Odisha had a fair share of agitation activities in the pre-independent period leading to unprecedented level of mass mobilization against the British in the eastern parts and Prajamandal activities in the Garjat areas. What is commonly not known is that the women played a significant role in these troubled times. The awakening of the Odia Women was the manifestation of the growth of national sentiment and democratic urges for national and individual liberty. Initially when Gandhi launched his political movement, he rightly realized that the social and religious conventions, customs, traditions and the lack of training, discipline and motivation among women had limited their participation in politics. Therefore, Gandhi wanted to train and educate women in the fundamentals of organized activity and propaganda at the local level firstly through his constructive programme. In fact, Gapabandhu Das had great faith on the Odia women. Encouraging the women to join their hands with him he several times appealed to the women to do their full share in the struggle. He had strong faith on them because he respected and women as living embodiment of Shakti. It was Gandhi’s clarion call for women’s emancipation that helped women to leave the strategy of an indoor life and participate in the political movement in large number. This historical emergence of Odia women into political limelight coincided with the Non Co-operation Movement in 1921. At this critical situation Kuntala Kumari Sabat rose to the occasion and challenged the authority in these words, “Nations is our religion, Charakha is our life. We will hold Charakha in our hand and we will destroy all the conspiracy of the enemy.” Like Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi she plunged into the national movement with her strong pen and appealed to the womanhood not to use the foreign goods and to destroy the administrative machinery of the British Empire.

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The Role of Women and Women Organisations in Odisha in Indian Freedom Struggle

Dr. Krushna Chandra Das

In Odisha, Gandhi mobilized the wives and daughters of Congress men first to promote the programme. At Cuttack, Rama Devi and Sarala Devi worked actively along with other ladies to popularize the Khadi and Charakha programme. They took to spinning in Charakha and fought tooth and nail against social evils which had been eating into the vitals of our society. The Non Co-operation Movement of Gandhiji roused the national spirit of women of Odisha as in other parts of India. His concept of truth and non-violence, his austere, simple and godly life had a great impact on women. When the Non co-operation movement was coming to an end, a
group of women namely Rasamani Devi and Swarnalata Devi met at Swaraj Ashram in Berhampur founded the Utkal Women’s Conference’, which was to hold first session in June, 1924.¹ In the midst of tremendous enthusiasm women from all over Odisha met in the Swaraj Ashram at Berhampur on 30th June, 1924.² This occasion stirred the patriotic spirit of women belonging to different classes. Kuntala Kumari Sabat, the famous poetess, who stayed in Delhi, with her husband organized one ‘Bharati Tapavana Sangha’ at her residence where Odia often met and carried on various discussions.³ In 1928 an Odisha Women’s Education Reform Conference was held under the leadership of Sailabala Das for encouragement of women education. Gandhi was a source of inspiration for the women workers. He expressed the position of women in ‘Young India’ on 17th Oct 1929 that “.......Women is the embodiment of sacrifice and suffering and her advent to public life should therefore result in purifying it....... It is a serious problem the enlightened daughters of Bharat Mata are called upon to solve....... They must apply methods suited to the Indian genius and Indian environment. They must be strong, controlling, purifying, steadying hand, conserving what is best in our culture and unhesitatingly rejected what is base and degrading…….”

