

## Voices of Women of Odisha

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Odisha has a rich cultural heritage, and many women have left an indelible impression in the annals of Odisha's history in different periods. Caught in the globalization, state of Odisha has been increasingly recognizing the role played by women in the society. Beginning from the six Bhauma queens who ruled the state of Odisha, the women during the initial stages of the spread of Buddhism, women leading salt marches and tribal women protesting against the loss of their natural resources to greed of the state and multinational corporations, in all these we find women of Odisha working and contributing towards the overall development of the society. Whether literate or illiterate under the yolk of patriarchy from ages their endless contributions and efforts have led to the progress in various walks of life.

Browsing through the history of Odisha, reminds of the dynamic women like Sarala Devi, Smt. Reba Ray, Smt Rama Devi, Sucharu Devi, Padma Bai and many more. The historical sources of the period are abundantly filled with stories of accomplished women of the time. As we look back much deep into the annals of history, we find women during the Shailodbhava dynasty who ruled over southern part of Odisha from the middle of 6<sup>th</sup> century AD to 8<sup>th</sup> century AD excelling in

culture and arts. Royal women of these times were benevolent and could donate villages but did not play an active role in the affairs of administration. Sculptures of this era indicate that women excelled in dancing, singing and other adornments imply high aesthetic senses.

### **Women as Administrators**

The zenith of power and position of women came during the rule of the Bhaumakaras (736AD to 945 AD). According to some historians, the Bhaumas belonged to Odisha and were a non Aryan tribe. Women of these tribes enjoyed great freedom. The Bhaumakaras followed the custom of allowing their female members to succeed their deceased husbands. Six widowed queens and one unmarried princess of the Bhauma dynasty ruled as sovereign rulers, which is unprecedented in Indian history. **Tribhuvanamahadevi** was the first known queen to be the queen in 845 AD. The others like Pruthivi Mahadevi, Bakul Mahadevi, Gauri Mahadevi and Dharma Mahadevi succeeded one after another. One of the striking feature was that none of the queens adopted a son to succeed her. The female rulers took up the reins of administration perhaps on account of their superior ability as compared to the male members. Women during Bhauma rule enjoyed a high status

in society. The queens were trained both in warfare as well as administration. They presided over assemblies of the feudatories. Some women however showed courage and talent in administration. Sumitra Devi of Mayurbhanj who ruled from 1803 AD to 1810 AD displayed immense bravery and intelligence. Rani Suka Devi of Banki, a feudal state, too displayed tremendous courage in safeguarding her territory.

### **Women as Poetesses**

Ancient history speaks of the Oriya women who occupy a brighter position than at present. There were talented poetess like Madhavi Devi, Brundabati Devi, Rani Nisank Ray etc. as mentioned in Khurdha Itihas(History of Khurdha). The writings of women focus mainly on social prejudices and exploitation against women such as "Child marriage", Child widow, women education etc to fight against the illiteracy and social evils that affected women.

### **Women in the military**

If we go further back we find descriptions of women in military dress engraved in the olden caves of Odisha. From this it appears that women did not hesitate even to face wars. Oriya legends and myths which glorify women have been a source of inspiration to the women of the succeeding generations. The bravery and magnanimity of Suka Devi, the queen of Bankigarh in the 18<sup>th</sup> century are widely known in Odisha.

### **Women as Social Reformers**

The efforts of Reba Roy and Rani of Khallilkote in spreading female education in the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century is indeed heartening. Profile of female education in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Odisha presents not a quite favourable picture of female literacy. The number of female scholars in different schools of Odisha compared to the males of school going age is a meagre 1.3% in

their ratio and this clearly indicates that in the last decade of the same century female literacy was just a trickle and not in any way significant to effect any cultural change. A meeting of Odia women was organized by Rama Devi for social reformation and welfare activities at Cuttack. The meeting took on political colour and a resolution was passed to send female delegates to congress conference. This was the beginning of a great epoch in the changing role structure of women in society who felt enthused to enter the mainstream of political action in order to prove their social worth. This was certainly the most historic moment in the movement for women liberation.

Since women actively participated in all the programmes of social welfare and reform they carved out a space for themselves in the larger sphere of civic and political interaction with the dominant section of their male counterparts. Slowly social reform movements gained their foothold in Odisha, the major objectives being the removal of untouchability and the social upliftment of the depressed classes. Sarala Devi, Rama Devi and a host of women reformists came prepared to bear the brunt of the conservative fury in their attempts at storming the bastion of caste discrimination. It is not a case that they broke down the caste barriers or emancipated the depressed fellowmen from the ligatures of repression, but their participation certainly brought a new spate of flavour into social reform. Their emergence in this domain softened the rigour of social resistance and made considerable headway towards eroding caste discrimination if not totally liquidating such long groomed caste prejudices.

