India witnessed a relentless struggle and strife for years together preceding the attainment of its independence from the shackles of colonialism. The people of India had to overcome a long way to get India free from the clutches of British predominance. History of our country is the mute spectator of those people who have shown their valour and unfathomable love and dedication to their motherland. The Indian freedom movement is glorified singing the story of those valiant warriors. Since it was the participation of all sections of the society the movement was termed as ‘mass movement’ which could be possible only after the appearance of Mahatma Gandhi in the freedom movement. The clarion call of Mahatma Gandhi gave an impetus to the people in every nook and corner of India. People of Odisha also had significant role in the freedom movement. Although initially it was confined only to urban educated class, royal and educated families, but the Gandhi’s inspiration worked like a magic wand that allured the people of the whole of India. At that time how could have women kept confined them inside the four walls of their home? They responded to Gandhiji’s call in huge number by directly or indirectly participating and it was turned into a mass movement.

Role of Women in the Freedom Movement in Western Odisha: Some Reflections

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West Odisha has its own contribution to this momentous struggle for independence. The western part of Odisha, extending from the Kalahandi district in the south to the Sundergarh district in the North West, comprised of nine districts, i.e., Balangir, Sambalpur, Jharsuguda, Sundergarh, Deogarh, Suvarnapur, Kalahandi, Nuapada, Bargarh and Athmallik subdivision of
Angul district. Prior to 8th century A.D. the western part of Odisha was known as Dakshin Koshala. This region is a vast geographical area, exhibiting a vast degree of demography and lifestyle. Cultural profile of South Koshal depicts its rich history and culture.1

Women of western Odisha have played a significant role during the freedom movements. They have had an outstanding contribution demonstrating indomitable courage and unflinching patriotism, though rarely highlighted. Prior to Gandhiji’s visit Krishna Devi, a Punjabi woman, came to Sambalpur with her husband who was a businessman. She had played a leading role to inspire the people of this area. Earlier she had taken part in Satyagraha at Raipur. In 1928 for the first time Gandhiji and Kasturba came to this region. Under the leadership of Krishna Devi the women of Sambalpur assembled at a special meeting held in the honour of Mahatma Gandhi and Kasturba. She played significant role in bringing forth the message of Gandhi and inspiring the women of this region. She was arrested and sent to Sambalpur jail while addressing a mammoth peasant conference at Budharaja in March 1931. After release from jail she went to visit Bargarh. The women of Bargarh organised a grand meeting in honour of Krishna Devi. Fakira Behera donated his residence to open the Congress Office at Bargarh, which was later on named as Krishnasram. Many women were inspired by Krishna Devi and participated in the freedom movement. Mention may be made of Jambubati Devi, wife of the famous freedom fighter Bhagirathi Pattanaik, Gandharvi Devi (daughter-in-law of Fakira Behera), Iīā Meher (the wife of Kunja Bihari of Tukurla), Shreyyabati Devi (wife of senior freedom fighter Ghanashyam Panigrahi of Manpur, Bheden) and many more.

In March 1931 Krishna Devi presided over the Dāndi Divas at Gandhi Ghat in Sambalpur.2

Among the women of Western Odisha Jambubati Devi has been acknowledged as the first women freedom fighter. She was born on 9th November 1886 at Binka. After getting married to Bhagirathi Pattnaik of Barpali, a frontline freedom fighter, Jambubati Devi also entered into the freedom movement. By that time she had little knowledge on the movement. Bhagirathi Pattanaik was fighting for the cause of Swaraj. When Jambubati Devi came to know about the freedom movement she brought out a piece of gold and gave it to her husband, the last piece of property with her. In the early morning of 1931 the entire family left home and set out their journey, toured villages to propagate the Gandhian principles. She established Ashrams at Baltikira, Tukurlâ (Bargarh), Budharaja (Sambalpur) and also at Jharsuguda. By taking this step, she strengthened the Congress Organisation and produced female leaders for the movement. They went to Kumbhari, Remunda, Mānpur, Bargarh and Tukurlâ. On the way they propagated Gandhian principles and brought forth messages of Gandhiji.3 After their arrival at Sambalpur they stayed in the house of one Kuldhar in the Kolh-Para near Budharaja. Subsequently the house was turned into an Ashram that happened to be the first Congress Ashram of Sambalpur. For the first time Jambubati Devi participated in civil disobedience movement and got imprisoned in Sambalpur Jail. There she was confined for six months and then sent to Bhagalpur Central Jail for next six months.4 Under the leadership of Jambubati Devi ten women joined the national movement of Salt Satyagraha in Balasore. She could be able to create patriotic feeling among women.
On 2nd March 1931 the peasant congregation was held. The district authority apprehending its impact upon the people of the area arrested Jambubati, Krishna Devi, Bhagirathi Pattnaik, Prafulla Pattnaik (son of Bhagirathi Pattnaik), though Jambubati and Krishnaddevi were released in the evening. Jambubati and Prafulla took shelter in the house of Krishna Devi, when Bhagirathi Pattnaik went to jail. Following the Gandhi-Irwin Pact in March 1931 all the political prisoners were released. In response to this event the congress men of Sambalpur organised public meetings and rallies at Sambalpur, Jharsuguda and Bargarh. Hundreds of women came to attend the meeting being mobilized by Krishna Devi and Jambubati Pattnaik.

