



Participation of Women in the National Movement and Feminist Consciousness in Colonial Odisha

Kailash Chandra Dash

(I)

Oh you men, if you do not rise up this time
 We will march forward clad in warrior's dress
 We, women, coming out of the seclusion,
 Will take up the sword of non-cooperation
 In the thick of fight of peaceful Satyagraha
 Will march in procession batch by batch
 What though our heads are hung on the gallows
 We fear not the funeral pyre or fire pit.
 To-day the commander has called
 Rise ye, the heroic sons of India.
 Into this unique battlefield of non-cooperation
 Enter ye one by one girding up your loins.
 Ye all the famous heroes of India
 Come forward at the call of the Commander.
 Gandhi, the greatest Yogi, is your leader
 ye men and women rise up thinking of Siva.
 No use there is of guns and cannon in this
 The only weapon is your life.
 The drops of your blood are shots and powder
 Come ye armed with this weapon
 Your commander has called
 Come who will first offer his life
 Come together ye Hindus, Mussalmans.
 Sikhs, Parsis, Buddhists, Jews and Christians.
 Your home is in Hindustan
 Insult to it is insult to you.

These words of *Kuntala Kumari Sabat* in her revolutionary poem *Ahwana*¹ in 1930 in the wake of the spread of the Gandhian strategy against colonialism and British imperialism interestingly explain the consciousness of women in colonial Orissa and their marked participation in the national movement. This consciousness first came in Bengal in the last phase of the 19th century among the women. The most powerful periodical *Banga Mahila* appeared in 1876 expressing the nationalistic ideas of Bengali women². It was in the second decade of the 20th century only the Oriya women got their first periodical *Paricharika* to express their ideas³. There were women poets like Sulakshyana Devi and Sulochana Devi who had the courage to speak against orthodoxy in a well known periodical like *Sambalpur Hiteisini*, but the tone was very mild and was still not comparable with that of the Bengali women. Orissa till the 1920s lacked the leadership of a powerful women like Sarala Devi-Chaudhuruni-the first Bengali women leader in the national movement⁴. In the 20th century with the advent of the Gandhian phase women in India participated in large numbers against colonialism and British imperialism. Their involvement in the national movement had a linkage with the women movement which was directed at first to the shaping of the feminist consciousness⁵. Orissa like



Bengal in the Gandhian phase provided a fine paradigm of feminist consciousness. In Orissa the role of women in the anti-colonial struggle led to the concurrent progress of the feminist consciousness on the dominant trends of a patriarchal culture. This feminist consciousness along with women participation in the national movement constitutes a significant aspect of the history of Swaraj. This paper looks at some of these trends in Orissa in the Gandhian phase.

(II)

A consciousness for female education was already fostered by many social activists like Chaturbhuja Pattnaik, Viswanath Kar, Srivatsa Panda, Jayamangal Rath and Bairagi Mishra in Orissa. But the educational activities did not suddenly change the attitude of women in Orissa towards the problems which were perplexing the entire country. Even if the female education was encouraged, the house-wife culture (to be confined to the four walls of the father-in-law's house) was much appreciated in Orissa. Women writings were not found relating to the political problems in the country even in the beginning decade of the 20th century A.D. Kuntala Kumari Sabat, Sarala Devi and Basanta Kumari Devi actually set a stage for women consciousness which became widespread with others participation. Kuntala Kumari through her patriotic poems stimulated the Oriya women and particularly her *Ahwan* on Gandhian movement became very popular with the women in the rural areas. It was Sarala Devi who stood as the most prominent woman activist in the anti-colonial struggle in Orissa. Her participation in the national movement and her consequent effort to feminize political and social discourse to foster feminist consciousness in Orissa were really interesting aspects of our enquiry on the national movement.

From a typical conservative upper middle class set up Sarala emerged like a fiery deity and contributed a lot to the movement for the empowerment of women in colonial Orissa. Her entry into the nationalist politics, her articulation of Oriya identity, her opposition to the housewifeization and her search for women freedom have been presented in the periodicals and the journals of the time. The famous Sabuja poet in Orissa *Anada Sankar Ray* in his auto-biography has presented the life of Sarala before she came to the focus of Orissa politics in an interesting manner⁶. Sarala Devi (1904) from her very childhood had an independent mind. She had also enlightened herself by reading many books in English and Bengali. In the 1920s the Sabuja group contributed to the fostering of a new atmosphere for romantic Oriya literature. Anada, Kalindi, Baikuntha, Harihara and Sarat Chandra were the five friends in this group. The group was determined to publish a novel entitled *Basanti* in the well-known journal *Utkala Sahitya*. They wanted 12 persons to write the novel. But they were only five. They gave out a declaration for the writing of the novel. The address of Kalindi Panigrahi was published in the newspaper for this purpose. Sarala gave a letter to participate in the novel writing. From her letter Anada was convinced that she was enough talented to write a novel. He advised her to talk to Kalindi and at last she became a member to write. This participation of Sarala with the Sabuja group deepened her knowledge and she was possibly thinking to be a literary figure with all independence. Her marriage with Bhagirathi Mahapatra, son of a Jamindar in Jagatsinghpur restricted her activities for a time. She did not want this early marriage and it was forced upon her. The restricted life in her father-in-law's house was beyond her tolerance. She wanted to be free from this and so there was a revolting tendency in



