

Rama Devi, the Mother of the Masses

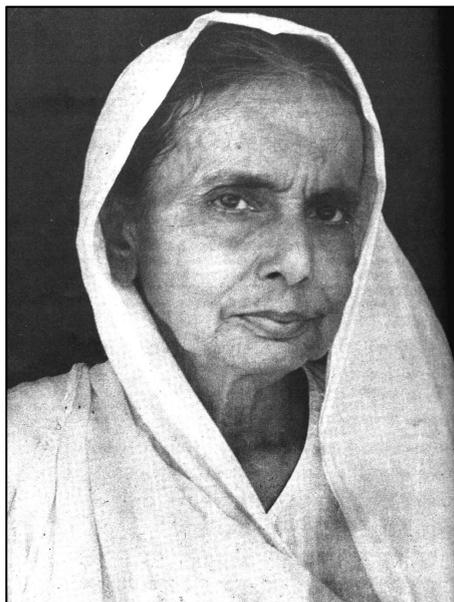
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When the epoch-making call of Swaraj under the charismatic leadership of Gandhiji rent the air of India, thousands of women-educated and uneducated, urban and rural came out of their seclusion to shape the destiny of the nation. Ramadevi Choudhury emerged as a pioneer among the women freedom fighters and social reformers who dominated the socio-political firmament of Orissa for more than half a century.

Rama Devi was born to Gopal Ballav Das and Basanta Kumari Devi on 3rd December 1899 at Satyabhamapur of Cuttack district. During her childhood, she was profoundly inspired by her uncle's (Madhusudan Das) spirit of nationalism and Sri Aurobindo's philosophy. She married Gopobandhu Choudhury, a Deputy Magistrate, the office which he resigned in 1921 to join the freedom movement.

It was on 23 March 1921 that Rama Devi had the privilege to attend a meeting of forty women which was held inside the Binod Vihari

Temple at Cuttack. Mahatma Gandhi addressed it. His non-violent programmes brought about a dramatic change in the static life of Oriya women, marking the beginning of political awakening and unrest among them. It is to be recorded here that for the first time Oriya women attended a public meeting and it was also the first occasion when a great political leader of Gandhi's stature addressed them in a separate meeting. Rama Devi took note of appreciative look in Gandhi's eye when she presented a bundle of hand-spun thread while other women were presenting gold ornaments and money. After this meeting her life took a new turn as she decided to follow the foot-steps of Gandhiji and his ideals and infact later, she made it the motto of her life.



Rama Devi attended the Gaya session of Indian National Congress in 1922 along with ladies of similar faculty like Hiramani Devi, Sarala Devi & Padmabati Devi and remained directly in touch with the activities of the Congress. She also attended the Calcutta session of I.N.C. held in

December, 1928 alongwith Sarala Devi, Sarojini Choudhury, Janhavi Devi, Kokila Devi and Rasamani Devi.

The historic Salt Satyagraha of Mahatma Gandhi involved hundreds of women activists who came out from the seclusion of their houses to join the Congress demonstrations for the manufacture of salt. A few weeks after the Dandi March began, Gandhiji said “The impatience of some sisters to join the good fight is to me a healthy sign. In this non-violent warfare, their contribution should be much greater than men’s. To call women, the weaker sex is a libel. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man’s superior. The effect was ‘miraculous’. The awakening of women redoubled the energy and activities of the Satyagrahis. As soon as the Satyagraha started at Inchudi, Rama Devi accompanied by Malati Devi, Annapurna Devi, Kiran Bala Sen reached the Satyagraha camp at Balasore and violated the salt law. Spontaneous participation of women in great numbers in the Salt Satyagraha was a significant phenomenon. It infused a new life and luster to the mass upsurge. To involve women in large number and ensure their active participation, the women leaders went from house to house inspiring them to break the salt laws. They went Srijang and persuaded the women of Srijang on this issue on 21st April 1930, thirty women prepared salt in Kuarpur.

