



## Freedom Struggle and Rama Devi

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Men and women are like two wings of a nation. As the bird cannot fly with one wing while the other being paralysed so also the nation cannot progress without effective participation of the women for the greater cause for the advancement of the nation. When we recall our history of nationalism we cannot turn aside the leading role played by the women pioneers in the freedom struggle of Orissa. While remembering the women who break the new ground and left their footprints in the memoirs of the State we can never forget the name of Rama Devi, who is not only source of inspiration but an idol of womanhood for every woman of Orissa. When one cast his glance into the history of Independence Movement of India it became more prominent that along with men there were thousands of women who took a revolutionary role in the freedom struggle of the country and Rama Devi was one among them. The clarion call of Mahatma Gandhi awakened thousands of women leaders in Orissa as well as in India who jumped into the Indian Independence Movement with tremendous courage and vigour sacrificing all their comforts and luxury. Their works and self-sacrifices provide a rich insight into our glorious past when they lived upon.

When Sarojini Naidu, Anne Besant, Sucheta Kripalani, Aruna Asaf Ali, Pandita Ramabai, Bijayalaxmi Pandit who solemnly contributed their lives for the independence of the

country at the national level at the same time in Orissa women leaders like Rama Devi, Malati Choudhury, Shyamali Mohapatra, Sarala Devi, Sarojini Devi and Kuntala Kumari Sawat etc had taken leading part in the freedom struggle. The attempt and vision of the women freedom fighters for gathering momentum to the struggle of independence is really remarkable.

Among the women freedom fighters in Orissa Rama Devi occupied a unique and unparalleled position who played an outstanding role in the freedom movement of the state. Though she belonged to a very rich zamindar family she quit all her luxury and comfort for the cause of independence. She took active part in Salt Satyagraha, Khadi Movement, Bhoodan and Gramdaan Movement of Vinobaji and was imprisoned several times by the British Government. Still she did not lose her courage and tenacity towards accomplishment of her tasks and duty for the nation. She marched in bare feet from village to village in different corners of Orissa and held meetings to spread the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi, which motivated thousands of women in Orissa to come forward to take part in the freedom struggle of the State. Women in huge gatherings in villages listened her inspiring speeches and joined her in enormous number to strengthen the spirit of nationalism. Thousands of

women followed her who not only offered their ornaments, cloths and money in huge amount but also joined the struggle for independence and it became a mass movement against the autocratic rule of British Government in India.

Ramadevi had taken birth on 3rd December 1899 in the lap of Basanta Kumari Devi and Gopal Ballav Das in Cuttack district. From her childhood Ramadevi was more influenced by Utkal Gaurav Madhusudan Das, Mahatma Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave and Jayprakash Narayanan and after all by her parents. On 11th November 1914 she got married to Gopabandhu Choudhury the son of Sri Gokulananda Choudhury who happened to be one of the close family friends of her father at that time. Unlike her father-in-law, the mother-in-law was a staunch conservative woman of that time but still everybody loved her due to her good manner and polite behaviour. But she couldn't confine herself within the four walls of her in-laws house for a long time. The problems and miseries of the common men had driven her into the common platform where she was determined to give selfless service for them for the whole life.

The political career of Ramadevi started in the year 1921 when she joined the movement of National Congress along with her husband who left his service in the same year. They took part in different meetings of National Congress in different parts of the State. At that time the Non Co-operation Movement was started in the country and subsequently the entire family including her brother-in-law Nabakrushna Choudhury and his wife Malati Coudhury also took part in the National Movement. After joining National Congress she used to wear only khadi leaving apart the luxury sarees, cloths and ornaments. In her first meet with Mahatma Gandhi at Cuttack in the year 1921 in Orissa she offered

a hand woven cotton bundle to Mahatma when he could visualize the extraordinary potency and spirit of the woman for nationalism and patriotism.

She took active part in Salt Satyagraha in different corners of Orissa in the year 1930. Due to stringent prohibition of British Government in Cuttack to continue the movement she went to Inchudi and Srijang in Balasore District alongwith Kiranbala Sen and Malati Devi where thousands of women joined with them in the movement of Salt Satyagraha, which is popularly known as Inchudi Satyagraha. In the same year in the month of November police arrested Ramadevi and Pranakrushna Padhiari at Swaraj Ashram when Sarala Devi was in Vellore Jail and Malati Devi was in Bhagalpur Jail. Afterwards they were released from Jail after Gandhi Irwin Pact was signed. Some days latter she met Simanta Gandhi in the Karachi Session of Indian National Congress and there she requested Dr Rajendra Prasad to hold a meeting of Indian National Congress in Orissa.

