



# Rama Devi : The New Light Among the Women Freedom Fighters of Modern Orissa

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Rama Devi was a resplendent socio-political leader among the women freedom fighters of modern Orissa, who became a legend in her lifetime. She responded to the clarion call given by Gandhiji to struggle for justice and not to become submissive before injustice. She was the symbol of women's pride, met the challenges posed by the social rigidity and political instability. For the growth and development of nationalism in the annals of the women rightists, her works had been magnificent. For achieving all these, she never hesitated to retort to the remarks passed by the British officials. Before her emergence in the freedom movement, the political awakening in the 19th century was confined to the higher strata of the society and did not percolate down to the level of the common man. The National Society<sup>1</sup> at Baleswar, Orissa Association<sup>2</sup> (*Utkal Sabha*) at Cuttack, and the *Utkal Hitaishini Samaj*<sup>3</sup> at Paralakhemundi were some of the early socio-political organisations formed by the elites to discuss and disseminate political ideas among the Oriyas. Raja Baikunthanath De, Madhusudan Das and Shyamasundar Rajguru provided leadership to these elite associations which had tremendous impact on Rama Devi and changed the course of her life and made her the symbol of "Universal Motherhood"<sup>4</sup> among the Oriyas.

Rama Devi was born at Satyabhamapur in Cuttack district on 3rd December 1899. Her

father was Gopal Ballabh Das, the then Deputy-Magistrate and mother was Basanti Manjari. Her forefathers belonged to Madhipur near Khurdha who migrated to Satyabhamapur in the 17th century. She was highly influenced by the three great ideals like, the Gandhian political ideology, kindness towards the destitutes and the high standard of leadership of Utkal Gaurab Madhusudan Das. The year 1921 was the turning point in the life of Rama Devi, when she joined her husband Gopabandhu Choudhury in the Khadi Movement<sup>5</sup> and became the staunch follower of Mahatma Gandhi. Practically she came in contact of Mahatma Gandhi, when he visited Orissa to attend the Women's Sammilani at the market complex of Binodbihari in Cuttack. In 1928 on the bank of the river Alaka, an ashram known as *Alakashrama*<sup>6</sup> was set up to look after the disease affected people under the leadership of Rama Devi. Besides, she organised a brigade of young girls by cutting across the class rigidity and distributed medicines among the poor masses. In 1930, at the Lahore Session, the Congress resolved to launch mass civil disobedience and to energise the people to fight for complete independence of India. 26th January of 1931 was decided to be celebrated as the 1st Independence Day all over India. For the first time the word "*Purna Swaraj*"<sup>7</sup> was taken up as a new slogan of our freedom struggle and it



reverberated in different parts of Orissa. Mass public meetings were organized to observe the pledge of Independence under the leadership of Rama Devi, Gopabandhu Chaudhury and Acharya Harihar Das. To commemorate 26th January as the 1st Independence Day of India, at Bhubaneswar in Orissa the national flag was even hoisted on the top of the Lingaraj Temple. As a result Rama Devi and some Congress men like Acharya Harihar Das, Lingaraj Mishra, Krupasindhu Hota and Bholanath Saha were arrested by the police. Rama Devi, Lingaraj Mishra and Gopabandhu Chaudhuri took over the charge of the movement and played a very dominant role in propagating the Congress views and the news of the mass movement in Orissa.<sup>8</sup>