The involvement of Rani Bhagyabati Pattamahadei of Kujang in the Salt Satyagraha drew special attention. Thwarting vigilance of Magistrate and the police party, the Rani, Rama Devi and many other volunteers crossed to Kaliapata in a boat during the dark hours of the night. Hundreds of women following the ideal of their patriotic Rani came forward to prepare salt. But the Kujang Satyagraha received a setback on account of the arrest of prominent male

leaders. The women Congress leaders like Rama Devi and Malati Devi kept up the organizational work as well as the movement of the Congress Party. They worked “more strenuously and bore greater hardship than many of the men leaders could have done.” In the first phase of the Civil Disobedience Movement six ladies including Rama Devi were jailed. By the end of 1930 due to mass arrest of Congress leaders, adverse effects of agricultural depression on the peasants, and various repressive measures of the Government, the movement began to lose its spontaneity and potency of radicalism and showed instead signs of exhaustion. As a result of the Gandhi – Irwin Pact of 5 March 1931 a general amnesty was granted. The leaders including Rama Devi came out from various jails.

Gandhiji had declared ‘fast unto death’ in protest against communal award of August 1932. He formed ‘All India Harijan Sevak Sangha’ for the removal of untouchability. A branch of Harijan Sevak Sangha was organized at Cuttack under the chairmanship of Balukeswar Acharya, a renowned Kaviraj of Cuttack and Smt. Rama Devi along with Laxminarayan Mishra and Satyanarayan Sengupta were chosen as Secretaries. About fifteen ladies took active part in the anti – touchability work under her leadership. While carrying on the untouchability work, Rama Devi became convinced that as mothers women had great roles to play in the society and that the awakening of the country was impossible without the awakening of its maternal force. About twelve ladies participated in Gandhiji’s Harijan Padayatra begun at Puri on 9 May 1934. Gandhiji appreciated their activities during the Padayatra in the following words.

“I have marvelled at the manner in which Smt. Rama Devi and her girls have discharged themselves during the tour which however

pleasant and easy it was had undoubtedly its trials. But these ladies have not known what fatigue is. There was a naturalness about all they did which went to show that they had been trained to bear hardship and live simply. As soon as the party reached its destination, these ladies allowed themselves no rest. They immediately went out among the Harijan's fearlessly and with the greatest freedom. I have had the privilege of mixing with tens and thousands of India's women. I have seen them at work. But no where have I seen anything quite like what Smt. Rama Devi and her little band have been found to do so gracefully and so naturally. They have never needed or claimed any special privilege."

On Gandhiji's instruction Rama Devi along with her husband left for Bari and built a thatched house there named 'Sebaghar'. The workers of Sebaghar devoted themselves to social and economic uplift of the villagers by the constructive programmes like promotion of Khadi, anti-touchability campaign, national language, women's awakening, prohibition, basic education, adult education, dairy, agriculture, tanning and distribution of medicine.

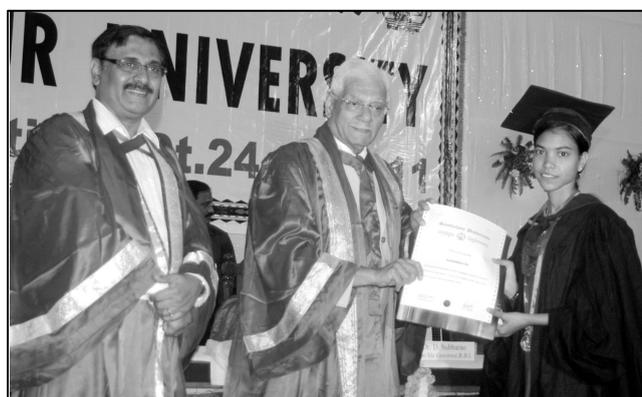
During the Quit India Movement 24 ladies including Rama Devi were arrested in Orissa and

the Ashram was declared illegal by the British Government. She had to undergo nearly two years of imprisonment in Cuttack jail. After her release from the jail in July 1944, she concentrated her attention on Khadi, basic education and training to women workers.

After independence Rama Devi along with her husband Gopabandhu Choudhury resigned from four anna membership of the Indian National Congress. She remained aloof from power politics and joined the Sarvodaya Movement started by Vinoba Bhave. She had won the Prestigious Jamunalal Bajaj Award for her sincere service to women and children.

Rama Devi breathed her last on 22nd July 1985. Her contributions are indeed valuable. Though she is no more with us her daring spirit and incomparable dedication are still leading us on path of a better tomorrow.

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His Excellency the Governor of Orissa and Chancellor of Universities Shri Murlidhar Chandrakant Bhandare presenting the Gold Medals to students in the 24th Convocation of Sambalpur University on 24.02.2011.