Several women organizations started to be formed which worked towards female education, eradication of social evils etc. The most laudable effort was the Utkal Mahila Conference held in Berhampur in 1924. Women like Rama Devi, Malati Devi, Annapurna Devi, Godavari

Devi worked for the socio-economic upliftment of the Odia women, especially the rural women. The modern women's movement in Odisha was an integral part of freedom struggle.

### **Role of Odishan women in Freedom movement**

The spirit of nationalism found a mighty upsurge in the 2nd half of 19th century and Odisha had its own distinguished share of national enterprise. The freedom movement in Odisha was a regional manifestation of the All India Movement under the aegis of the Indian National Congress. With the advent of Gandhiji in the National Congress and the launching of the Non-Co-operation Movement in 1920, the nature of freedom movement in Odisha took a new orientation. In the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century large number of women in Odisha came out from indoors and whole-heartedly devoted themselves to the task of national struggle. The emergence of women into the political limelight coincided with the Non-co-operation Movement 1921. Under the Gandhian spell a large number of women activists like Sarala Devi, Rama Devi, Malati Choudhuri, Janhavi Devi, Hiranmayi Devi, Godavari Devi, Radhamani Devi, Parvati Devi and Janaki Devi stood the forefront. These women freedom fighters participated in various activities of the freedom struggle such as *Satyagraha*, spinning cottage industries and other related programme under the aegis of Indian National Congress.

The eminent women leaders like Shailabala Das, Reba Roy and the queens of the minor states of Odisha were influenced by the creed of Indian National Congress. They not only worked for the female literacy drive, widow remarriage, elimination of *purdah* system and child marriage, but also for individual freedom, national unity, solidarity and democratization of all social institutions.

From 1885 to 1905, most of the Odia women leaders withdrew from Congress due to negligence of Indian Congress leaders towards issues of Oriya and Sailabala came forward to make Oriya speaking tracts to form a separate province. Women leaders like Nisamani Devi, Nitambini Patra, Haramani Devi, Monorama Devi, Champamani Devi, Ashamani Devi, Sunamani Devi, Radhamani Devi etc were influenced by the ideologies of Pandit Gopabandhu Das.

By 1920, the women seeking their lone goal of emancipation found the media an important instrument to fight against all ideologies of sexism and male chauvinism. To use the media to their advantage, the female participants must either turn journalists or cultural producers and this imperative activated many women to compose and to write so that their views could be circulated among the educated audience either in fictional or non fictional form. A group of women writers emerged in the literary scene and among them Kuntala Kumari Sabat and Sitadevi Khadanga are the two women luminaries whose contribution to Oriya poetry during the epoch of cultural renaissance remains land-mark in literature for all the times. They did not pursue art for any propagandistic motives though both of them have a strong message in the substantial part of their poetic outpourings. Their poetic skill, rhetorical acumen, aesthetic designs remain incomparable paradigms of literary production of the age. For the first time they proved that women could be as capable as men in any domain of literary creativity. This created a new image of Odishan womanhood and brought great recognition for the genius of the female sex as cultural producers and heightened the prestige of women writers blazing a trail of glory for women in Odisha. Labanya Devi, the wife of Advocate Loknath Bahadur of Puri founded a women's association at Puri called

Mahila Bandhu Samiti. It had the primary membership of a few prominent ladies from the elite classes. Involved exclusively in the literary activities of women, this association gave recognition to women's talent and creativity.

Gandhiji's visit to Odisha for the first time in 1921 obviously had its effect. In March 1921, Mahatma Gandhi addressed various public meetings in Odisha. He also addressed a small gathering of women at Binod Bihari, Cuttack. Towards the end of 1921 Sarada Devi with her husband visited Kanika, where tenants were agitating against their pro-British Raj as well as the British authorities. Rama Devi and Hiramani Devi attended the Gaya Session of the Indian National Congress held in 1922. The Calcutta Session of the Indian National Congress held in December 1928 was attended by Rama Devi, Sorojini Chowdhury, Janhavi Devi and Kokila Devi. The famous *Salt Satyagraha* of 1930 involved hundreds of women activists like Sarala Devi, Kishorimani Devi and Malati Devi who came out from the seclusion of their homes to join Congress demonstrations for the manufacture of salt. A few weeks after the Dandi March began, Gandhiji said, "the importance of some sisters to join the good fight is to me a healthy sign. In this movement, their contribution should be much better than any man. Woman is immeasurably superior to man. The awakening of women redoubled the energy and activities of the Satyagrahis. As soon as the Satyagraha started at Inchudi, Rama Devi and Kiran Bala Sen reached the Satyagraha camp at Balasore. Hundreds of women came under the spell of their amazing enthusiasm and leadership. On 20<sup>th</sup> April, 1930 they led a long procession of women to the Satyagraha centre and violated the Salt Law. Rama Devi, Annapurna Devi, Malati Devi and other women volunteers visited Srijanj and encouraged the women folk of that area to violate

