Participation of Women in the Freedom Struggle during the Gandhian Era: A Comparative Study between Odisha and Andhra Pradesh

A. Sobha Rani
S.C. Padhy

Participation of women in the freedom struggle forms an important and interesting aspect of the History of Modern India. It is of great significance because it brought mass participation for the political independence of the country. On Gandhi’s call large number of women joined the National Congress and acted upon the advice by participating in the Movement. Gandhi opined that women were most suited to fight with the new weapons of non-violence and truth. When we go through the history of freedom movement we see that his faith in women was true. They lived up to his expectation by actively participating in the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement and the Quit India Movement.

In the present study the two states of Odisha and Andhra Pradesh are taken into consideration to study the work of women freedom fighters. Present Odisha remained under four separate British units, i.e., Bengal, Bihar, Central Provinces and Madras. Likewise Andhra Pradesh till its formation as a separate State was a part of Madras Province and the Princely State of Hyderabad. Those parts which form the present States of Andhra Pradesh and Odisha are taken into consideration for the present study. A few prominent personalities in different movements of this period are studied from both the States. A comparison is drawn basing on the study.

Role of Odia women in the Freedom Movement: The Non-Cooperation Movement:

Women were more enthusiastic and active in the Non-Cooperation movement in Odisha. During his visit to Odisha, Gandhiji attended a meeting at Binod Behari. It was attended by forty women. Gandhi made a direct appeal to Odia women to join in the Non-Cooperation Movement. 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 Swaraj Fund for freedom struggle. It may be worthwhile to note that after the speech many Oriya women had decided to join the national movement. One of them was Ramadevi, the wife of Gopabandhu Choudhury. Ramadevi had declared her decision to join the freedom movement and had handed over all her golden ornaments to the Mahatma for the National Fund. In addition to Rama Devi, the other women leaders included Sarala Devi, Godabari Devi, Haimavati Devi and host of others, mostly hailing from advanced and well-to-do families imbued with the feelings of patriotic nationalism.

The programme of Non-Cooperation of Gandhi had negative and positive aspects. The negative aspect of the programme consisted
boycott of British goods, legislative councils, offices and educational institutions. The positive aspect included the promotion of swadeshi, removal of untouchability, prohibition, national education etc. When the Movement was launched in Odisha, very few women participated. Their participation was mainly in the programme of Charkha and Khadi.

The women of Cuttack organized public bonfire of foreign goods at the call of Gandhiji. The women Satyagrahis called upon the general public to boycott schools, colleges, law courts and to non-cooperate with British administration in all possible manners. The women in Odisha courted arrest in large numbers and filled the jails. In the town of Jharsuguda, one woman Satyagrahi, Tulasi Devi was caught by the police and arrested while influencing the women of some neighbouring villages to join the national movement. In Berhampur several brave women of Giri family including the mother of V.V. Giri, Subhadramma played their selfless role in the Non-Cooperation Movement, supporting the active male members.

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.

Civil Disobedience Movement:

In Odisha the Salt Satyagraha was launched with the commencement of the National Week on April 6, 1930. A noble feature of this movement was the participation of women in large number. The women picketed before the shops selling foreign goods and liquor. In Ganjam women leaders like Sarala Devi, Malati Devi and Kishorimani Devi (the wife of Niranjan Patnaik) did extensive tours to the interiors of the district enrolling volunteers and collecting funds. They in fact drilled the ideals of Satyagraha into the minds of rural mass, particularly among the women folk of Ganjam. Educated women belonging to high families came out of their homes and joined Congress demonstrations and in manufacture of salt. At least one thousand women participated in the movement from this area. Kundalata Devi and Kishorimani Devi were imprisoned for disobeying the salt law. Kundalata Devi helped Sarala Devi by donating all her golden ornaments at Gobra meeting. She moved to different places of Ganjam with Sobhabati Panda and Purnabasi Devi to popularise the Congress ideals. Kishorimani 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 freedom movement all over Odisha. Women Satyagrahis helped their male counterparts when the Satyagrahis attacked the government Salt godown at Huma. At Berhampur the women satyagrahis went on a procession around the town singing patriotic songs and then condemning British apathy. Thereafter another women procession was taken around the town with V.V. Giri’s mother Subbadramma, her daughter-in-law Saraswathi and two daughters Laxmi Bai and Sarojini to protest the sale of Toddy in the town. All of them were arrested for joining the Civil Disobedience Movement.

