilla warfare against the British. She kept the Government in constant trouble and tension for sometime. But along with her son she was captured and killed by the English troops in 1916.²⁰

At the direction of Mahatma Gandhi the women of South Orissa not only participated in political activities and movements but also remained deeply involved in the constructive programme. Such works included eradication of untouchability, prohibition, social reforms, promotion of Khadi etc. The group of women who dedicated themselves to the constructive work in South Orissa were A. Laxmi Bai, Champa Devi, Kishorimani Devi etc. These ladies received preliminary training and education for constructive works in the Alaka Ashram and in Hindustan Seva Ashram.

The Harijan movement of Gandhian constructive programme became very widespread and popular in South Orissa under the leadership of Champa Devi and Jayamangala Rath. Jayamangala Rath married a Harijan lady, who later on became active worker of Patitapaban Sangh. Champa Devi at her Ashram of Ichapur kept a number of Harijan ladies.

Through Vedic way of offering Mantra and Homa they were made touchables. She stayed there with Harijans and took care of them. She read Ramayana and Mahabharata and did Samkirtan with them at her residence.²¹

The peasant movement also made rapid progress in Ganjam and the adjoining areas under the leadership of Laxmi Bai (MLA) and Hemalata Samanta and T. Arahulu. They established contacts with the Ganjam ryots and toured different areas, addressed big gatherings of ryots and collected lady members for the movement. Gradually a large number joined the movement and offered their membership. They included Uma Devi, Ahalya Devi, Manakya Dei, Bishnu Priya Devi, Sumana Devi, T Annapurna, Tarini Dei. Sulakhya Devi, Padmavati Devi, Sita Devi and V. Kumudini Devi.²²

Women played an important role not only in improving the condition of Harijans or peasants, but also made their best efforts for the uplift of their own community. For the all round development of women they set up several socio-cultural and educational institutes and societies at different places. One such

association was the Utkal Women's Conference organized by the women of South Orissa. As has already been mentioned a couple of ladies including Rasamani Devi and Swarnalata Devi met at Swaraj Ashram, Berhampur and founded the Utkal Women's Conference which held its first session on 30th June 1924,²³ presided over by Acharya Prafulla Chandra Ray of Bengal. The main aim of the conference was to discuss and deal with various problems related to women.

Annapurna Devi moved from place to place and organized meetings for women's liberation. She organized a number of primary schools in villages for the development of female education.²⁴ She established at Nari Sadan Berhampur with the help of Parsuram Patro.²⁵

On the whole, it is gratifying to note that women played a very significant role in the freedom movement of South Orissa. They participated in all aspects and phases of the

nationalist movement including the constructive programme.

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