her mind during that phase. But freedom was not easy to achieve. She had a comfortable family life, but this *Ragi Yubati* (angry lady) as recalled by Anada Shankar wanted freedom and free participation in the social life. After she gave birth to a son, she got some freedom and there was a sort of understanding between herself and her husband. Already during that time Gandhian programmes were popular in Orissa and she could influence her husband to be active for the cause of the country. A nationalist institution like *Alakashrama* was established in Jagatsinghpur in which Bhagirathi Mahapatra was associated and the inspiration of Sarala was there for him. The rise of Sarala in politics in that Gandhian phase was so well-known that H.K. Mahatab in his work *Dasha Varshara Odisha* had given a creditable place to her in nationalist struggle for asserting herself in the face of great problems⁷.

When Sarala started her political and literary career, a band of women activists had already come to the forefront—Manorama Devi, Nishibala Nayak, Pramoda Sundari Devi, Rasapriya Devi, Kokila Devi, Vishnupriya Devi and Jahnvi Devi. They were actively engaged in the reforming activities for the uplift of women in the society. At that stage a famous woman activist was Basanta Kumari Devi. In 1927 when Mahatma Gandhi was planning to visit Orissa she wrote a letter for the women which was published in *Utkala Dipika* of 10th December 1927. She stated that *Mahatma was welcomed by women in the different parts of the country during his tour and that they could happily grant donations. In Cuttack there were ladies, but there was no arrangement on their behalf to present donations for his Khadi programmes. Was Mahatma working for the males only? The spread of Khadi work would be very useful to the ladies. The widows would be the most benefitted by this programme. Now-a-days all*

types of women are conscious of their duties and rights and they are prepared to work for their country. What about the Oriya women (Odiyani)? Would they remain only in the kitchen room? She appealed to the ladies of Cuttack to present donations to Mahatma Gandhi according to their capacity for the spread of Khadi work. This appeal clearly emphasized the point of women consciousness in Orissa during the beginning phase of Gandhian leadership.

As early as 1927-28 women demand for the reform of the society was forceful in Orissa. Sarala through her discourse created a new consciousness. Her important articles containing the problems of women in India—*Hindu Samrajyare Nari Samasya O Sanstithi* (Women problems in the Hindu Society), *Adhunika Yugare Odia Nari* (Oriya Women in the Modern Age), *Kanyasunakatha* (about the purchase of girls on payment for marriage) appeared in the Weekly Newspaper *Asha* in 1929 and subsequently by 1935 she had composed booklets like *Utkalare Narisamasya*, *Narira Davi*, *Bharatiya Mahila Prasanga*, *Narira Jagata* and *Virangana*. These were actually discourses and aimed to foster feminist consciousness in Orissa. No woman writer could write such powerful prose pieces like that of Sarala in the 1930s and 1940s particularly with the purpose of activating women and consciously engaging their attention to the constructive works in the society as well as articulating the neo-identity of the Oriyas. No doubt Kuntala presented patriotic poems which contributed to the women consciousness. But Sarala was responsible through the feminization of social and political discourses in creating feminist consciousness in Orissa. The articles were full with revolutionary and radical ideas and in them there was a bold attempt to reform a patriarchal cultural set-up.



Sarala's role in the anti-colonial struggle led her to be associated with villages. She strove for female education and constructive programmes. A good example of this type was her admiration for the nationalist institutions like Alakashrama of Jagatsinghpur and Gandhi Sevashrama of Champapur which was established by the famous Gandhian Govinda Mishra⁸. In November 1931 Sarala presented an account of this institution after her visit to the area. She wanted this Sevashrama to be a centre of Congress activities and constructive programmes.