In the district of Cuttack, the places where salt was made in defiance of Salt law by the Satyagrahis were Chatera, Kalipat, Paradip, Erasma, Kakkardia and Daradia. In the Puri District Salt campaign was undertaken at several centres like Astaranga, Chilika, Latra, etc. Kujang was another important centre of Salt Satyagraha in Odisha. The public meeting of women held at Cuttack on 22 April, 1930 under the
chairmanship of Mrs Kumudini Dasgupta generated patriotic urge among the women to enrol themselves as civil resisters.\textsuperscript{13}

Ramadevi and Malati Devi worked with vigour and dedication for the success of the movement. It received great impetus as soon as Rani Bhagyabati Patamahadevi, prominent woman of Kujanga joined the Salt Satyagraha. Despite the vigilance of one magistrate and the police party Rani Patamahadevi, Rama Devi and many other volunteers prepared contraband salt there. Hundreds of women following the ideal of their patriotic Rani came forward to join them.\textsuperscript{14} Most of the prominent Congress leaders including leading women like Sarala Devi, Malati Devi and Rama Devi were put in the prison. Though government tried vigorously to suppress the civil liberties in various ways, there was no sign of retreat of the struggle. Besides salt, issues like boycott of foreign clothes, no revenue campaign, non-payment of Chaukidari Tax, picketing in liquor shops and boycott of forest department auction, peaceful mass violation of grazing and timber restrictions, change of forest laws and boycott of the September 1930 Legislative Assembly elections were taken up to galvanise popular enthusiasm and mass mobilization. While leading picketing at liquor shops and foreign cloths shops at Cuttack, Rama Devi and Malati Devi were beaten up with canes. But they never retaliated. Many women workers of Odisha suffered police atrocities while a few thousand persons including 700 women were returning from Eram Salt centre at Balasore, the police attacked them and lathicharged several women inflicting blows at their backs and legs. The women volunteers who were distributing Congress Bulletins were beaten by the police. Even the girls of an orphanage in Cuttack were found to have distributed the Congress Bulletins like, “Bidrohi and Biplabi” taking great risk.\textsuperscript{15} Thus much greater involvement and participation of women was seen during the period of the Civil Disobedience Movement.

**Quit India Movement**

After the failure of the Cripps Mission, Quit India Resolution was passed by the All India Congress Committee in Bombay. On 8\textsuperscript{th} August 1942, Indian National Congress held its session at Gwalior Tank Field in Bombay. It was attended by 250 representatives from 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, 24 Congress leaders including the gallant Rama Devi were arrested who exercised effective control over the public in the State.\textsuperscript{16} The Ashram at Bari was declared illegal by the British Government. She had to undergo nearly two years of imprisonment in Cuttack jail.\textsuperscript{17}

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.

Shobabati Panda also dynamically took part in the Movement. She was arrested for her dynamic activities. Smt. Champa Devi delivered an impressive speech at Russelkonda criticizing the British. She was arrested and sent to jail for her explosive speech against the British.

In addition to them a host of other women like Sunamani Devi, Susila Kanungo, Dela Devi, Nisamani Devi, Bilasi Devi, Usha Devi,

Thus the women of Odisha played their most glorious and heroic role in all phases of freedom movement.

Women participation in the Freedom Struggle in Andhra Pradesh:

Andhra Pradesh, like any other part of the country, played a significant role in the freedom struggle. Men, women and children did their best to fight for the common cause. Great leaders like Duvvuru Subbamma, Durgabhai Deshmukh, Sangam Lakshmi Bai, Yellapragada Sitkumari, Ammanna Raja, Arutla Kamala Devi and others are well known. Large number of women participated in the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, and Quit India Movement. In the constructive programme, especially in the manufacture of Khadar, women in Andhra did more work than men. They became victims of repression as much as men. But they braved all this with patience and heroism.