Salt Law. Smt. Rasamani Devi, Sarala Devi, Kuntala Kumari Sabat, Sorijini Chowdhury took pioneering interest in establishing this participation of many Oriya women in the historic Karachi Congress session in 1931 and paved the way for greater role in national movement. The spread of the Civil Disobedience Movement in Odisha was mostly due to the All Odisha Women's Council which had members from different parts of the state with Kuntala Kumari as its President.

Gandhiji's Padayatra in May 1934 had a profound impact on the women of Odisha, as they were called upon to fight the evils of liquor, boycott of foreign clothes and to discard untouchability. Inspired by Gandhiji's teachings, Rama Devi and her associates participated in the development of Khadi and Village industries. Meanwhile Malati Devi carried on the Congress Socialist Movement with her husband. Sarala Devi became a member of the first Legislative Assembly of Odisha from 1937 to 1944. In 1946 Malati Devi was elected to the Constituent Assembly of India.

The political activities of the Oriya women reached its zenith during the period of Quit India Movement. Many Congress workers including Malati Choudhury represented Odisha in this Movement. The role of Odishan women 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. 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 on 8<sup>th</sup> August 1942. On the same day in Cuttack and some other places in Odisha, 24 leaders including Rama Devi were arrested. Malati Choudhury with much difficulty arrived at Cuttack on 12<sup>th</sup> 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. Eminent 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.

The advancement of Odisha became a steady proposition only with the woman entering in the mainstream of civic and political life of the community though Odisha still lags behind with respect to female education if it is compared with the other advanced states like Kerala and West Bengal. A glance at the present status of women taking different roles in social structure does not give a very encouraging picture of women liberation. The movement that took its rise from the spread of education and attempts of modernising a traditional society has stopped far short of attaining the climax which could have been reached if woman of Odisha had risen to a status of parity with their male counterparts. Yet the present picture gleams with signs of better prospect. Recent statistics of college education during the last decade reveals a steady, progressive increase in the strength of women on roles in the institutions of higher learning. This signals a progressive change in male attitude towards educating women and giving them social, cultural and civic parity.

### **Women in the Political Scenario**

Late eighties and early ninties of last century determined the entry of women into fields of administration with international awakening of women from Fourth International Conference of Women, Beijing and Reservation for Women in grassroots level of Panchayati Raj Institutions and Municipal Institutions of India. The political arena

in the 1970s witnessed the entry of young Brahmin (high caste) Oriya lady Nandini Satpathy who rose to be the Chief Minister of the State. Though she hailed from a political background and had been a student activist, her rise was phenomenal but the irony was that the status of women in Odisha did not dramatically change during her tenure. Today we need more representation of Odia women in the political field as MP and MLA.

### **Women Activist of 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Odisha administration issued an Order of reservation for women in Odisha Administrative Services and in admissions into the Engineering Colleges of Odisha in 1992. This has ushered a situation of entry of women into administration and technical education.

Last decade and a half was marked by a resurgence of women's struggle and emergence of new women's groups and organizations in the state. In the late 80s and the beginning of the 90s several women organizations emerged. These women organizations took up the issues related to women's oppression like dowry, violence within the family, alcoholism among men, wife beating, discrimination at work place etc to mobilize women for a collective action. There are also several active grassroot organizations, tribal women's organization, self employed women's organization who are fighting against all forms of oppression, injustice and exploitation.

Women's movement in 21<sup>st</sup> century gave a radical turn to women's movement where tribal, landless and rural women have participated. Prominent tribal women like Lacchma Majhi, Tulsi Munda, Urmila Kuanra to name a few who see education as a fundamental need for social change and work for the education of tribal children. Some women like Prof Asha Hans, Kasturi Mohapatra, Nirupama Rath, *Tapasi Praharaj*

etc are the backbone of social transformation and work for the upliftment of marginalized people of the society.

### Conclusion

Thus women of Odisha played their most glorious and heroic role in all phases of freedom movement and played the role of social activists in post independence era. Apart from these women who have got their inspiration from their emerged as great writers, social activists and bureaucrats in the current millennium stand as role models for the younger women generation.

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