Orissa has enriched and glorified the history of India by playing a very important role in the freedom struggle of the country. Thousands of people and leaders made tremendous sacrifices in their heroic confrontations against the British empire. Like other parts of India, various phases of the freedom struggle were launched in Orissa under the able leadership of Madhusudan Das, Pandit Gopabandhu Das, Nilakantha Das, H.K. Mahatab and Bhagirathi Mahapatra. But the participation of women in the freedom struggle forms an important and interesting aspect of the history of modern Orissa. It is of great significance in the history of Orissa in the sense that this mass participation brought political independence as well as socio-cultural regeneration for the state as desired by Bapuji.

By the clarion call of Mahatma Gandhi, the Indian National Congress held in Calcutta in September 1920. Here, Gandhi advocated for manifold non-cooperation with British Government. Which included boycott of impending elections under the Government of India Act of 1919, boycott of schools, colleges, offices and Law Courts etc., by Indians with a view to speeding up the process of achieving National Independence.\(^1\) Gandhi's visit to Orissa in 1921, the last week of March gave rise to great enthusiasm and fervour among the people, particularly among the women folk.\(^2\) On his arrival in Puri, he was greeted by a large crowd of men and women amidst the sounds of conch-shells and of *Hulahuli* by women. The non-cooperation movement became widespread in Orissa in 1921. Picketing before the shops selling foreign cloths was mainly done by women. The use of *Charakha* also became very popular with women. Picketing before liquor shops was mainly resorted by women who were more enthusiastic and active in the non-cooperation movement. They used hand woven cloths, gifted their jwelleries and ornaments to the Swaraj Fund under the leadership of Rama Devi for the cause of the motherland. In addition to Rama Devi, the other women leaders included Sarala Devi, Godabari Devi, Haimavati Devi and host of others, mostly hailing from advanced and well-to-do families imbued with the feelings of patriotic nationalism.\(^3\) The women of Cuttack organised public born fire of foreign goods at the call of Gandhiji. The women Satyagrahis called upon the general public to boycott schools, colleges, Law Courts and to non-cooperate with British administration in all possible manners. The women in Orissa immediately responded to this call of Gandhi and they resorted to different kinds of non-cooperative Satyagraha and courted arrest in large numbers and filled the jails. Gradually the number of female Satyagrahi activists swelled all...
over the state to the surprise of the Britishers and to the astonishment of male non-cooperators. Several *Ashrams* were founded to provide training and orientation to female Satyagrahis at different places. The Oriya women Satyagrahis donned swadeshi robes and travelled from place to place by bullock carts and on foot and spread the message of non-cooperation braving all the odds and hazards on their ways. In the town of Jharsuguda, one women Satyagrahi, Tulasi Devi was caught by the police and arrested while influencing the women of some neighbouring villages to join the National movement. And, thus, Orissa women remained at the forefront of Non-cooperation movement till such time it was withdrawn by Gandhiji as a protest against Chauri Chaura incident.

The next National movement launched by Gandhiji on 12th March 1930 is called Civil Disobedience movement. It started with breaking the Salt Law at Dandi. On the day of 6 April 1930, the first batch of 21 Oriya Satyagrahis, left the Swaraj Ashrama in Cuttack, and marched towards Inchudi under leadership of Gopabandhu Choudhury. They were ceremoniously garlanded by a band of gallant women satyagrahis headed by Rama Devi and Malati Choudhury. With this the Salt Satyagraha started in Orissa. The Salt Satyagraha in Baleswar district included Rasulpur, Srijang, Bhimpur, Tundra, Kuanpur, Ratai, Parikhi, Kheranga, Gudi, Rajabula, Salgaon, Athalaped, Boitar, Berhampur, Mandari and Eram. Hundreds of women Satyagrahis violated Salt Law there and courted arrests.

On 21 April, 1930, about 30 women led by Rama Devi, Malati Devi and Annapurna Devi violated Salt Law at Srijang and courted arrest. Kujanga was another prominent centre of violation of Salt Law. A public meeting of women was held in Cuttack on April 1930 under the presidentship of Kumudini Dasgupta for the purpose of recruiting women in the Salt Satyagraha. On May, 8, 1930 a large number of women including Rama Devi, Prafulla Kumari Hota gathered in Kunjanga and violated the Salt Law. The movement received added vigour with the joining of Rani Bhagabati in it. Rani Patamahadevi, Rama Devi and many other women Satyagrahis prepared the contraband Salt there. In Ganjam district, the Salt Satyagraha by women took place at different places like Ganjam, Rambha, Huma and Gopalpur. Among the prominent women Satyagrahis included J.V. Narayana, Kishoremani Devi, kundalata Devi, Sarala Devi, Malati Devi and Rama Devi who participated in the Salt Satyagraha movement there and courted arrest and imprisonment.