Non-Cooperation Movement:

Gandhi visited the East Godavari region of Andhra Pradesh during the time of the Non-Cooperation Movement. A meeting was held at Vijayawada in 1921. His speeches in Andhra proved to be a big source of inspiration for women to participate in the struggle for freedom. In a speech delivered to women at Rajahmundry on 3 April 1921, Gandhi said, “You my dear sisters I want to warn you and to bring you to a sense of duty and religion. If there is a dancing girl amidst you, I ask you to make her life not one of shame. Take up the spring wheel and take the few paise that the work brings you, and it will bring God into your house. I ask you to discard all your fine garments and ornaments if only for the protection of these dancing girls. Take up the spinning wheel for the sake of purity of India. I ask you to consider that to wear fine foreign sarees is a sin.”

Subbamma who paid a visit to Vijayawada with a group of women to seek the blessings of Gandhi took the plunge notwithstanding the various social constraints prevalent in those times. She happened to be the first woman of the region to participate in the National Movement. She also succeeded in motivating other women of the region to participate in the freedom struggle. She spoke powerfully as early as 1921. During the time of the Non-Cooperation Movement she worked with Ponakka Kanakamma and Unnava Laxmibayamma.

Another woman who was deeply influenced by Gandhi was Durgabai. She attended the meeting on 6 April 1921. Seeing the volunteers collecting money and other valuables for the Tilak Swaraj Fund, Durgabai too climbed the dais to offer her collection to Gandhi. Holding the little girls hands (she was eleven years old then) Gandhi asked, “Why don’t you contribute your golden bracelets too?” Durgabai readily parted with her bracelets for such a noble cause.

To a certain extent, credit for the success of the Non-Cooperation Movement in Andhra goes to women. A recent study says that “if the Non-Cooperation Movement made relatively more progress in Andhra than in Madras Presidency, the credit goes partly to women.”

However in 1922, Gandhi called off the Non-Cooperation campaign, all of a sudden
taking all concerned by surprise. But despite the suspension of the movement, the atmosphere in the Godavari area remained charged and women like Subbamma continued to conduct meetings to popularise khadi and the concept of the abolition of untouchability, the two most important items of Gandhi’s constructive programme.22

Civil Disobedience Movement:

Gradually the number of women participating in the Indian struggle swelled and started playing a more diversified and militant role. By the time, Civil Disobedience Movement was launched women activists were already playing bigger and more militant role. In the course of the movement thousands of women discarded Purdah. They broke salt laws, picketed liquor vends and foreign goods shops. A number of women courted arrest and went to jail. Sarojini Naidu a women leader born in Hyderabad had been playing prominent role in the movement by that time. After the arrest of Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu led the Dharsana Salt Depot, which was a historic demonstration of the power of non-violent Satyagraha.

Davvuri Subbamma propagated the ideas of freedom and commitment during the period of Civil Disobedience Movement for which she was arrested and jailed. Durgabai’s patriotism was recognised in 1930 when the Salt Satyagraha was launched. She, with the help of two other prominent nationalists (A. K. Prakasam and Desodharaka Nageswararao), organised the Movement in Madras. She was arrested and imprisoned for her involvement in a movement that had been banned. She was imprisoned during the Salt Satyagraha and was sent to Vellore Jail where she mingled with other women prisoners. To her shock, she found that many of them did not even know for what reason they were convicted. Touched by their ignorance and misery, she vowed that she would work for enlightening the women folk of India. She was arrested thrice during the Movement.