Following the Gandhi-Irwin pact there was a lull in the rest part of the country, but the town of Sambalpur was active in organising people for the cause of Freedom Movement. Despite the suppressive measures taken by the British Government, Prafulla, the son of Bhagirathi Pattanaik, continued to organise meetings at Jharsuguda with the help her mother Jambubati Devi and Tulsi Devi, the mother of Bihari Ram.6 On 8th July 1932 second phase of Satyagraha began at Bargarh. All the Satyagrahis were sent to Patna jail except Jambubati who was put in Sambalpur jail. Gandhi decided to suspend Civil Disobedience Movement, although individual Satyagraha continued to be launched in different parts of the country. In August 1933, while launching individual Satyagraha Jambubati Devi picketed before the foreign liquor shop and foreign cloth shop at Marwadi Pada in Sambalpur and the liquor shop in Bargarh for which reason she got rigorous imprisonment of four months. On 18th September 1933 Bhagirathi Pattnaik, husband of Jambubati Pattnaik apprised of the District Magistrate of Sambalpur that they were going to adopt individual Civil Disobedience Movement on 22nd December, 1933. Their appeal was rejected and they got arrested. Bhagirathi and his son Prafulla were sent to Patna Central jail and Jambubati Devi was sent to Bhagalpur Central Jail having rigorous imprisonment. After the completion of their term in jail Bhagirathi, Jambubati and Prafulla joined as volunteers to serve the destitute of earthquake. They joined the camps at Madhopur and Basudevpur. There, they met Jawaharlal Nehru who had come to visit the relief camp. On 3rd April 1934 they had the honour to spend a night with Mahatma Gandhi, Mirabehn, Bhagabati Devi, the elder sister of Rajendra Prasad and Jamunalal Bajaj. After paying his visit to earthquake area Mahatma Gandhi resumed his Harijan tour. On 4th May 1934 Gandhi reached Jharsuguda by train. Congress workers received him with a warm welcome. Tulsi Devi, mother of Bihari Ram garlanded Gandhi with marigold flower. Gandhi uttered, ‘O Harijan Mother’ and put the same garland around the neck of Tulsi Devi. For two days both Jambubati and Tulsi Devi attended Gandhi avidly. On December 1935, the National Congress was observing the 50th year of its service to the nation. The entire nation observed in pomp and ceremony. In Barpali thousands of men and women took out procession under the leadership of Jambubati Devi.

During Quit India Movement thousands of men and women took out processions countrywide. Some students of Ghoremara training school in Bihar were searching for a leader. In the meantime they could find Jambubati as their leader who could lead them. Jambubati led the procession holding high a tricolour accompanied
by Smt. Prema Devi, wife of Shri Krishna Prasad Saha. The meeting was presided over by Jamuna. During Quit India Movement 1942 while working in Bihar she was arrested along with Prema Devi at Dumuka. After her release from jail she got shelter in the house of Binodanada Jha and his wife respected as her mother. The Satyagrahis in Bihar used to address her as ‘Mà ji’ (mother) for her dedication, love and affection towards the motherland. The next year on 17th April 1943 she breathed her last leaving a lot of memorable contribution to freedom movement.

Prabhobati Devi a dedicated woman freedom fighter was the daughter of Dhanapati Dash of Bargarh. She became a widow at the age of 10. She had studied up to class five. She requested Malati Devi to keep her as a worker. After taking training in the Bari Ashram she took part in the police station gherao in Bargarh and distribution of pamphlets for Congress propaganda. For this activity she was sent to jail for one and half year. She moved village to village to encourage people to boycott the foreign goods and propagated the Swadeshi Movement. She was the first woman who joined the meeting organised by Malati Choudhury on the bank of the river Jeera. In 1938 Prabhobati Devi went to Bari Ashram and participated in the Satyagraha, spinning and weaving, cottage industry, fundamental and adult education, women development, Khadi, animal husbandry and took training in national linguistic education. She worked for 15 days with Gandhi at Wardha Ashram. Prabhobati joined freedom movement at the age of 26 and got arrested by Police on 23rd August 1943 due to circulation of pamphlets of Congress. She was sent to Sambalpur jail and released in 1945 from the jail. She joined Bhoodan movement and had active participation in foot marching of Binova Bhave. After independence she founded Rukmini Lath Bâl Niketan at Bargaon for the orphans.