Sarala took an active role in the Civil Disobedience Movement of Mahatma Gandhi and she was arrested on 31st May 1930 while she was proceeding to Palasa through the Brahmapur Railway station⁹. She was tried in the sub-divisional court of Chhatrapur and was given six months' imprisonment. She was sent to the women jail at Vellore. In consequence of her imprisonment in Berhampur there was one day Hartal on 1st June. In the morning about one thousand people started procession by Kirtan and there was a great meeting at Hatapada in the evening in protest to this event. According to the report of the weekly newspaper Nabeen of 3rd June 1930 there were eight women leaders including Sarala Devi who were arrested by that date. The other women leaders were Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, Lakshmiapati Mandraji, Durgadevi, Satyavati (grand-daughter of Svami Sraddhananda), Kamala Devi and Srimati Mitra. This imprisonment of Sarala in the Civil Disobedience Movement elevated her position. She was released after six months in December 1930.

In the 1930s and 1940s she was very busy in the making of the feminist consciousness in Orissa. In her articles published in different periodicals and journals she demanded economic independence for women. Her articles in large

number focusing specifically women movement in Orissa were published in well-known periodicals like *Asha*, *Nabeen* and in the journals like *Utkala Sahitya* and *Sahakara*. Highlighting her contribution in 1934 *Modern Review of Calcutta* (in its November issue) remarked;

Smt. Sarala Devi of Utkala is the first lady to be appointed as the Director of the Cutack Central Co-operative Bank. Orissa owes much to her activity, both in the political sphere and social reform activities. She has given a strong impetus to the progress of the women's movement in that province. She has broken through the long standing Purdah system prevalent in her community. She is a member of the All-India Congress Committee. She presided over the Tamilnadu Women's Conference held at Erode in the Madras Presidency. She is a self-made lady, having fought her way in all her struggles with orthodox society and adverse circumstances.

Sarala got a good position in the All India sphere during the 1930s like Jethi Kripalini, Bhagubai Desai who were very famous in India.

Like Sarala Devi there were many other prominent women leaders and activists in Orissa. In the 1920s and 1930s Ramadevi, Malatidevi, Sailabala Das, Pratibha Kar, Suprabha Kar, Sukhalata Rao, Sudhanshubala Hazra, Sarojini Chaudhuri, Sundarmani Parija, Nirmala Devi, Haimabati Devi, Avanti Devi, Annapurna Rukmani Devi, Vishnupriya Devi, Sita Devi and many others became active in Orissa and they had participation not only in the national movement but also in the making of the feminist consciousness in Orissa¹⁰. Their constructive works in the Gandhi Sevashrama at Champapur, Kadua Ashram at Sakhi Gopal and in Bari Sevashrama definitely point to their earnest effort for women regeneration in Orissa. It is interesting to note that Sunamani Devi and Annapurna Sahoo could



proceed to Sabarmati Ashram of Mahatma Gandhi for sufficient training which could help them to work constructively in Orissa. In 1930 the women workers were needed to undertake Khadi work in Alakashrama and we know from the autobiography (*Jibana Pathe*) that Prafulla, wife of Biswanath Hota of Balasore, Lakshmi, wife of Satyabadi Nanda of Puri, Sobha, wife of Antaryami Panda of Ganjam and Gunamanjari, wife of Lalbihari of Puri came to the Ashram for this purpose¹¹. This indicates a growing women consciousness in Orissa in the Gandhian phase.

The Quit India Movement or the August Revolution of 1942 marked the final phase of the mass upsurge against British colonialism¹². It was conspicuous by its quantitative and qualitative territorial reach as well as broad social reach¹³. Women in Orissa took active part in this movement¹⁴. Rama Devi and Malati Devi were arrested during this movement. Nandini Devi, then a student leader, also had an active participation in this phase of the national movement¹⁵. Chakradhara Mahapatra a well-known writer in Orissa in an interesting article focused the role of Nandini in the movement and in that article he presented the reactive tone of the people of Cuttack by her arrest¹⁶. Nandini started to write short stories on the situation in Orissa and published them in Nabeen, a powerful weekly literary newspaper from Brahmapur¹⁷. Women leaders in Puri, Sambalpur and Ganjam were equally conscious in this phase.

There were some feminist magazines in Orissa during this phase. The first was *Paricharika* or *Sikshya Darpan* which was edited by Basant Kumari Devi in the middle of the second decade of the 20th century A.D. Sarala Devi had contributed Rs.24 in 1919 for its publication¹⁸. Sarala herself edited a woman magazine named *Sabita* which was short-lived.

On behalf of Bihar Orissa Women Council Sukhalata Rao had published and edited *Aloka* which contained women writings. Sarat Kumari Samantaray on behalf of *Utkala Christian Association* also edited for some time a women magazine called *Prabhat* which was more on the missionary activities in Orissa than on women problems in general. However, from 1937 Sarala Devi published her views for feminist consciousness in Orissa in a permanent column called *Mahila Mahala* in a well-known monthly Oriya magazine named *Sahakara*¹⁹.

