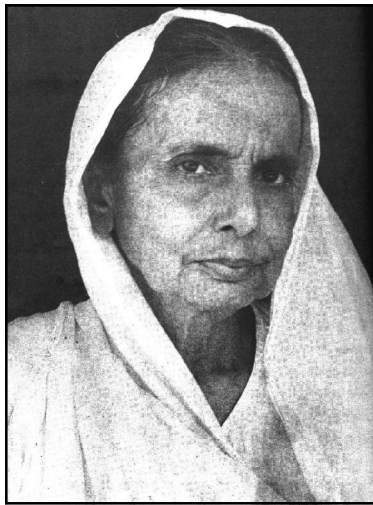


Rama Devi : An Epitome of Women Emancipation

Prabhukalyan Mohapatra

Rama Devi, a freedom fighter of Orissa, became a legend during her lifetime. She is accepted as a "lady of lamp" and considered as the symbol of women's pride for her outstanding contribution to the contemporary society. Her selfless sacrifice for the uplift of the society and generosity for hapless destitute is inexplicable. She as an organiser, worker, campaigner, speaker, writer and inspirer of common people is quite uncommon.

Being the niece of Utkal Gaurav Madhusudan Das, the father of modern Orissa and influenced by Swadeshi movement from the childhood, she developed an innate feeling of public spirit much before her marriage. Her father was Gopal Ballav Das, the then Deputy Magistrate and her mother was Basanti Manjaree. Rama Devi was born at Satyabhamapur village of Cuttack district on 3rd December 1899. She married to Gopabandhu Choudhury, who resigned from the post of Deputy Magistrate to plunge into the freedom movement. Soon after Gopabandhu relinquished government service, she whole - heartedly joined the nationalist activities.



In 1921, Rama Devi participated in the Khadi movement along with her husband and became a staunch follower of Mahatma Gandhi. She came in direct contact with Gandhiji during his first visit to Orissa on 23rd March 1921.

Thereafter she attended Gaya Session of Indian National Congress (1922), Calcutta Session of National Congress (1928) and emerged as a leader during Salt Satyagraha. In 1928 Alakashram was set up, on the bank of river Alaka, to look after the diseased persons under the leadership of Rama Devi. At the Lahore Session (1930) Congress resolved to launch Mass Civil Disobedience and it was decided to observe 26th January 1931 as the first

Independence Day. The new slogan "Purna Swaraj" reverberated in different parts of Orissa and public meetings were organised to garner mass support under the leadership of Rama Devi, Gopabandhu Choudhury and Acharya Harihar. National flag was hoisted atop Lingaraj temple in Bhubaneswar on the said day for which Rama Devi along with some prominent congress leaders were arrested by the Police.

Gandhi resolved to launch Civil Disobedience Movement by breaking salt law at Dandi. Hence Utkal Provincial Congress Committee selected Inchudi on the Balasore coast and Kujanga on Cuttack coast as the site for salt collection. Rama Devi alongwith Malati Devi, Kiranbala Sen organised women's meetings to ensure better participation in the movement. The first batch of women Satyagraha reached Inchudi on 20th April 1930 defying government order. Rama Devi with some women leaders went from house to house to mobilize support of the rural women in favour of the movement. The response was highly successful. Rural women plunged into the Salt Satyagrah ignoring their family resistance. In Kujanga of the then Cuttack district, women Satyagrahis under the leadership of Rama Devi and Bhagyabati Pata Mohadei (Queen of Kujanga) came out of their houses with baskets and manufactured salt openly without any fear. Both Inchudi and Kujanga are two important places of Orissa where women Satyagrahis joined the salt movement in in many numbers under the leadership of Rama Devi.

Rama Devi was arrested during salt movement alongwith other prominent leaders. Undaunted by this arrest, Satyagrahis spread the message of the movement to different parts of Orissa like Basta, Balasore, Bhadrak, Kujanga, Astaranga and Chilika. Orissa was pulsated with new life during this historic phase of National Movement.

Despite grilling torture by the Police, a batch of young girl students joined the Civil Disobedience Movement under the leadership of Rama Devi. They picketed in front of the government offices, wine and opium shops, boycotted British goods. Most of the students of Jajpur, Kendrapada, Pattamundai, Dharamsala,

Mayurbhanj area gave up their studies and they took part in the freedom movement. By vehemently opposing un-touchability, she emerged as an eminent social worker. She set up an Ashram at Bari and urged the people to love the Harijans as human beings. Even she lived in their huts, washed their clothes, swept their floors and also taught their children. She also worked for the extinction of communalism, which often sparked off tension among Hindus and Muslims. Following the footsteps of Utkalmani Gopabandhu Das, she too visited flood and drought affected people of the State.

Bhoodan Movement had a great impact on Rama Devi's life. After Independence she devoted herself completely for the cause of Bhoodan. She accompanied Vinovaji during the four month twenty-two days long historic "Bhoodan Yatra" in Orissa. During the march she organised a number of meetings where she told the landlords to treat Harijans and landless poor as their sons. Sometimes she got a whole village, which were distributed among the landless.

Rama Devi was also a good writer. "Jeevan Pathe" (On the path of life) the autobiography of this luminary is a rare piece of art. She laid much emphasis on education, emancipation and empowerment of women. She was very fond of children too. Rama Devi rose to stature and became a legend during her lifetime.

Prabhukalyan Mohapatra is a freelance journalist, who lives at Qr. No.-VR-3/2, Unit-III, Bhubaneswar.