

Role of Malati Choudhury and Her Associates in Indian National Movement

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An incomparable revolutionist, a brave and daring freedom fighter, a committed social worker and one of the foremost nationalistic leaders was Mrs. Malati Choudhury popularly known as Numa. She joined the National Movement as a teenaged girl during the Non-cooperation Movement in 1920.

When women rarely dared to step out of their houses, it was through sheer determination and commitment that she not only succeeded in encouraging other women to come out of the four walls of the kitchen but also succeeded in infusing a new life and vigour to the movement against the British rule in Orissa. Aiming at an egalitarian and socialistic society, she lived and moved extensively amongst the peasantry and the tribals of Koraput, Sukinda and many other areas. She was strong-willed but at the same time affectionate and motherly for many who were fortunate enough to come across this great lady during her life time. As a freedom fighter, she was probably the last crusader whose lifelong passion was to champion



equal opportunities for all in the country. Through her efforts hundreds of women came out of their houses and took an active part in the Salt Satyagraha of 1930 at Inchudi and Kujang. In 1940 she became the President of the Provincial Congress Committee and in 1942 she joined as

a member of the All India Congress Committee. In her pursuit of an egalitarian society she vigorously championed the cause of the peasants and tried her best to mobilise support for the abolition of Zamindari in Orissa. She was also instrumental in the formation of the Orissa Krushak Sabha and its mouth piece 'Krushan'.

The worker-peasant force was initiated into the freedom movement by the radicals during the 1930s. But the number of women radicals, both in case of leadership and participation, was very much limited in Orissa in comparison to their male compatriots. Except Malati Choudhury no other woman leader could think of radicalism at that time. Top ranking women leaders preferred to follow and practise the Gandhian style of



passive opposition and social-moral uplift. Even Malati Choudhury, on many occasions, preferred to work as a moderate socialist within the Congress. Women radicalism found roots among in the girl students in 1940s who worked in the line of Students Federation and Communist Party prominent among them were Nirupama Mohanty, Nandini Satapathy, Sabitri Acharya, Bithi Ghosh, Ramarani Ray, Sushila Devi. They had an intimate co-worker and activist in Shyamoli Lahidi, the Secretary of Women Students Congress.¹ Remaining within the Congress framework Malati Choudhury had all the sympathy for radical freedom fighters. Basically a revolutionary, she restrained herself in obedience to Congress ideology. Her role in the State Peoples' movement exhibited her radical activities. She addressed the Dhenkanal peasants and women meeting on Sept. 2, 1938 primarily on Communist lines.² Prior to that she had presided over the Cuttack district Krushak Sammilani on 30th April 1937 at Anakhia. She contended that "India would soon plunge into a state of revolution and that Orissa would be the first to greet such a movement being pressed by the conditions of poverty and all round misery prevailing all over the province."³ On behalf of the Utkal Congress Socialist Party, she declared the programme for amelioration of the plight of the peasants including abolition of landlordism without compensation and amendment of Tenancy Laws. It may be recalled here that she never put a knot on her head to dress the hairs in a vow till the achievement of independence. Even later perhaps for her radical ideas, she very often found it difficult to pull well with Congress.⁴

But the scenario changed during 1940s with the spread of radicalism among the women particularly among the students. The breach

between Congress and Communists remained unbridged and the strenuous relationship deteriorated further with the communist policy and response to the Quit India movement.⁵ The communist capitalised on the students force. Their activities built a strong net-work of students organisations through Students' Federation by teaching and preaching ideas of communism to the youth mass. The youth wing of Congress was loosened in face of the superb organising skill of the Students' Federation. The communists concentrated on certain pockets, Cuttack being the headquarter, where the Students' Federation maintained absolute control over the students.

Individual Satyagraha started at various places of Cuttack district. Malati Choudhury wrote a letter to Gandhi for allowing her to join Satyagraha, but Gandhi did not allow her as her daughter was only one year old. Individual Satyagraha also started in some places of Ganjam district on 4th December 1940. Smt. A. Laxmibai in a meeting at Berhampur was arrested by the police for delivering anti-war speech. Smt. Champa Devi was arrested by the police for offering individual Satyagraha at Rassolkunda. Gandhi choiced Solora Devi and A. Laxmibai for Individual Satyagraha. The Individual Satyagraha lingered for a long period and the Congress leaders were sentenced to jail for giving anti-war slogans. A resolution was passed by All India Congress Committee on 8th August 1942, popularly known as 'Quit India Resolution' which demanded India's Independence from the British Government and it was the final struggle without any compromise for ending British Raj in India.⁶ Being a leading personality of that period was Malati Choudhury, attended the A.I.C.C. conference at Bombay on 8th August, 1942. She was a close associate of Surendranath Dwivedy