The most powerful articulation on feminist identity in Orissa came from Sarala Devi in connection with the publication of highly obscene matters relating to the ladies in the 1940s when she took all successful steps against this publication²⁰. Sarala Devi as Secretary of Utkala Sahitya Samaj in a letter to the Premier of Orissa on 9th November 1943 intimated on this aspect²¹. She stated in her letter- "As the representative of the women of Orissa I have brought it to your serious notice time and again that the papers, the *Satkatha* edited by Raghu Rout and the *Niankhunta* by Godavarish Mahapatra have been publishing highly obscene matters relating to ladies. If I remember aright you were pleased to assure me that your Government would do everything possible to suppress this unbridled licence enjoyed by these two papers. Recently the Utkala Sahitya Samaj, the premier literary body of Orissa and Orissa States, brought it to the notice of your Government in its petitions dated 27th September 1943 addressed to the Chief Secretary that (I) the paper *Niankhunta* in its VIIth issue of the year 3 has published a poem named *Nari O Mahanadi* in the 4th stanza of which the editor had referred to the genital organ of a lady and shamelessly written that it was deep and long like the *Satkosia Ganda* of the river *Mahanadi* with male organs in it and countless seminal germs



and that (II) the books, *Bibaha Bigyana* and *Kamabigyana* published by the Manmohan Press, Cuttack contained highly obscene matters in the shape of vulgar description of sexual matters, named pictures and portraits of the different poses of sexual coitus. The books were found in our library and we found also that young students were reading them from day to day with great enthusiasm.

We requested your Government to take action against the editor, printer, publisher and the proprietor of the press in which the *Niankhunta* and those two books had been printed under section 292 IPC which is a cognizable offence in the penal code. But instead of ordering the magistracy and the police to take action under this section your Government in their letter No.3410 dated the 25th October 1943 of the Special Section shook all responsibility in the matter and suggested that the *Utkala Sahitya Samaj* if it so liked should institute a criminal case. I must submit that this attitude of your Government is totally inconsistent with the kind assurance you gave me that it would do everything in its power to suppress the gutter press of Orissa. The *Utkal Sahitya Samaj* had also moved the police and the police had under section 292 arrested not only the editor of the *Niankhunta* but also the proprietor of the *Saraswata Press* of Cuttack in which it is printed. They had also started investigation in right earnest although it is not known what exactly they had done with regard to the books *Bibaha Bigyana* and *Kama Bigyana*.

But unfortunately the order of the Under Secretary to your Government in special section referred to above had a damping effect on the police and they have suddenly dropped the case against the *Niankhunta*. It is quite likely that the decision of your Government not to take any action has percolated to the police and the

magistrate of Cuttack and they have without any justification dropped the prosecution against the *Niankhunta* after having duly arrested the persons connected with its publication. It is possible that they will not take any action against the persons connected with the publication of the two books referred to above.

It is understood that after arresting the persons connected with the publication of the *Niankhunta* the police referred the matter to the Government pleader, Cuttack who has opined that the case cannot stand. The conduct of this Government Pleader was suspected in connection with the case pending against the *Satakatha* when he dropped some respectable prosecution witnesses without any justifying cause. The incident is quite well known to you and now again the same Government Pleader has come to the picture by completely sabotaging a similar case against the paper *Niankhunta*. The *Oriya Translator* to the Government who also deposed in favour of the editor of the *Satakatha* has joined hands with the Government Pleader and submitted a thoroughly misleading translation of the stanza 4 of the alleged obscene poem.”

In the end she stated that the Premier of Orissa would be pleased to call for the file from the police and judge whether there was or was not a case against the *Niankhunta* and whether the police was justified in dropping the case against the paper or not. Thus she was very critical of the obscene literature in Orissa and wanted strong action from the side of the Government against this design.

In conclusion we may add that in the wonderful awakening in India in the Gandhian phase of anti-colonial struggle there was the clear demand on the part of the women for freedom and self-development as also for service²². Service without freedom is slavery as stated by Rajkumari



Amrita Kaur²³. Women's movement is the full expression of instinctive desire of women to rise to full liberty of soul, to the fullest development as human beings. To serve wholeheartedly, to give without stint, is an essential part of the development of a free woman. These words of Amrita Kaur were not only applicable to the women movement in some parts of India they were also applicable for the women activists of Orissa in the Gandhian phase. In Orissa women had long been pushed to the seams of history. A conscious resistance appeared during the Gandhian phase due to the interaction of several forces and the marginalization of women in history and in society could be pushed aside by the efforts of many women in Orissa.

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Kailash Chandra Dash, Reader in History, B.A.College, Brahmapur-6, Dash.kailashchandra@rediffmail.com.