

# Participation of Women of Ganjam District in the Freedom Movement of India

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The nationalist movement towards the close of the 19th century provided the necessity impetus and pull to draw an increasing number of women into the political mainstream. An atmosphere for such a breakthrough was created by the activities of the social reforms and nationalists, who raised demand for education and literacy among women. As the struggle for independence gained a mass character, growing participation of women became necessary. Since then, political consciousness among women has shown an incessant increase in both extent and depth. In India's fight against the British Raj women came forward in their thousands to sacrifice anything they could.

They faced bullets, suffered imprisonment and bore hardship along with their male comrades to win independence. It was the national liberation movement and mainly the effort of Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation which led to the emancipation of Indian women in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

As no detailed study relating to the role of women in nationalist struggle has been conducted, it will be worthwhile to undertake a comprehensive study covering political awareness and role of women in Orissa.

Under the circumstances, it is useful to see women's political involvement in the national freedom struggle in a historical perspective. A thorough highlight into Orissa's political culture would explain the extent of women's role and participation in the struggle for independence.

The emergence of women into political limelight coincided with the non-cooperation movement of 1921. Labanya Mayee Devi daughter of famous writer and advocate Gopal Chandra Praharaj and wife of a distinguished Advocate Lokanath Bahadur of Puri founded a women's association at Puri named Mahila Bandhu

Samiti. It had the primary membership of a few prominent ladies from the elite class involved exclusively in the literary activities of women. This association gave recognition to women's talent and creativity. At this point of time the Congress party, largely because of Gandhi, made inroads into the public mind of the State. In 1921, the first Utkal Pradesh Congress Committee was founded under the Presidentship of Pandit Gopabandhu Das with forty thousand members. During his tour of Orissa, in March 1921, Gandhi addressed various public meetings in the process; he awakened the women of Orissa who dared to defy convention. These women left their houses in large numbers in order to participate in the freedom struggle. Into the Gandhian spell, fell a large number of women activities. They participated in various activities of the freedom struggle, such as, Satyagraha, spinning, cottage industries and other related programmes under the aegis of the National Congress. This resurgence of women not only influenced individual men and women but also the whole family and this eventually created an atmosphere for a new social order. In the year 1929, Orissa

was the last state to enfranchise women. This belated act served to accelerate women's emancipation.

The emergence of the women from South Orissa in the struggle for India's freedom was a sensational episode. Their burning patriotism, supreme valour and gifted organizational abilities are written in the letters of gold in the history of Indian Freedom Movement.

It is important to note that even the scheduled caste and scheduled tribe women participated in the freedom movement. In the hills of Ganjam district yet some tribal women raised their voices by jumping into the freedom struggle. History hardly recorded their great sacrifice. However, this would not minimize the magnitude of their sacrifices for the independence of their motherland. A profile of women freedom fighters of undivided Ganjam district have been discussed below.

### **Adruti Laxmibai**

Adruti Laxmibai, sister of V.V.Giri former President of India was born at Brahmapur on 12<sup>th</sup> October, 1899. Her father was Varahagiri Venkat Jogesh, a leading advocate of Brahmapur and mother Smt Varahagiri Sovama was a pious

lady. She studied her primary education at Brahmapur and after that she joined the Theosophical Society at Kasi. She completed her graduation at Dayacician College at Calcutta. She studied Medicine at Vellore Medical College but her ill health could not support to be a doctor. Therefore she discontinued her studies and returned to Brahmapur. She got married to Adruti Venkateswar Rao of Rajmundry. As ill luck would have it, her husband met a premature death within a year of marriage. Due to early demise of her husband she returned back to her parental abode at Brahmapur plunged into the freedom movement by the call of Mahatma Gandhi.

Giri family was hub of freedom fighters particular in Brahmapur and Ganjam District in general. National leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Babu Rajendra Prasad, Meeraben during their visit to the district used to stay at the residence of Giri. As a family member Laxmibai got ample opportunity to serve these leaders. She had a fair knowledge of classical music. She sung the prayer song of "Jay Gandhibad Mangalam" at the time of Gandhi's visit. Their indelible impact on Laxmibai made her a true freedom fighter.

She took part in the freedom movement by participating "boycott Foreign Goods" and picketing before the liquor shops. For her activities she was first arrested on 18<sup>th</sup> January, 1932 and she was sentenced one year rigorous imprisonment with a fine of Rs. 700/- by Chhatrapur Court. Later on she was sifted to Vellore jail for one and half year. She took active part in the Quit India Movement of 1942. She was a prominent activist in the *Khadi* Movement. She distributed *Khadis* free of cost to the poor people. She was an active member of the Congress during 1930-40. She was the Vice-President of Ganjam District Congress Committee and President of Brahmapur Town Congress. She was also an active member of the State Congress Committee. Her activities during the Quit India Movement are remarkable. She was the President of Ryots Mahasabha of Ganjam district. She presided over at the Ryots Mahasabha of Ganjam district held at Kullada in 1935. India got her Independence when she was in Cuttack jail.