and a founder member of the underground movement in Orissa. After the 'Quit India' resolution was passed by AICC, Yousuf Meherally, the then Mayor of Bombay, convened a secret meeting of the socialists in his residence.⁷ Among others, Achut Patwardhan, Ram Manohar Lohia, Rama Nandan Mishra, Ashok Mehta, Smt. Malati Choudhury and Surendranath Dwivedy were present. There, it was decided to launch the under-ground movement against the British by hoodwinking the police.⁸ Malati Choudhury, who was present in meeting also endorsed the proposal. Finally the decision was adopted by the All India Congress Committee. Imprisonment of the Congress leaders all over India rang the alarm bell which alerted the people for immediate action. Then the storm broke out with all its fury and shook the Government at its foundation. The fury of the storm of popular movement overwhelmed the people so blatantly that they did not find any outlet to the situation. Suddenly Rama Devi was also arrested and kept in Cuttack Jail alongwith four top ranking Congress leaders. But Malati Choudhury was escaped from imprisonment. She had to walk down to Cuttack from Bhubaneswar. The ultimate saying of Gandhiji 'Do or Die' always vibrated in her mind. In fact she laid the foundation of 'August Revolution' in Orissa. The revolutionary activities of the Oriya women like Malati Choudhury and Rama Devi aroused majority of the women folks of Orissa to stand on their heels. Spirit of Quit India movement touched everyone and the girl students of Ravenshaw College participated in it. Marching in a procession to demonstrate anti-British feeling they initiated the boarders of Nursing Hostel for their participation.⁹ The demonstration was peaceful. But some of the girl students like Nirupama Rath and Nandini Satapathy, who joined Students' Federation later,

actively participated in the demonstration while they were students of Secondary and Primary schools respectively. Another young lady of 15 years old, Uttara Choudhury rightly inherited the spirit of revolution from her parents, Nabakrushna Choudhury and Malati Choudhury. In the beginning of 1942 movement, "She sympathised actively with the Congress campaign and advocated strike in schools and sabotage communication network in an extensive scale. It was also known that she went out of her way to meet Ramananda Mishra, (Socialistic leader of Bihar) when he was taken out from the Cuttack jail."¹⁰ She was suspected to be in close contact with other active Congress workers and acted as an intermediary between Congress organisers who had gone underground and those who were indulging in subversive activities. She was detained by Government on the recommendation of the Superintendent of Police (CID), Special Branch and the District Magistrate, Cuttack.¹¹ The Quit India resolution of August 1942 as well as Congress directive to its followers on the maxim, 'Do or Die' was not taken lightly by the government as it brought in its wake mass disturbances of an appalling and unprecedented nature occurred in many places.

The women displayed their gallantry when they heard about the arrest of prominent leaders of Orissa. Surendranath Dwivedy acting as the guide of Malati Choudhury spearheaded the protest march in Orissa. The secret bulletins helped them to organise the movement in a systematic way. Meetings, hartals and strikes went on as usual. The Quit India Movement slowly went on gathering momentum in far and wide corners of Orissa. During the Quit India movement in Orissa many women Satyagrahis courted arrest and were lodged in different jails. At that time the



Cuttack jail hosted women freedom fighters like Rama Devi, Malati Choudhury, Sunamani Devi, Priyambada Devi, Harapriya Devi, Sushila Devi, Manyala Devi, Godavari Devi, Sobharani Panda, Sashibala Kanungo, Khetramani Devi, Usha Devi, Haramoni Devi, Bimala Devi, Bilasi Devi, Bela Devi, Kiran Lekha Ray, Sakuntala Mahanty and Uttara Choudhury etc. Malati Choudhury took an outstanding role in the underground activities in the 42 Resolution. As an underground leader she guided the progress of the movement at different parts of Orissa. She remained also a leading woman stalwart in the movement.

Thus, the women of Choudhury family and associates played their most glorious and heroic role in all phases of freedom movement such as Non-Cooperation movement, Civil Disobedience movement, individual Satyagraha movement and in the Quit India movement. As a freedom fighter, Smt. Malati Choudhury was probably the one crusader whose life long passion was to fight for equal opportunities for all in free India.

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