Quit India Movement:

Gandhi’s call of ‘Do or Die’ spread the magic amongst the people of Andhra as was the case in other parts of the country. Prominent women leaders who had already been playing significant part in the Freedom Struggle intensified their campaign for complete freedom. Subbamma, an active participant of the Salt Satyagraha condemned the British apathy and tried to build sympathy for the cause of freedom among the people of Andhra Pradesh.23

Padmaja Naidu, daughter of Sarojini Naidu, devoted herself to the cause of the nation like her mother. She was the joint founder of the Indian National Congress of Hyderabad. She spread the message of Khadi and inspired people to boycott foreign goods. She was imprisoned for taking part in the Quit India Movement.24

Mrs. S. Amaravati Devi wife of Shri Nagappa, an active participant of national freedom struggle, played a prominent role in the Quit India Movement. She was detained in jail along with her infant son. She along with her husband offered Satyagraha and courted arrest for several times.25

Like Amaravati Devi many women members who were the wives of prominent members of AICC took active part in spreading the movement. Women participation may not have been as high as the male participation quantitatively but qualitatively their participation was significant in Andhra Pradesh.

A Comparison of Motivational Factors Between the two States of Odisha and Andhra Pradesh:

From the above study it is clear that the motivational factor was high in both the States as
we can see the number of women Participants have swelled from one movement to another.

In Odisha women from educated classes like Rama Devi and the women of Giri family became leaders of the Movement. Kuntala Devi and Sarala Devi were poets and novelists also. At the same time we see that there were many women who followed them were uneducated. In Andhra Pradesh also eminent women leaders like Sarojini Naidu and Durgabai Deshmukh were educated. Sarojini Naidu is famous as a poet and writer. Her writings depicted the picture of a typical Indian. But Subbamma though became a powerful leader from Coastal Andhra was denied of formal education. She was married at an early age and then widowed just after a decade. The little education she had afterwards was meagre. Like her there were many women who followed her in the Movement were uneducated. But the spirit of nationalism was no less than the educated women of the State.

In Odisha during the Quit India Movement in the tribal areas of Koraput and Garhjat, uprisings were seen. In the same way Alluri Sitarama Raju led a Tribal uprising against the British in Andhra Pradesh. Though the leaders of these movements were not women, a number of women took part in the uprisings. A common feature of both Odisha and Andhra Pradesh was that there were women leaders and followers in the movement. Women leaders like Rama Devi, Malati Devi, Sarala Devi from Odisha and Sarojini Naidu, Durgabai Deshmukh and Duvvuri Subbamma from Andhra Pradesh led the people in different phases of the national movement. Similarly the sacrifices of women followers are noticed.

Religion and Caste did not become a constraint for participation in the freedom struggle. Gandhiji’s Harijan Movement and his support to the socially backward classes gave way to every section of the country to take part in the freedom movement. This is a common phenomenon for both the States.

When we observe the socio-economic background of the women participants, most of them are from well-to-do families and did not have any economic constraints. Subbamma from Andhra Pradesh was an exception to this. She came from a very poor Brahmin family. Though the leaders hailed from either middle or well-to-do families, the followers belonged to all classes even to the poorer section of the society.

It must be mentioned here that in both the States the change in the social life of women is clearly visible. Women, who were confined to their homes and to the domestic duties of the house, have come out of their houses, participated in bonfires, picketing hartals etc. They suffered the lathi charge and imprisonment along with the male participants of the movement. They were not afraid of the atrocities of the British.

Finally, male members of that period should be appreciated for encouraging the female participants, whether a mother, a sister or a wife. The encouragement received by the women helped them to go a long way in the national movement. Though we find some cases where women rebelled in the houses to take part in the rebellion, in most cases, they received the permission and encouragement which made their way into the movement easy.

Thus we see that though the places of study are different, we find very little difference in the movement led by women in these areas. This reminds us the fact that geographical boundaries did not bring any difference in the spirit of Nationalism. Both the women of Odisha as well as Andhra Pradesh are equally enthusiastic and
committed to bring freedom to the country. Women leaders from both the places of study will be remembered with great respect for their contribution in bringing freedom to the country.

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A. Sobha Rani, Field Assistant, P.G. Department of History, Berhampur University, Berhampur – 760007.
S.C. Padhy, Professor, P.G. Department of History, Berhampur University, Berhampur – 760007.