She was elected to the Orissa Assembly without any contest from the Brahmapur Assembly Constituency in 1937 first general election and continued as MLA constantly

till 1953. Only two women members were elected to the Assembly in 1937 and she was the only lady member from South Orissa. She became the Deputy Speaker of Orissa Legislative Assembly and later became the Speaker of the Orissa Legislative Assembly from 29.5.1946 to 20.2.1952.

She attended the Deputy Speaker's national Conference held in Kerala and in that conference she inspected the education policy intensely. For the empowerment of women she introduced free education to the girls in the Orissa. For her sincere endeavour the strength of girl students in the schools of Orissa significantly improved. She was an active member of Orissa wing of "Central Welfare Society". She was also the President of the "Kasturaba Memorial Fund" of Orissa Branch. She served as an adviser for the "Government Girls High School Committee" in Orissa. She was a member in the State Social Welfare Board and extended her services in various fields of welfare activities. She visited Ganjam, Boudh and Phulbani districts and took efforts for the development of poor students. She used to help the girls staying in the Jaya Mangalam Ashram. A. Laxmibai was an ideal

leader, a freedom fighter, a social worker, reformer and a state leader. She remains as a role model for every Indian woman.

### **Hemalata Devi**

Hemalata Devi was born in the family of Kapil Das and Smt. Laxmi Das of Khallikote in Ganjam District on 8 August 1911. She plunged into the freedom movement when she was reading in class seventh. She was greatly influenced by a prominent freedom fighter Sri Gouri Shankar Samant of Khallikote. Sri Gouri Shankar Samant was a Kshatryia by caste and Hemalata was a Brahmin. Ignoring the parochial caste system Hemalata married to Gourishankar at Brahmapur in 1934. Prominent freedom fighters of Ganjam, Sri Dibakar Patnaik, Umacharan Patnaik, Banamali Maharana were present in her marriage ceremony. After marriage Gourishankar and Hemalata stayed at the residence of Rama Devi and Malati Devi and contributed their might for the cause of freedom movement. Influenced by the activities of notable freedom fighter Harekrushna Mahatab, Hemalata had taken training at Puri Azad Sevashram. Gouri Shanakr was appointed as the

secretary of the Congress cell of Ganajam District.

In order to invigorate the freedom movement, a meeting was called at Kabisuryanagar in 1935. The meeting was presided over by Biswanath Das. Gouri Shankar and Hemalata took active part in that meeting and gave enthralled speech to make the freedom movement dynamism. For their speech against the British they were arrested and imprisoned at the Brahmapur jail and later on sifted to the Vellore jail. During the jail period health condition of Gouri Shankar deteriorated severely. They were freed after 18 months in that jail. Soon after their release the ill-health Gouri Shankar died. Notwithstanding her husband's premature death Hemalata decided not to distance from the freedom movement. She was in contact with the prominent freedom fighters of the state. She had a cordial relationship with the illustrious *Raj Parivar* of Khallikote who were committed for the formation of Orissa province. Hemalata took part in the movement for the amalgamation of Oriya tracts into Orissa. The great soul of the district died on 21 October 1998 at the age of 87.

### **Smt. Sobhabati Panda**

Smt. Sobhabati Panda was a dynamic and revolutionary genius of Ganjam. She was a woman of courage. She was born in 1913 in an established Brahmin family of Digapahandi. Gandhi's very first visit to Brahmapur in March 1921 gave a tremendous impetus to Freedom Movement in Orissa. Sobhabati Panda along with her husband Antaryami Panda attended the first public meeting of Gandhi in Brahmapur in 1921. Gandhi's speech had indelible impact on her mind. Very soon she affianced herself in the freedom movement and joined in Alaka Ashram of Gopabandhu Choudhury at Jagatsinghpur. She took active part in the Hindustani Seva Dal training. During the Salt Satyagraha in 1931, she could organize the nearby village women and proceeded towards Huma along with 1000 women. They prepared Salt at Huma violating the Salt Law imposed by the British government. For the violation of Salt law she was arrested and imprisoned for 6 months. After her release she dedicated herself to *Charakha* and *Harijan* Movement and other constructive programmes of Mahatma Gandhi. In 1942 she took a leading role in the Quit

India Movement. During this period he came very close to the ideology of Gandhi. She took active role in the political procession, demonstration, and provoked the people to disobey the British rule and regulations. She was again arrested and released.