In a speech at Women’s meeting on 10th Feb 1929, Gandhiji pointed out: “If want to establish Swaraj in India, which for you and we can only mean Ramayan., You must become pure in mind and body like Sita, for then alone you will become the mothers of heroes. And as a first step towards attaining bodily purity you must emancipate yourselves and your daughters from the thralldom of the various social abuses and tyrannies that are prevalent in your midst at present.” Inspired by Gandhiji’s message, the women workers in Odisha had devoted their valuable time to the spread of Khadi and village industries. The boycotting of foreign goods and picketing before liquor, opium and Ganja shops were vigorously launched. This shows their spirit of self-less sacrifice and concern for the society. Some of the women workers had to go back to the villages in order to indulge themselves in the constructive works as desired by Gandhiji. The names of some women workers were Sunamani Devi – Beraboi (Delang), Laxmi Devi – Sarangajodi, Bela Devi – Ganeswarpur, Subharani Panda – Subarnapur, Godavari Devi – Ratnagiri, Mandal Devi – Brahmagiri, Arnapurna Choudhury – Bari and Bira Narasinghpur, Subharani Panda – Subarnapur, Godavari Devi – Ratnagiri, Mandal Devi – Brahmagiri, Arnapurna Choudhury – Bari and Bira Narasinghpur, Subharani Panda – Subarnapur, Godavari Devi – Ratnagiri, Mandal Devi – Brahmagiri, Arnapurna Choudhury – Bari and Bira Narasinghpur, Subharani Panda – Subarnapur, Godavari Devi – Ratnagiri, Mandal Devi – Brahmagiri, Arnapurna Choudhury – Bari and Bira Narasinghpur, Subharani Panda – Subarnapur, Godavari Devi – Ratnagiri, Mandal Devi – Brahmagiri, Arnapurna Choudhury – Bari and Bira Narasinghpur, Subharani Panda – Subarnapur, Godavari Devi – Ratnagiri, Mandal Devi – Brahmagiri, Arnapurna Choudhury – Bari and Bira Narasinghpur, Subharani Panda – Subarnapur, Godavari Devi – Ratnagiri, Mandal Devi – Brahmagiri, Arnapurna Choudhury – Bari and Bira Narasinghpur, Subharani Panda – Subarnapur, Godavari Devi – Ratnagiri, Mandal Devi – Brahmagiri, Arnapurna Choudhury – Bari and Bira Narasinghpur.

The year 1930 is of tremendous significance in the annals of the freedom struggle. It was in this year the famous Salt – Satyagraha took place in Odisha. Hundreds of women workers had joined in this Civil Disobedience Movement.⁷ The women all over Odisha extended their whole – hearted support to this historic movement. By 1930, there were a large number of women workers in the Congress Ashrams of Kadua and Alaka at Puri and Cuttack respectively. Sunamani Devi and Annapurna Devi, the inmates of Kadua Ashram had stayed for sometime in the Sabarmati Ashrama of Mahatma Gandhi to receive training.⁸ Saraswati Devi of Cuttack received her training in the Sevadal Training Camp as one on the delegates from
Odisha for the All India Congress Session at Bombay and Kalyani. Similarly Rasamani Devi of Puri District served as a volunteer in the Congress session at Calcutta. Bimala Devi from Puri District and Amrit Devi from Sambalpur District received their training at the Baria Ashram for Congress work. Bhargavi Devi from Sambalpur district received her training in Basic Education at Wardha. It is to be noted here that the Non-Co-operation Movement was responsible for the establishment of a number of Ashramas modelled on the Sabarmati Ashram of Gandhiji. One of the earliest and best known among them was the Alaka Ashram at Cuttack. Smt. Rama Devi and Malati Devi worked hard for the development of the Ashram. Kishoremani Devi of Ganjam set up a ‘Pragati Ashram’ at Berhampur for the purpose of providing training and Orientation to the Young Satyagrahis. Gandhi wanted the women to participate in what he regarded as the vital task of constructive work, namely picketing before liquor shops and the shops which sold foreign clothes. He was convinced that women could make an effective appeal to those engaged in the sale of liquor and foreign clothes. As a matter of fact, picketing was organized at Cuttack in front of the opium and Ganja shops, liquor shops and shops of foreign goods by Binapani Devi, Anjali Devi, Sundarmani Devi, Gopal Sundari Devi, Kirtanbala Sen, Motirani Panda and others. They also involve themselves in circulating bulletins among the people. The superb organizing ability, courage and conviction of these women leaders in Odisha unnerved the British officials. Kuntala Kumari Sabat stirred the conscience of the people through her writings such as ‘Ahwan’ and ‘Sphulinga’. Her poems kindled a new spirit in the hearts of the people and inspired them to fight relentlessly against the Britishers.

