

Reminiscing with the Legend : An Interview with Smt. Annapurna Moharana

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Indian women turned themselves to be pathfinders instead of being a mere passive voice in the struggle for freedom. In a time when India was fighting for freedom from the British Raj the Indian women were fighting against the orthodox Indian society as well as the Raj. Thus, the dawn of independence saw two spheres: one, the freedom of the motherland and two, the freedom of the mother. But the question is whether the Indian women are really free? The answer perhaps lies within the great journey of a true Indian woman, the legendary Smt. Annapurna Moharana. India has many courageous daughters like Annapurna Devi, who explains us through her legendary work as a freedom fighter and protector of our nation, the true essence of a woman.

Capturing the essence of a woman through the very epitome of womanhood was proving to be too heavy for the psyche of a woman of this generation but I was ready to meet the legend. As I approached Annapurna Devi's house



with trepidation I saw through a dark passage a sunshine drenched courtyard and a vision in a white saree sitting in an old fashioned arm-chair with such grace that the first picture of Annapurna Devi is still fresh in my mind even t-day.

Annapurna Devi is completely unaware of her legendary status, I was further humbled in her presence when she welcomed with folded hands. She could perhaps sense my nervousness, so she made me feel very much at home as we sat in the courtyard and began a very informal interview. It was like listening to a story from my grandmother. Thus, the story of Strength, Courage and Struggle unfolded.

Being a Women's Studies student I was naturally curious about the status of women and my first question to Annapurna Devi was regarding the status of women in Odisha during the freedom movement? Her answer was an eye opener. She said; let me tell you the events starting from the year 1923-24 because before that I was a child. So let me speak of my

experiences from that time, usually the women of middle class and lower middle class stayed home and were not allowed to come out to work even talking to men or any association with the male society was considered lowly for a woman of this class, but the labour class women used to work in fields as well as their homes and various other work and activities which led them outside their homes. Thus, the difference between these two classes of women was evident, as exposures by working in fields, going to market etc. And their exposure to the outside world or coming in touch with their male counterparts was not possible. Secondly the education of women was hardly considered despite what is said in the story of Fakir Mohan Senapati in Rebat. The need of women's education was not at all thought upon. In Cuttack there was hardly any family in which the girl child was given an education. I didn't go to school as well as my father was a non-cooperative member. I couldn't go to any government school. Such was the status of women during that period of time.

I then asked her how did you being a young woman of those orthodox times came about in playing such major role in the freedom movement ?

She smiled and said that is because the paternal sides of my family like my father, mother, uncle, aunty and brother took part in the freedom movement. Hence the environment of my home completely changed and I saw many such women who took part in freedom movement during that time. When I went to Calcutta with my parents I saw great women freedom fighters such as Sarojini Naidu, Jyotirmoye Ganguly, I also visited Karachi Congress and saw women from all over India who have struggled for freedom and had taken much hardship for our country. Thus these exposures inspired me in a great way. But mainly

it was my family's influence on me for being involved in the freedom movement.

I was very awe-struck by the famous women personalities in her family and wanted to hear about them, so I asked did your mother Smt. Rama Devi and your aunt Smt. Malati Devi inspire you in your role as a freedom fighter or was it because of the problems and atrocities ?

She playfully gave my head a pat and said this was an intelligent question and said my mother Smt. Rama Devi and my aunty Smt. Malati Devi inspired me to become a freedom fighter. My Aunt was a student of Rabindra Nath Tagore, when she was to appear for Matriculation but in 1921 Gandhiji urged everyone to leave school and colleges. So, she wanted to join the movement and went to stay with her uncle as she didn't want to appear for the exams but her mother was highly educated and her grandfather D.L. Gupta was an I.C.S, So they forced her to give the exams. But after that she didn't study under Government schools. She studied in Shantiniketan which was a national institute. My mother was the daughter of the younger brother of Utkal Gouraba Madhusudan. So, from childhood she heard about activities on how to make Odisha free, how to literate women etc. Then Khudiram was hanged, this made a great impact on her mind. Thus, by facing such an environment of freedom movement both sisters in laws i.e. my mother and my aunt were as if prepared for the movement. Their attitude was formed from the start.

Women at those times were very vulnerable and perceiving a woman as a fighter for any cause was unthinkable, so I was very interested to know whether the role of women freedom fighter accepted during those times ?

She answered apart from Malati Devi and Rama Devi, let us consider them as exceptions;

usually people did not appreciate this role. When Gandhiji said that women like men have equal right to fight for their nation, and they can work better than men as a woman is known for herself sacrificing nature and can give her life for her child. Thus, by hearing this many women became inspired but our society was not at all accepting of this new Avatar the women wanted to portray. There were very few women whose husbands, father or brother went to jail with her or join her in the freedom movement. Most of the women revolted against their families to join the movement, as in those times if a woman steps out of her house against the wishes of her family she was considered a disgrace. But a woman Sushila Devi Singh escaped this cordon but she was spotted and was tried to be captured, she hid in a bush and later she came and joined the movement in Cuttack, her in laws and even her own father didn't allow her in their home. This is the story of one woman but many women like her tried to join the movement. They came from all over the place like Puri, Balasore etc. but our society didn't at all approve of this and tried to hold them back at all junctures.