### **Smt. Champa Devi**

Champa Devi was born in 1904 in village Dura in the Suburban area of Brahmapur. She was an outstanding freedom fighter of the district. She was a sufferer of child marriage. The conservative Hindu society considered marriage as a sacramental bond between the husband and the wife. It is a bond once for all and not to be broken at any costs. Wife is the life-partner of the husband not only in the temporal world but also in the heaven and in the next birth. Therefore when the husband died, the wife had to live an ascetic life devoting herself to the soul of her deceased husband. Soon after her marriage her husband died and she became a widow at the midst of her adolescence. Suffered by conjugal life she determined to follow the life of a social activist. She was very much influenced by Sribatcha Panda-an architect of Arya Samaj, a social reformer of

Orissa who believed in the natural equality of women with man. Influenced by illustrious women freedom fighters of Orissa like Rama Devi, Sarala Devi, Malati Devi and Kuntala Kumari Sabat, she was a champion of women liberty. She sought liberty for women not only in political sphere but also in other sphere. As a true freedom fighter she organized the women against the British for the liberation of motherland. During the Quit India Movement in 1942 she delivered an impressive speech at Russelkonda criticizing the British. For her speech explosive speech against the British she was arrested and sent to Russelkonda jail for 6 months.

### **Smt. Kundalata Devi**

Another female protagonist of the Indian Freedom Struggle was Kundalata Devi. She was the wife of great freedom fighter of the district, Sri Banchhanidi Patnaik of Gobara village of Ghumusar. She married to Banchhanidhi Patnaik in 1925. After two years of her marriage Gandhi visited to Gobara in 1927 and his address to a mammoth gathering produced unprecedented enthusiasm in the mind of Kundalata Devi. The Pradesh Congress

Committee enrolled 39000 members and collected nearly 21000 rupees. Smt. Kundalata Devi was the only women freedom fighter of district who donated all her ornaments to the Tilaka Swaraj Fund at a meeting at Gobara. During the Salt Satyagraha, she was in charge of Udyoga Mandir at Brahmapur, who motivated the women activists of the district by travelling from village to village. She also dynamically took part in the Quit India Movement of 1942 and participated in Seva Dal Training centre. For her nationalistic activities she was arrested and put behind the bars several times.

#### **Smt. Surjamma**

Smt Surjamma was wife of prominent freedom fighter master Soneya of Brahmapur. She has an honourable place in the names of the Orissan Freedom fighters. She associated herself in different activities of freedom movement like the Civil Disobedience Movement, Harijan Movement, and Quit India Movement. She took active part in picketing before the liquor shops and motivated people to boycott the foreign goods. For her anti British activities, she was arrested twice and sent to jail for years together. It is believed that she

died broken hearted on 13<sup>th</sup> January 1948 when she heard the news of assassination of Mahatma Gandhi.

#### **Smt. Sitadevi Khadanga**

Born in 1902 at Aska, Sitadevi Khadanga was another female freedom fighter of the district. She was the daughter of Harihar Panda of Aska. Sri Panda was a time-honoured Lawyer of the district and the famous leader of Oriya movement. She had not received any formal education from any institution. She was inspired by her husband Sri Banchanidhi Khadanga. She was a multifaceted personality. She was a poet, essayist, story writer, novelist, biographer, translator and dramatist. She had penned a number of novels in Oriya such as Posyaputra (adopted Son), Pratyabartan (come back), Agraj (Elder Brother), She had also written a number of dramas like Sahodar (Brother), Mandir Prabesh (Temple Entry), Naree (Woman), Naistik (Orthodox), Nispati (Decision), Prachina, Pantha (Old Method), Basudhara Pida (Agony of the Motherland), and Matruhina (Motherless). She was an active member of Ganjam District Board and Congress Party. Her joining in the freedom movement gave a

great impetus to the women folk of the district.

#### **Smt. Kishoremani Devi**

Kishoremani Devi was an extraordinary woman freedom fighter of Ganjam district. She was the wife of a notable freedom fighter Sri Niranajan Patnaik of Aska. Influenced by her husband's nationalist activities she plunged into the freedom movement. Gandhiji paid second visit to Brahmapur on 24<sup>th</sup> December 1927 and addressed meetings at Chatrapur, Badakhemundi, Samantarapur, Patpur, Russelkonda, Gobara, Boirani, Purusotampur, Polasra, Kodla, and Khallikote. He emphasized the use of Khadi, Charakha and advised the people to give up foreign goods. The call of Gandhiji and the inspiration of her husband provided a new turn to her life. She was very much influenced by Gandhi and joined in the Salt Satyagraha on 7<sup>th</sup> May 1930. She was active in motivating hundreds of village women of the district to take part in the Salt Satyagraha at Huma. Along with hundreds of women she collected the Salt at Huma and violated the Salt Law. She was always in the vanguard of women freedom fighters. She was the forefront of women *satyagrahis* picketed before the liquor

shops and boycotted the foreign goods.