Again she was arrested in the year 1932 and kept in the Hazaribagh jail. After being released from jail she engaged herself in the services of Harijan through the institution called *Asprushyata Nibarana Samiti* by the instruction of Gandhi for eradication of untouchability. There after the institution was renamed as *Harijan Sewa Sangha*. Ramadevi convinced people not to treat Harijans as untouchables and not to consume liquor. In the year 1934 Gandhiji had started his movement from Puri where Ramadevi was actively associated with Gandhiji in his works. In the year 1938 a meeting was held in the presence of Gandhiji, Kasturba, Maulana Azad, Rajendra Prasad and Sardar Ballav Bhai Patel in Orissa and Rama Devi was actively associated with it. She moved from village to village to collect money for the meeting and made it a success. After the

death of Kasturba Gandhi, Gandhiji assigned her with the work of the representative of Kasturba Trust's of Orissa Chapter. In the August Revolution of 1942 the entire family of Rama Devi including her husband Gopabandhu Choudhury were arrested.

She started an Ashram at Bari, which Gandhiji had named as *Sewaghar*. There the volunteers of the Ashram were engaged in various kinds of works like Khadi work, awakening of women in different issues, Basic Education, Spreading the National Language, rendering services to Harijans, cleaning the toilets, Self Services, Adult Education, Drug De-addiction and increasing self employment of common men through Dairy Development, Bee keeping, leather works and delivering health services to the patients. The workers of the *Sewaghar met* it from their own earnings through weaving cotton. Rama Devi used to supervise all these works of the Ashram herself. She was a unique and extraordinary personality, motherly, affectionate and stoic in character who did not react either in pain or in pleasure. She loved to give her service to the poor and downtrodden and completely dedicated herself for the service of others.

### **Rama Devi After Independence**

On 21st August 1947 *Utkal Khadi Mandal* was established and Rama Devi become an active member of it. She laboured hard for the development of the institution. There after she started a Teacher's Training Centre and established a *Balwadi* at Ramchandrapur and introduced a Sishu Vihar Yojana for the welfare of the children. In 1950 she established a Tribal Welfare Centre at the Dumburugeda for the welfare of the Scheduled Tribes. Rama Devi herself was supervising these works with much stress and strain. In 1951 Rama Devi and Malati Devi went to Koraput to give service to the famine

affected victims at Koraput and gave reliefs to them. She had also started Gramdan movement in these areas. She could not stand still after seeing the painful situations of the people and immediately rushed to the affected areas and rendered necessary services to the affected victims without any hesitation. During famine and flood she stretched her helping hand for the services of the affected and abandoned victims in different parts of Orissa. The natural calamities where she delivered her services were flood in Balasore, cyclone in Kendrapada, famines in Cuttack, Dhenkanal, Mayurbhanj, Kendrapada and Phulbani. During these difficult circumstances she took the help of Jayprakash Narayan and rendered services through Utkal Relief Committee. She also took active part in peace keeping through Hindu Muslim unity and also supported Student Movements.

Being influenced by the ideals of Sarvodaya Movements of Vinobaji, Rama Devi along with her husband Gopabandhu Choudhury started their foot march in the year 1952 in different corners of Orissa like Ganjam, Gunpur, Bisam Cuttack, Bhawanipatna, Sambalpur, Balangir, Brahmagiri etc. and covered 2000 miles and spread the ideals of Bhoodan Movements in the entire Orissa. The main aim of the march was to collect surplus land and in this process they collected 1000 acres of land from people and re- distributed land to the people who were landless. Subsequently they were associated with Vinobaji in the year 1955 when he came to Orissa. She presided over the meeting of All India Sarvodaya Convention held at Pandarpur. In the year 1962 in Indo China War this brave women had moved courageously to give selfless service to the Indian soldiers affected in the War. During emergency in the year 1975 alongwith Hare Krushna Mahatab Nilamani Routray, Rama Devi came forward to protest the situation. During that

time when freedom of press was curtailed Rama Devi introduced a newspaper in her own signature to spread the message to all quarters of people in Orissa. The newspaper was published from Gram Sewak Press, which was subsequently closed by the Government and was declared unlawful. Rama Devi persuaded common mass to fight against injustice.

Among her spectacular achievements are the establishment of the Cancer Detection Centre, Sishu Vihar at Cuttack. She was awarded with many awards and honors for her selfless service to the mankind. She also received many awards for her benevolent and philanthropic dispositions. She was awarded honorary

doctorate degree from Utkal University and felicitations from Jamunalal Bajaj Foundation. On 22nd July 1985 the great soul took her last breath but the ideals she imprinted in the heart of millions of common people will remain alive for all the time to come.

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