Participation of Oriya Women in the Indian Freedom Movement

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The Participation of Oriya women in India's freedom struggle is a sensational event. Their fiery patriotism, supreme valour and gifted organisational abilities are written in letters of gold in the annals of the Indian Freedom Movement.

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. In March 1921, Mahatma Gandhi addressed various public meetings in Orissa. He also addressed a small gathering of women at Vinod Vihari, Cuttack. Towards the end of 1921 Sarada Devi, with her husband visited Kanika, where the tenants were agitating against their pro-British Raja as well as the British authorities. Rama Devi (wife of Gopabandhu Chowdhury) 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, Sarala Devi, Sarojini Choudhury (daughter of Fakir Mohan Senapati), 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 impatience of some sisters to join the good fight is to me a healthy sign. In this nonviolent movement, their contribution should be much greater than of 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 Inchiudi, Rama Devi, accompanied by Malati Devi, Annapurna 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 April, 1930 they led a long procession of women to the Satyagraha centre and violated the Salt Law. It infused new life and lustre to the mass upsurge. Rama Devi, Annapurna Devi, Malati Devi and other women volunteers visited Srijang and encouraged the women folk of that area for violating Salt Law. Many Oriya ladies also took active part in preparing salt at different centres like Tundra, Boita, Inchiudi, Kuanpur, Keligaon, Rasulpur and Kasha. Huge quantity of salt manufactured at different centres were brought to Balasore for sale.

The involvement of Rani Bhagyabati Patamahadei of Kujang in the Salt Satyagraha drew special attention. Thwarting the vigilance of a magistrate and the police party, Rani
Patamahadei, Rama Devi and many other volunteers crossed to Kaliapata in a boat in the cover of the night. Hundreds of women following the ideal of their patriotic Rani came forward to prepare contraband salt.

In the district of Ganjam, under the leadership of Sarala Devi, Malati Devi and others the salt campaign took the shape of a mass upsurge. Sarala Devi and Malati Devi made extensive tours and in fused the ideals of Satyagraha into the minds of the women-folk of entire Ganjam area. About one-fourth of the participants were women who willingly joined the struggle.

Through women's participation in Salt Satyagraha, Gandhi ji continued to exhort women to channel their political energies into constructive work. Sarala Devi, Rama Devi and Malati Choudhury were the first among hundreds of women arrested alongwith the male leaders. During their time Kuntala Kumari Sabat, a patriotic poetess infused a spirit of revolution into hearts of the people through her writings like Ahwana (calling) and Sphulinga (particles of fire).

Gandhi ji's Padayatra in May, 1934 had a profound impact on the women of Orissa, as they were called upon to fight the evils of liquor, boycott of foreign clothes and to discard untouchability. Inspired by Gandhi ji's teachings, Rama Devi and her associates participated in the development of Khadi and Village Industries. They organised besetting of foreign clothes and picketing before liquor shops. Meanwhile Malati Devi carried on the Congress Socialist Movement with her husband. Sarala Devi became a member of the first Legislative Assembly of Orissa 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. On the 8th August, 1942 the All India Movement attempted to cast a final blow against British Imperialists. Many Congress workers including Malati Choudhury represented Orissa in this movement. The following day all the Congress leaders from various parts of India who had assembled at Bombay were arrested. Malati Choudhury alongwith Surendra Nath Dwivedy escaped the police dragnet and went into hiding in order to keep up the movement active and energetic.

On the same day in Cuttack and some other places of Orissa, 24 leaders including Rama Devi were arrested. The Government through Notification Nos.137 and 147, dated 9th August, 1942 declared all Congress institutions in Orissa as illegal. With much difficulties Malati Choudhury arrived at Cuttack on 12th August, 1942 and laid the foundation of the August Revolution in Orissa. 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 Maharana, Mangala Devi, Suryamani Devi, Gunamanjari Devi, Champa Devi, Pravabati Devi, Sita Devi, Laxmibai and many other contributed immensely in making the Quit India Movement a grand success.

After the attainment of Independence on 15th August, 1947 women like Rama Devi, Malati Devi, Sunamani Devi and Annapurna Maharana joined the Sarvodaya Movement started by Vinoba Bhave. The contributions of Rama Devi as a social worker and Malati Devi as a saviour of the tribal people is an unforgotten chapter in history.

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