During the Civil Disobedience Movement, women in large number from different strata of life came forward to join various campaigns and programmes of the movement. At the same time the participation of women of non-political and lower class families was also very encouraging. In fact, it is gratifying to note that women of remote rural areas also played important role in the freedom movement. In Sambalpur some prominent women spearheaded the Civil Disobedience Movement and observed the ‘Dandi Day’, on 12th March 1931. Smt. P. Taramma, Suryamma, T. Arahulu, Baralaxmi and A. Laxmibai were the leading women from Ganjam district who joined the first batch of Telegu Satyagrahis from Berhampur to Kotabambillam to manufacture salt on 20th April, 1930. Smt. J.V. Narayan led massive women’s procession and addressed the public meetings during the time of Salt Satyagraha. As per the Utkal Pradesh Congress Committee decision, women took important role also in the non-payment of Choukidari tax campaign. Being inspired by the appeals of women, thirteen villages adjoining Inchudi in the Balasore district plunged into this programme and refused to pay tax to the Governor officials. Apart from this entire programme, even teenage girls in the Banara Sena (The Monkey Brigade) i.e. the children’s Voluntary army played an important role in the Civil Disobedience Movement.

Gandhiji declared “fast unto death” on Communal Award issue in September 1932. It had its impact in Odisha. The anti untouchability work gained a new momentum in Odisha with the participation of women workers including Kokila Devi, Sushila Devi, Godabari Devi, Tulasi Devi, Manika Devi, Chandramani Devi, Annapurna Choudhury, Sobharani Panda, Ansumali Ray, Amiya Ghose, Rama Devi, Malati Choudhury, Purabai and Nathibai. Rama Devi became the Secretary of “Pradesika Harijan Sevak Sangha”. The historic Harijan Padayatra of Gandhiji began on 6th May, 1934. Gandhi called upon the women folk to fight the evils of liquor, boycott foreign cloth and oppose untouchability. Some of the contemporary women workers who participated in this Padayatra were Sushila Devi, Godabari Devi, Sobharani Devi, Tulasi Devi, Mangala Devi, Rama Devi, Malati Devi, Ansumali Ray, Sunamon Devi, Annapurna Choudhury, Manika Devi and Puru Bai. These women workers had also campaigned for the propagation of Hindi as national language. At the farewell meeting, Gandhiji eulogized the work of the women folk in Odisha in the following words: “I have marvelled at the manner in which Rama Devi and her girls have discharged themselves during the tour, which however pleasant and easy it was, had undoubtedly its trials. But these women have not known what fatigue is. I have had the privilege of mixing with tens of thousands of Indian’s women. I have seen them at work. But now here have I seen anything quite like what Rama Devi and her little band have been found able to do so gracefully and so naturally. They have never needed any special privilege.”

The Quit India call given by Gandhi on 9th August 1942 drew a large section of women worker’s into the mainstream of national movement. The women workers in Odisha tried their best to fulfill the cherished dream of Gandhiji. On 6th May, 1944 ‘Kasturaba Nidhi’ was formed for the all the round development of the children and the women. Due to the initiative of Rama Devi and others a number of centres were opened at different places like Bari, Ramachandrapur, Satyabhamapur, Narendrapur, Phulgadia, Soro,
Kantiapada, Borangan, Rugudibai, Khamesi, Sunamudi, Beraboi, etc. and in course of time various welfare schemes were taken up by these centres. 17

Thus, the women of Odisha played their important role in the British period especially during Gandhian era. They did in such a manner the parallel of which is yet to be seen elsewhere, till the attainment of Indian freedom on the 15th August 1947. They provided their worth and genius as good social reformers.

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