Parbati Giri, the Mother Teresa of Western Odisha was born in Samaleipadar under Bijepur police station on 19th September 1926. By that time the message of freedom movement had reached the villages of Odisha. She was educated up to class three. She accepted a life of Satyagrahi at the minor age of 12. A congress meeting was organised in Samaleipadar in the year 1937. A great assembly of Congress was held a year later in 1938 at Samaleipadar. Distinguished freedom fighters like Malati Choudhury and Pranakrushna Padhiari could be able to invigorate the people by their valuable speeches. The little girl Parbati Giri could not remain silently and forced her father to allow her to join in the Congress work. After giving a difficult test Parbati Giri was allowed to go to the Bari Ashram of Rama Devi. During the age of conservatism and dogmatism a girl of minor age left home and went to the Bari Ashram. It is undoubtedly a wonderful achievement. After being trained in weaving Parbati Giri moved from village to village, like Samaleipadar, Sarandapali and Daleipara of Sambalpur town, to impart training on weaving, spinning and knitting. She actively participated in the Khadi Andolan of Mahatma Gandhi. The thunder less sound was echoed in every nook and corner of India. How the people of the villages could be the mute spectator, where a daughter like Parbati Giri was a dedicated Satyagrahi. The villages like Pânimorâ, Samaleipadar, Ghens (in Bargarh district) became the hub of freedom movement. The people like Ramachandra Giri, Ujjal Giri, Kubera Giri and Dwitiya Giri were sent to Bengal jail as prisoners while taking part in the freedom movement. Parbati Giri was arrested for
her anti-government activities. She stayed one year with Prabhabati Devi. Later on Prabhabati was shifted to Cuttack jail. She actively participated in the Khadi Andolan of Mahatma Gandhi. The Quit India Movement was started in the year 1942. The thunderous sound of this movement was echoed in the countless villages of Odisha. The prominent villages where pioneers of freedom movement were born are Samaleipadar, Panimora, and Ghens etc. Once young Parbati Giri accompanied by a group of boys gave anti-British slogans. But due to her minor age, the police personnel could not be able to arrest her. Although later on British police arrested her and sent to Bargarh jail. During the freedom movement Parbati Giri was too young to fight, but she had exhibited unprecedented valour and courage through her anti-government activities.

She was also identified as a social reformer, inspired by the high ideals of Mahatma Gandhi. After India’s independence she dedicated her life for the upliftment of poor and destitute. She established Kasturba Matruniketan at Nrusingnath, Paikmal in the undivided Sambalpur district. She was a glaring star of Odisha. Although she had come from a small village of Western Odisha, her unflinching dedication to the cause of humanity would make her remembered by the people of the land. She has occupied a unique place in the history of India. For her yeoman service she got ‘Rashtragaurav’ and honorary ‘D.Litt.’ from the Sambalpur University. She died in the year 1998.

Gurubari Meher of Sonepur, a valiant women freedom fighter had played an important role in the freedom struggle like other women Satyagrahis of Western Odisha. The movement spearheaded by Gurubari Meher was an offshoot of the Prajá Mandal movement inaugurated in Cuttack in 1938. This branch was launched for the first time at Sonepur under the leadership of Laxman Satpathy. It was on January 28, 1947, a few days preceding independence the Government of princely state of Sonepur let loose a reign of terror at Binika town. People got enraged against the king of Sonepur state for his pro-British stance. Nearly 20,000 freedom fighters led by Gurubari Meher organised a mass movement against the king. Gurubari marched forward to protest against the extra cess charged on various goods. She was shot by the police following which her anti royal followers destroyed the royal regime. The story of Gurubari Meher is a little known story. Her valiant and bravery only came to light when her story was unveiled by historians like Prof. Sadhu Charan Panda and Prof. Siba Prasad Nanda following the news clip in Dainika Asha, a local newspaper published from Sambalpur.9

Rukmini Devi Lath, the wife of freedom fighter Sri Prahallad Rai Lath of Kansaripara, Sambalpur district was extending all type of help to the Congress leaders. During the year 1930, her husband was working for Congress. People avoided the Congress party for fear of punishment when Government banned the congress. However, Rukmini Devi for the interest of her husband prepared food for them and gave shelter to them in the critical moment. She extended all type of help to the Congress leaders like Ramadevi, Gopabandhu Choudhury, Pandit Nilakantha Das, Krupasindhu Hota, Sri Nabakrushna Choudhury, Harekrushna Mahtab, Surendranatha Dwibedi, Nilamani Routray and Malati Choudhury.10 Apart from that, following women who might not be considered great freedom fighters but they had played squirrel role in the process of freedom struggle in Sambalpur.
were Tulasi Devi, Ketaki Devi, Indu Pradhan, Jambovati Sahu, Sebati Pradhan and Lilavati Pradhan etc.

Bhela, a remote village in Nuapada district was the cradle of many freedom fighters. It has also recorded some of the momentous events that had carved out a niche in the history of freedom movement. Distinguished women like Leelabati Devi, Annapurna Dei, Shrimati Panigrahi, Taramani Devi and many more were leading women Satyagrahis of Bhela, (situated in undivided Kalahandi district) fought for their rights and liberties during the freedom struggle. During the Quit India Movement when there was huge outcry in the entire country, the women of this area were also fighting against the oppressive rule of the British Government. At that time British Government imposed unscrupulous taxes. People using more than one chullah had to pay tax for each number of chullah. The women attacked the British police with wooden poles topped with iron cap at one end (paharun, used for thrashing corn) as weapon to defend them. The women of Bhela had shown their valour and self-determination in protesting against the British power for their injustice towards the native people. History will resound with singing the songs of glory and devotion of those eminent women freedom fighters who have dedicated their life to the motherland.

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