

Sandi Sabar of Kujendri : A Little Known Tribal Lady Freedom Fighter

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Till she was nineteen, she never dreamt that she would be a soldier in the country's freedom struggle nor had she heard about India's independence movement. She was leading a sparse life surrounded with illiteracy, ill health, malnutrition and hunger like her fellow tribals. Her wake up call came when she met Biswanath Pattnaik who had arrived at the scene at Kujendri in the last part of January 1940. It was after this meeting that she discovered the soul within her and set on the path of a revolutionary.

Sandi was born to Bairu Gamang and Lujuri as their second child in the first half of 1922. No exact date of her

birth is known as tribals are never careful about recording these. Nilakantha was the first child of the couple. Bairu was the Gamang or chief of his village. As such Nilakantha and Sandi were brought up with great care in accordance with the tribal system. As there were no educational facilities, Sandi was illiterate. Since her childhood she was brave, fearless and simple in character. She had a pleasant personality and was liked by all, irrespective of age and sex.

The following story is an evidence of her bravery. In the last week of February 1940, Sandi, with other women of the village went to collect mahua flower from the forest at the foothills near their village. They had started early in the morning, and as they followed their regular pattern of each one choosing a particular tree. When Sandi went near her chosen tree she saw a bear eating mahua flower. The bear soon turned and lurched towards her with the intention of harming her. The quick witted Sandi gathered her courage and picked up a long wooden sal pole lying nearby and chased the bear.

When the bear attacked her opening his mouth, Sandi pushed the pole into the

mouth of the bear. The bear being afraid of the blow ran away into forest and disappeared.

When she was nineteen, she had to look after some minor household works and helped her parents. She had to graze cattle and goats in the nearby jungle. She also helped her parents in planting seedings, weeding etc. in agricultural seasons and also helped them in fetching fire wood and water. She also took part in community feasting and dancing. Thus she was leading a tribal way of life till the young Satyagrahi Biswanath's arrival at Kujendri.

I would like to mention a few words about Biswanath Pattnaik unless the episode of Sandi could not be understood. Biswanath Pattnaik (1916) born at village Kumarada near Digapahandi in Ganjam district. At the age of seventeen he joined as a social worker and was influenced by Acharya Harihar. He had rendered his services at the car festival of Sri Jagannath at Puri by serving the cholera affected people in the year 1934. On the way back from Puri, he enlisted his name in the Congress as a four anna member at Berhampur and purchased a Charkha (spinning wheel) and cotton. From that

day onwards he would spin cotton thread and wore only khadi cloth.

He enrolled for getting training to be a Satyagrahi at the Ashram at Bari which was founded by Sri Gopabandhu Choudhury and mother Rama Devi in the year 1938 and completed his training in 1939. He was then engaged in some official work at the Bari Ashram. In the beginning of 1941 he was directed by his guru Gopabandhu Choudhury to go to Gunupur, now in Rayagada district, for extension of cotton cultivation and to promote the Khadi programme.

Biswanath stepped into Gunupur on the first fortnight of January 1941 and stayed with Prahallad Panigrahi a prominent Congress worker and manager of the Khadi Sale Centre. Prahallad Panigrahi convinced Bairu Gamang to give shelter to Biswanath. Accordingly on the last Sunday of January 1941 Biswanath proceeded to San kujendri with Bairu Gamang.

Biswanath reached San Kujendri at sunset and stayed on the verandah of Bairu and took his food prepared in the kitchen of the tribal family. Nilakantha and Sandi also served him. The family of Bairu were soon greatly involved with

Biswanath and were influenced by his personality.

Biswanath single handedly without seeking any body's help started cleaning the village streets from the very next morning. He talked to the people and asked them to cultivate cotton and to spin thread and weave Khadi. He also convinced them not to buy dhotis and sarees made in the mills. Biswanath propagated among the tribals Mahatma Gandhi's doctrines and his work for the independence of India. In his free hours he started teaching tribal boys and girls. He toured extensively in the tribal villages. Gradually the tribals started to believe Biswanath and acted according to his direction. The Saura tribals cultivated improved cotton seeds and yielded a good harvest that year. Sandi was leader among tribal women for cultivation and spinning thread and Biswanath being supported by the Sauras established some country looms for weaving Khadi. Doms were the traditional weavers of that area. He trained some Sauras in the weaving technology with the help of a Dom. Nilakantha and Sandi also learned weaving from him. The Sauras prepared khadi themselves. After some time on the way to Wardha,

Rama Devi saw Sandi there and expressed her eagerness to get her trained at the Bari Ashram.