### **Smt. Hiramani Bisoyi**

Hiramani Bisoyi was the wife of Krushna Chandra Bisoyi who was the protector of Gumma fort of Parlakhmundi estate. In 1766 when the Ganjam district was given to the British East India Company, the British sent Mr Kits Ford to take the administration of Ganjam. But the King of Parlakhmundi, Sri Narayan Gajapati and the Bisoyis started military operation against the British. Narayan Gajapati was defeated by the British Colonel Pitch but the Bisoyis of Parlakhmundi did not pay allegiance to the British. In 1778 onwards Krushna Chandra Bisoyi and his wife Hiramani Bisoyi, in different forests strategies, attacked the British. The couple attacked and imprisoned the British incessantly for a period of twenty years. Unfortunately, spouse Krushna Chandra met a sudden death. Despite the sad demise of her husband, Hiramani shouldered the responsibility of Guma Fort. She ceaselessly attacked the British soldiers; and caused terror in them. As a result the British Magistrate became worried and sent George Russell to incarcerate her. But the costly effort of Russell went

in vain. Then the British sent Buckster to capture Hiramani. The first attempt of Major Buckster was futile. Hiramani's bold fight against the British concerned them furiously. After an elongated fight with the British, finally she was shot dead by Russell. Hearted by her death Mr Russell intoned "I have never seen such type of revolutionary woman. For her bravery, sincerity, soberness she was positioned in my heart as an extraordinary woman. She was illustrious for her activities as a freedom fighter in Ganjam."

### **Smt. Krushna Priya Devi**

Mahuri Queen Smt. Krushna Priya Devi was another notable freedom fighter of the district. She participated in the pre-protest movement of 1872. She was wife of deceased king Harihar Dev. Her brother's son Sri Gopi Martha and Sura Singh Martha were fought against the British in support of her sister. Not only in Brahmpur town, but also in whole district of Ganjam there was a staunch fight against the British by her leadership.

### **Smt. Apurba Devi**

Smt. Apurba Devi was the wife of Sri Ballav Nayak, of village Padmapur Nuagaon near Kodala. There was a non-paying tax movement by the Khalikote Raja and Apurba

Devi joined in that movement. She was a famous woman freedom fighter.

### **Role of women freedom fighters of Ganjam in Social Reconstruction**

During Gandhi's Padayatra programme in 1934, women were called upon to fight the evils of liquor, boycott foreign clothes and discard untouchability. Gandhi's constructive programme had in its objectives, the training and education of women in the fundamentals of organized activity and propaganda. Moreover, the participation enabled men to organize social reform on a local plane. The programme included several social reform activities.

Inspired by Gandhi's teachings, some women freedom fighters participated in the development of *khadi* and village industries. They organized boycotting of foreign clothes and picketing before liquor shops. Some women made an extensive tour by foot all over the district to inspire the women community, awaken their consciousness against bondage, and finally draw into the fray of the freedom struggle.

### **Conclusion**

The nature and background of women's participation in the Nationalist

Movement in Orissa during 20<sup>th</sup> century largely tallied with the women's movement at the nationalist level. Four characteristics reflecting the circumstances of origin can be identified: (i) male directions, (ii) a concept of complementary sex roles, (iii) absence of a radical onslaught on participation bases of Indian culture; and (iv) orientation towards elite representation and not mass mobilization.

Women's participation was initiated by men and operated under the leadership of man. Though there were disputes over this issue, it was generally the supportive attitudes of men of the elite that helped women to form associations.

There was trend of complementary sex role in regard to women's participation in the Nationalist Struggle in Orissa and the national level as well. The ideas of women competing with men in the economic sphere or of men co-operating with women in the domestic sphere was absent in addition, the obligation on women's movement participants to serve first their family and then the community meant that only middle class women with sufficient time and

man-power could actually do both. Thus this contributed to the fact that women's participation was restricted to the middle and upper classes.

From the beginning, women's participation was oriented towards elite representation and not towards mass mobilization. Gandhi's ideology was very respectful to women and supportive to their uplift, but this was strictly in terms of complementary sex roles. Gandhi argued that women should confine their economic role to home industries. Gandhi's activities did provide the impetus for the participation of Oriya women in the nationalist movement, but the legacy of male direction remained, with Gandhi's attempt mass mobilization, no doubt it increased the number of women available for participation in the movement. The potential contribution of women in mobilizing support was also important. They could convince their family members and others to support Gandhian Campaign and communicate the religious values essential for Satyagraha. Thus thousands of women left the seclusion of their home and joined the nationalist movement. A few women formed associations for

constructive work during the non-cooperation campaign and these were widespread during subsequent campaign.

Gandhi's ideology and techniques inspired women to participate in public activities and broke down opposition to their entry into social service and nationalists' movement. Indeed, his campaigns served as a training ground for many prominent women leaders.

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