In another instance two women one elderly and another one of the age around 18-19 came to our house as they heard of my mother and aunt. They wanted to join the movement but they couldn't be kept in our house as there were spies and the CID that kept a watch over our house and would have arrested them. So they hid in other places. In those hideouts oral training were given to them on different aspects like the national flag, why we can die for the national flag, why we have to discard foreign clothes etc. were the types of training that was given to them verbally but not by books and while they were involved in a protest march they were arrested and went to jail. A sub-inspector was the brother of one of the ladies and when he was notified he came and

verbally abused her and even physically abused her as well he then asked her to beg forgiveness to the Government to be pardoned but the lady despite her brother's abuses and persuasiveness did not budge from her stand. Like this there were many women who fought with their families to fight against the British Raj. Men had only one aim or goal to fight for the Britishers but women had to fight the society as well as the Britishers.

During the freedom movement prominent figures such as Mahatma Gandhi were associated with your family. Could you share your experiences with him ?

In the freedom movement Gandhiji was the most important figure, many people were encouraged by him to join the freedom movement. He first came to Odisha in 1921, I was very young then. During that time the first women's assembly was held in Odisha, in Binod Bihari. Gandhiji gave a speech there about demolishing casteism and regarding weaving one's own clothes, etc. In this assembly a lady came into prominence known as Sarala Devi, who was a member of the Congress Party and she urged others to become members as well as attend meetings of men, talked to many men, got involved in freedom movement and committed blunders according to other women and some orthodox men. In 1924 a meeting was held in Town Hall that was attended by many women as well but their sitting arrangement was done inside a covering of bamboo's known as Cheka but Sarala Devi for the first time went out of the Cheka and sat with the men and even gave a speech. All the older orthodox women present in this meeting criticized her for such action. Sarala Devi despite all these difficulties took part in the freedom movement.

As far as our association with Gandhiji is concerned, when Gandhiji visited Odisha he went

from Puri to Bhadrak we also went with him and stayed with him during his visit to our State. He walked for nearly 8 kms daily to visit places. He stayed for nearly 29-30 days. His visit in Odisha started on 9th May and ended on June 8th. In his speech he always used to say that we need equality among us first, thus, to have a free nation we need to have a free society. He wanted women to work on equal turf with men. He wanted to empower the women of our nation.

Such reminiscing brought a side to the legend's demeanor which was a sight to behold as she was animated and agitated at the same time, trying to make me understand how important equality of women was and still is in our society, I tried to lessen her agitation by trading on safe grounds in my next question to her which was home ground for her that is the many Ashrams started by her family where ever they owned land. I thus, asked her regarding the functions of these Ashrams and the role it played in the freedom movement ?

Annapurna Devi was happy to talk about the Ashrams as it meant a lot to her to be associated with her family property in a way no daughter is. She said there were two kinds of ashrams before the independence, they were ashrams in many villages like Delanga, Bairi, etc. and the people who came to these Ashrams had main goal that was independence, they used to discuss on steps to take for freeing our nation, improving the society etc. Many people collected large sums of money and gifted Gandhiji on his birthday to form a forum and work for the society. But Gandhiji wanted to use the money for the benefit of women by women. But the learned men of our society didn't want to use the money for this purpose. Thus, Gandhiji said let them destroy the money, the inner strength of women needs to be aroused and they need to be empowered. In

1944 he got the money and started a Trust to uplift women in many places in Odisha like Koraput, Puri, Sambalpur etc. This Trust worked for two purposes: one being SEBA, by taking nursing training, Balbadi training that helps little children and two, Empowerment of women: making women aware that her place is not only inside her house but with in the society and making women aware about her work in the community and for the upliftment of other women and help women in villages, to keep the villages clean and perform all philanthropic work.

I then asked her about a group I was very interested in since my childhood the Banara Sena as well as the Nari Shakti. what purpose according to you did these two groups solve?

She was very happy to be reminiscing about the Banara Sena; it brought back playful memories for her. We worked with Banarsena, she said. Little children of this group did picketing in front of alcohol shops against Britishers. They participated in the revolt in many ways and as they were children they could not be jailed and there wasn't any reformatory place for children then, so they went scot free of all their revolutionary activities. The only punishment they got was a beating on their hands from a stick for 15-20 times or being taken to a long distance and being left there, so they had to walk back home. But in spite of this they were never scared off. As far as Nari Shakti is concerned women formed a powerful group with this and revolted against the Britishers in many ways. But women eventhough jailed were not mistreated in imprisonment.