Later Acharya Harihar and Prana Krushna Padhiary reached Kujendri to encourage Biswanath and give him encouragement for the good work that he was doing. On the 2nd of October 1941 they accompanied Biswanath along with some Sauras and Doms and went to the Radha Krishna temple for worship and to eradicate untouchability. This time too Sandi was given charge to gather women from the Saura and Dom communities. She successfully managed her responsibility and helped in eradicating untouchability in the area.

To fulfil the wish of Rama Devi, Sandi was anxious to go to Bari. Hence she prepared herself. Bhagaban Senapati a Congress worker of village Gulumunda donated her a mat worth of Rs.2.00. Then Sandi wore a Khadi saree and started for Bari with Biswanath Pattnaik. They travelled by the narrow gauge railway line from Gunupur to Nuapada and then by broad gauge rail line to Haridaspur. They then went to Bari by foot. At Bari, Sandi was renamed as Shanti and took up vigorous training for six months. She learned to spin

cotton thread, weaving, cleaning of village to eradicate untouchability to speak truth all the time, believe in non-violence etc. She also learned Oriya and was soon able to read and write. She also learned the ashram way of life, prayers in morning and evening, flag songs as well as leading a routine and simple life.

On returning to Kujendri she became a role model and torch bearer among the Saura women of her area. She vigorously acted to propagate the constructive work that she had learnt at Bari Ashram among the tribals and soon became the leader of tribal women.

During his stay at Kujendri, Biswanath taught flag songs to the inhabitants of the village and used to hoist the Congress flag every morning and ritually get it down in the evening. All the inhabitants were accustomed to his flag hoisting. During the absence of Biswanath, the tribals continued to hoist the flag without any interruption. This news reached the ears of the Collector of Koraput Mr. Willcock. He ordered the Sub-Divisional Magistrate, Rayagada, who was also an English man and the Taluk Magistrate, Gunupur to cause

an enquiry into the Kujendri matter.

On receipt of the enquiry report from the Sub-Divisional Magistrate, Rayagada, the Collector of Koraput programmed a visit to Gunupur. In order to threaten the Sauras he chalked out a plan for a show of strength. The Collector gathered together a party consisting of himself, some armed police and forest employees, a few powerful Sahukars, some persons of the royal family, prominent money lenders and a few non-tribal Oriya landlords. The party walked on foot from Bamunihat to Kujendri, except for the Collector, who rode on a horse.

On the other hand Sauras too had made their programme to protest the Collector's visit. It was decided that on the appointed day Biswanath would remain absent at Kujendri. Bairu Gamang, his son Nilakantha and daughter Sandi would play the main role with the other villagers putting up their efforts.

On the appointed day in the first part of July 1942 the Collector and his party arrived at Kujendri and noticed that a Congress flag was flying on the flag post in middle of the street and a person named Jhandu

Bairu was standing on a platform holding another flag in his hand. The Collector shouted his orders to tear the flags. All of a sudden Sandi and about twenty young women rushed towards the flag post and surrounded it in a circle, joining hands with each other. Another circle was made by the elder ladies which covered the first circle. They were determined to protect the flag in exchange of their lives.

About two hundred Sauras observed the situation sitting on the verandas of the street. All of them were prepared as they had covered themselves with winter clothing and held weapons hidden inside.

The women encircled the flag post and danced vigorously singing the song "Jhanda ucha rahen hamara." The Collector silently observed the situation and looking at the tense situation decided not to take any action then and there. He led the party to the lower primary school to take rest, as they were tired after the long walk. From there the Collector and his party returned without taking any action.