Towards the end of February, Gandhiji decided to launch the Civil Disobedience Movement by breaking the Salt Law at Dandi, which provided utmost enthusiasm to the Congress leaders of Orissa. Since time immemorial the long sea coast of Orissa was able to produce fine salt but the British authorities had stopped its production much to the disappointment of the local people. No doubt it had caused misery to many poor people and the British salt tax was considered "the most iniquitous of all from the poor man's stand point. Hence Gandhi had decided to break it, and for the people of Orissa it was a heaven-sent opportunity to re-establish their traditional right to manufacture salt in the long coastal tract. Hence like Dandi on the west coast, Inchudi on the Balasore coast and Kujanga in Cuttack was selected by the Utkal Provincial Congress Committee for breaking the salt law. A batch of 21 volunteers proceeded from *Swaraj Ashram* of Cuttack on foot to Inchudi with Acharya Harihar Das, Gopabandhu Chaudhuri, Rama Devi, Malati Devi and many others.<sup>10</sup> There was a great enthusiasm among the people whose zeal to defy the government was intensified

by the arrest of Gopababu; Atal Bihari Acharya and Rama Devi at Cuttack. Undaunted by the arrest, several successive batches of *Satyagrahis* spread the movement to different parts of Orissa like Balasore, Basta, Bhadrak, Kujanga, Astaranga and the Chilka area. Led by Rama Devi, Malati Devi, Annapurna Devi, Laxmibai of Ganjam and others, Orissa was as if pulsated with a new life during this historic phase of national movement.

Despite depression and gruelling torture by the police under the leadership of Rama Devi, a batch of young girls belonging to the student community plunged into the Civil Disobedience Movement and boycotted the British goods and picketed in front of the offices, wine and opium shops. The educational institutions at Jajpur, Kendrapara, Patamundai, Mayurbhanj and Dharmasala, where most of the students gave up their studies, took part in the freedom movement.<sup>11</sup>

Rama Devi rose in stature and popularity. Her capacity as an organiser, speaker, indefatigable campaigner and inspirer of ordinary men and women was extraordinary. A veteran of the period of salt *satyagraha* she soon emerged as a social worker and vehemently opposed untouchability<sup>12</sup> and raised the slogan to treat the *Harijans* as own sons and daughters. She selected the Ashram at Bari in Cuttack district as her place of work. She urged upon the people to take care of the *Harijans* as human beings. She herself lived in their huts and colonies, washed their clothes and swept their floors and streets. She taught their children and looked after them.

Rama Devi worked hard to root out communalism, which often sparked off tensions among the Hindus and Muslims. She tried to re-unite them. Following the footsteps and ideals of Utkalamani Gopabandhu Das Rama Devi too



visited the flood-affected people of Cuttack, Balasore, Ganjam, Puri, and went round the famine affected areas like Rayagada.

Vinobaji, known as the Pitamaha Visma (of the epic *Mahabharata*), was the pioneer of 'Bhoodan movement' which cast a spell on Rama Devi. It added a new dimension to her social activities. Accompanied by Gopabandhu Choudhuri and Vinobaji, Rama Devi took up a foot - March, *Padajatra* at Khandasahi in Cuttack district. It took 4 months 22 days to be completed which is known as the historic *Bhoodan Yatra*.<sup>13</sup> In Orissa, Rama Devi organised a number of meetings and in her speeches she told the landlords that the *Harijans* and the landless poor were to be treated as their sons.<sup>14</sup> Immediately gifts of lands came flowing in. She went on foot from village to village and collected lands for the poor, some times she got a whole village and once or twice a whole district which were distributed among the landless.

Rama Devi was very fond of children and she spent time with them also. She delivered speeches and inspired them in educational institutions. She gave utmost emphasis to education, emancipation and empowerment of women. She emphasised on the ideals of *Janani Janma Bhumischa Swargadapi Gariyasi*.<sup>15</sup> It is the key to our nation's socio-economic progress. A women's college is named as Rama Devi Women's College which has been established at Bhubaneswar and dedicated to her sweet memory. She was a good writer also. '*Jeevan Pathe*' the autobiography of Rama Devi happens to be a masterpiece of all times.

Rama Devi is remembered among the Oriyas as a mother, Maa, for her multifarious socio-political activities and variously accepted as a lady of lamp, for her transparent character, selfless sacrifice and soft corner towards the

helpless destitutes and suffering millions. Her involvement in freedom movement, Bhoodan Movement and work against untouchability has rightly made her the new light among the women freedom fighters of modern Orissa.

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