After sharing light-hearted moments in the glee of Banar Sena I asked her about some serious matters like during the freedom movement of Odisha what were the activities against the Britishers ?

One of the major activities was picketing in front of the alcohol and drug shops, picketing against foreign clothes and other goods. Starting processions and explaining the people to revolt against the Britishers by singing patriotic songs, explaining how our countries revenue is being exploited by the British and some other activities were like the celebration of 26th January and on this day a notice was issued and read. It was a daily regarding the history of India and in its first paragraph it was written that any government that worked against the rights of its people could be overthrown by the people etc. this was read every 26th January and the people involved were arrested, lathi charge took place. Despite all these difficulties there were many other activities like flag hoisting, processions, singing patriotic songs etc.

I asked with hesitation whether she had ever gone to jail.

She laughed heartily especially seeing my discomfort in asking her this question and replied proudly, yes I have gone to jail, once in 1932 and then in 1942 and 1944 because I actively worked against the British government. I took part in many activities like when Gandhiji said salt is for everyone and then went to the sea shore to take salt, we also went with him and as it was illegal we were jailed.

I then asked her that by going to jail so many times how it affected her as a person and her status as a woman ?

She answered my entire family was involved in this and they were also jailed along with me. And others who were jailed were not affected as well because inside the jail the environment was completely patriotic and everyone was positively influenced. The

environment in the jail was inspiring to the people. At times people were jailed for six months and the village women who were mostly illiterates were educated about the true essence of nationalism by literate women jailed with them like Rama Devi, Sarala Devi. Thus, these types of people also took part to stay in jail among these illiterate men and women. Thus, the jail was used like a training camp.

I then asked her a personal question with trepidation that as casteism played a major role in those times but you chose an inter caste marriage, what was the reason behind it ?

She actually thanked me for asking her such questions as she believed it has great relevance on the subject and herself as a woman, She said, my family wanted to change the system, so my grandfather Madhusudan Das being a Hindu converted to Christianity, his father even disowned him when he married a Christian, my uncle Naba Krushna Chowdury married a Brahmin. And as Gandhiji said marrying in the same caste is not a way of national consent. Thus, Harijans should marry Brahmins and Hindus should marry Christians, Muslims should marry Hindus. Thus, my parents also decided that I should marry in another caste. My brother is also married in a different caste.

As your family was bringing a change in the society, through them did others use your family as an example and did the same ?

This type of intercaste marriage in our society was impossible if someone tried this it was revolted in a great way. My family was known to be Gandhibadis. Thus everyone knew why we were doing what we were. But others were following our foot steps in the society back then (she pauses and adds even today this is unthinkable.

In today's society what changes do you see in women compared to women in those times?

A great change is seen like women were inside Purdah then, now it is not so. In foreign nations a revolt was held for women's voting rights. But in India women did no such revolt for voting rights, they were given this right automatically because they were actually involved in the freedom struggle. In today's Odisha I see university educated women doing so well even better than men. Women have come a long way and are doing well in all spheres of life. Now a days women are not only talking about household affairs or clothes and jewellery but I see discussions on branches of knowledge from chemistry to ethics, to sociology. This shows the tremendous growth in knowledge which is only possible through education. But Odisha should also have women universities like Maharashtra. And when I see the economic independence of women it makes me very happy as well as the independence of a woman now has to travel alone by bus or train. But I see one thing that has not changed that is fear. Why are women so afraid? I see no animals or snakes around. So why are they so scared to go out in the dark etc. Because they are afraid of men. And the men who think that women tempt men is very scandalous way of thinking about women. Thus, even though men and women work together or get educated because of some misgivings of the society some thing doesn't change. And this fear will gradually fade if some ways are thought up. Women should not distrust men or be afraid of them and men should

change the wrong perception regarding women. They should work like two wheels.

I wanted to end the reminiscing with Annapurna Devi in this positive note but the need for assurance from this great personality about the deteriorating status of women in such progressive and developing times made me ask her this as a final question, The atrocities and abuses on women of an independent Odisha still persists, can we ever completely overcome it ?

We must change the deep rooted beliefs set in the minds of people for hundreds of years. Like abduction of Sita by Ravan that shows women are helpless vulnerable victims of men in our society. Such beliefs of hundreds of years which are set in people's mind like thick mud needs to be washed away. Then only can women be free of abuses. And yes I do believe this change in women's status even though it will certainly take time, will be seen in our society, as this was the dream of great freedom fighters like Gandhiji. If a nation in bondage could have such a dream then surely a free nation can achieve it.

This reminiscing brought out a certainty that women have achieved the status they deserve but it remains unseen as if surrounded in a mist, a mist that will surely lift in the after glow of such path-breaking personas.

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