On 9th August 1942 at Bombay, Gandhiji called for the "Quit India Movement." He instructed all Congress workers

"do or die" for the independence of the country. Many high level Congress leaders were arrested and put behind bars. Radha Krushna Baswasray from Koraput had attended Gandhiji's Quit India meeting at Bombay. When he returned from Bombay, he was arrested at Sunki in Koraput district. Biswanath got a letter from Radha Krushna Biswasray on the 12th August 1942, where the facts were narrated.

On receipt of the letter Biswanath prepared some hand written pamphlets and sent them to each and every village in the Gunupur region. He also fixed a date for launching of Satyagraha. He held discussions with the people and told them that they should join the Quit India Movement even at the cost of being put in jail or being shot in police firing. But he also promised them that after independence, the tribals would not be harrassed by the employees of the Raja or the British Government. They would be able to live in peace according to their own accord, Bethi and veti will be stopped. Hearing the words of Biswanath many Sauras willfully agreed to join in the movement. They decided on a date for launching the movement.

On the fixed date many tribals gathered at Kujendri. About two hundred men and fifty women assembled to go in a procession. The procession marched towards Gunupur. The procession was led by Jhandu Bairu who was walking with a Congress flag. Sandi too led the women, holding a flag in her hands. Many tribals followed, shouting slogans against the British Government and Raja of Jeypore. Biswanath was leading the mob and the whole process was one of non-violence. The mob made its way from Sankujendri to Gunupur and on the way passed through Kaithapadar. Badakujendri, Lachhapa, Gulumunda, Paaka and Panasguda. Many men and women from these villages joined the procession spontaneously. Gradually the strength of the procession increased and the crowd was more than three hundred persons when they reached the bank of the river Bansadhara.

The procession crossed the river by boats and entered Gunupur town. They travelled through each street of the town shouting anti government slogans. The local police had been given instructions not to obstruct the procession. Later the

protestors were called to the police station and after detention for some time they were allowed to go. All the Satyagrahis were released from the Police Station at sunset. As it was late, they all stayed back at Gunupur for the night.

The next morning the procession went to the nearby villages and propagated the words of Gandhiji and independence. Likewise they moved around different villages for four to five days and then returned to Kujendri. They were sent to Koraput Jail as they were found guilty under British Law.

After Biswanath's arrest, there was no one to instruct Sandi. On her own initiative, Sandi organised Saura women of twenty five villages around Kujendri and trained them in spinning thread. It is known that nearly 1500 spinning wheels were at regular work towards the end of 1942. From 1942 to 1945 Sandi dedicated herself to village reconstruction work.

Sandi was against getting married till 1945. When asked by the village elders, she replied that her work was not yet done, and she would consider getting married only after the country get its independence. However she

succumbed to the pressure and agreed for marriage.

Prahallad Panigrahi had suggested a proposal to Bairu. The boy was Madhu Sabar of village Khilipadar. Madhu was then serving in P.W.D Office, Nabarangpur. Bairu with some of his relatives went to Nabarangpur and discussed with Madhu and later Madhu also came to Kujendri talked with Sandi. They were both willing and the marriage was solemnised in the last part of 1946. After marriage Sandi went to stay at Nabarangpur with her husband. Her first son Balakrishna was born at Nabarangpur. Then Madhusudan was transferred to Koraput. They stayed at Koraput till 1951.

Madhusudan resigned from his government service and contested the elections as a candidate for Orissa Legislative Assembly in the first election held on 1952. He could not succeed in election. After resigning from service Madhu resided at Kujendri and worked as a teacher. On 27th November 1954 Sandi gave birth her second son Nandan. After delivery she suffered from profuse bleeding which could not stopped and she breathed her last on the 28th November 1954. Thus ended the life of a great soul.

Sandi was a freedom fighter who never imprisoned. But when Biswanath and others remained in Jail, she shouldered all the responsibility of freedom

struggle in Kujendri area. Due to her constant effort Saura women used to spin and were made aware about independence and participation in 1942 Quit India Movement. She took part in the freedom struggle for a short span from 1941 to 1946. But within that short period she attracted the attention of many state leaders like Gopabandhu Choudhury, Rama Devi, Naba Babu, Acharya Harihar and many others due to her sheer dedication. She will be ever remembered among the few tribal lady soldiers of freedom struggle for her selfless work.

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