On 10 May, 1931 a convention of women was held in Cuttack under the presidentship of Janhabi Devi. Women from all over Orissa attended it. Rama Devi, Kiranabala Sen, Sundarmani Devi from Cuttack, Janhabi Devi and Kumudini Devi from Balesore, Chanchala Bala Jena, Radhamani Devi, Gouri Devi, and Rohini Devi from Satyabadi and Sabitri Devi, Kumudalata Devi from Nimapara in Puri district attended. Matters regarding the national movement, social reforms, education, etc. were discussed. Gandhiji returned being frustrated from London after attending the Second Round Table conference in September 1931. He resumed the civil disobedience movement in December, 1931. The Orissa Congress men and women readily responded to Gandhiji’s call and jumped again into the second civil disobedience movement. Thus women played a glorious role in the Civil Disobedience movement at par with their male counterparts. Their greater involvement in the movement provided them special place of honour and renown in the annals of the National Movement. Their rich experience of struggle in the civil disobedience movement subsequently
enabled them to play equally glorious role also in public life of the state after 1936 and onwards in manifold ways.  

From Salt Satyagraha to the Individual Civil Disobedience movement the participation of women in the Freedom Struggle was not appreciable barring a few like Rama Devi, Sarala Devi, Malati Choudhury, A. Laxmibai and Godabari Devi. The undying impulses of women to participate in the movement was found largely in the Individual Civil Disobedience Movement of 1940 thus culminating in the Quit India Movement in 1942.

After the failure of the Cripps Mission, Gandhiji got his famous "Quit India Resolution" passed in the Wardha Session of Indian National Congress, which was finally approved by the All India Congress Committee in Bombay on 8th Aug., 1942, that gave authority to Gandhiji to start a non-violent mass movement asking the British to Quit India forthwith. In the mean time, the movement spread like wild fire in every nook and corner of the country, including in those of Orissa. On 8th August, 1942, Indian National Congress held its session at Gwalior Tank Field in Bombay which was attended by 250 representatives from states. Malati Choudhury was one among five representatives from Orissa. They returned with Gandhiji’s message that "Our country is independent from today, follow the peaceful method, paralyse the Government. You yourself become a leader. This is the last struggle. In it there is no compromise." While spreading this "Do or Die" message among the people in Orissa, 24 Congress leaders including the gallant Rama Devi were arrested who exercised effective control over the public in the State. Malati Choudhury took an outstanding role in the underground activities in the 1942 Revolution. As an underground leader she guided the progress of the movement at different parts of Orissa. She remained a leading woman stalwart in the movement. Like her, Sarala Devi, Rama Devi and Annapurna Maharana remained leading figures in the revolution of August, 1942. In addition to them, a host other women figures who also led the movement were Sunamani Devi, Susila Kanungo, Bela Devi, Nisamani Devi, Bilasi Devi, Usha Devi, Sakuntala Devi, Kshetramani Devi, Uttara Choudhury, Godavari Devi, Mangala Devi, Sobharani Panda, Prabhavati Devi, Bimala Devi, Parbati Guru, Susila Devi, Sobhabati Panda, Champa Devi, Baralaxmi Devi, Hemalata Sumanta, Apurba Devi, Suryamma and Timulu Arhalu. Their dedications, sacrifices and sufferings for motherland have no parallel in the history of our freedom movement.

And, thus, the women of Orissa played their most glorious and heroic role in all phases of freedom movement such as Non-cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, Individual Civil Disobedience Movement and in the Quit India Movement, the parallel of which are hardly to be seen elsewhere, which finally seeded the process of attachment of freedom on the 15th August, 1947. Women of Orissa, though illiterate and backward, made valuable contribution for the success of the movement. It is a saga of bravery and dedication.

To conclude, the most important factors responsible for political awakening among women masses in Orissa was the first visit of Gandhiji to the state beginning in 1921. In fact, his visits to Orissa had created consciousness among elite female leaders to join the mainstream of the freedom struggle as well as to work for the cause of socio-economic upliftment and emancipation of women. Further, due to his visits, a large number of women folks in Orissa had decided to plunge themselves into the national movement.
under the leadership of some prominent female freedom fighters. Analysing the mode of response and participation of women in the freedom struggle, it is evident that the force which was away from the National Struggle added strength and vitality to it. The advantage of women participation was specially marked by the wave of sympathy and appreciation aroused among the common people. This inspired male compatriots to make the Movement more intensive and vigorous.

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3. Mahatab, H.K.-Sadanara Patha (Oriya), Cuttack, 1972, pp.120-129.
4. Young India, 2 March, 1930.
5. Samaj, 19 March, 1930.

Abbreviation
INC - Indian National Congress
GM - Gandhian Movement
Pt. - Pandit
INA - Indian National Army
OR - Orissa Review
O - Oriya.

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