

Sarala Devi, An Inspiration for Women

Bijaya Lakhmi Jena

Indian Social structure is based on patriarchy, patrilineality and patrilocality. The women who were enjoying tremendous powers during Vedic period, in course of time became a puppet with hands of man. Decision making all over the world still remains male preserve. There is a gross under representation of women in every sphere, though they constitute half of total population. The colonial period of Orissan history ignored women and their right of existence on equal term with men. In the wake of language movement of Orissa with parallel to National Freedom Movement at centre, a new consciousness emerged which inspired few women to come forward from the fourwalls of their house and Smt. Sarala Devi was an example among them.

Born in an aristocratic, affluent Zamindar family of Narilo village, Cuttack on 19th August 1904 with father Mr. Basudev Kanungo and mother Padmavati Devi. Her paternal uncle Mr. Balamukunda Kanungo, a renowned Dy. Collector adopted Sarala Devi as daughter. She was brought up with her uncle Balamukunda Kanungo. Saraladevi was the sister of Mr. Nityananda Kanungo, niece of Mr. Raj Kishore Dash and cousin sister of Smt. Rama Devi. Most of her family members were moderate in attitude and against the traditional orthodoxical ideas.

During her childhood Orissa lacked an independent identity of her own as some parts of Orissa was with Bengal and some with Bihar. Mr. Balamukunda, being a Deputy Collector moved from place to place which helped Smt. Sarala Devi to come in contact with various types of people, culture, socio-economic problems. She started her education at Banki in an Oriya medium school. She had a intensive fascination for English language which she learnt by herself at home from Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar's book, "First book of reading." In due course of time her interest in literature helped her to learn Hindi, Bengali, Sanskrit, Telugu, Kannada, Marathi etc. Her reading habit helped her a lot to know about the prevailing conditions of Orissa and India.

It's not the biological but the man made disparity between men and women which annoyed her. From her very childhood she was against the superstitions, ill practices, evil customs of the society. In her schooling time she preferred to be dressed like boy rather than wearing *burkhas* and fought against untouchability.

At an early age of fourteen against her wish she got married to Mr. Bhagirathi Mohapatra, son of landlord Choudhury Durgacharan of Jagatsinghpur which proved to be a turning point in her life which added fuel to her revolutionary ideas and illuminated her future life because her

husband Mr. Bhagirathi Mohapatra who was highly talented, educated, broad-mentality person. After her marriage by getting the support of her husband Saraladevi attempted in bringing renaissance in the social, cultural and political life of women in Orissa. She alongwith other women leaders attempted in removing social evils.

Saraladevi felt that the life of women in Orissa was very miserable as our male dominated society curtailed the rights of women. The women were treated as second class citizen whose duties were only to rear the children and maintain the house like a domestic servant. Child marriage, polygamy, Sati, dowry system degraded the status of women. During the colonial rule Saraladevi found that widows were the passive victim of unalterable male oppression. So, when Gandhiji motivated women to join the national stream speaking about the evils of Sati, child marriage, widowhood, it attracted her and she joined hand with Gandhi to spread the message to reform the social evils and to upgrade the status of women.

During 1920 Gandhianism concept became a national acceptance for freedom and at the same time the role played by Utkal Sammilani for the amalgamation of Oriya tracts under the leadership of Madhusudan Das and Gopabandhu Das inspired Saraladevi. She attended the 35th Indian National Congress session at Nagpur in 1920, with husband Bhagirathi Mohapatra, Gopabandhu Das, Harekrushna Mahtab, Niranjan Pattnaik, Mukund Prasad Das which was addressed by Mahatma Gandhi. The year 1921 was a turning point in the history of women Movement in Orissa. It was marked by first visit of Gandhiji and Gandhian Strategies holding separate meeting with Oriya women at Binodbihari, Cuttack, an event which was not only unprecedented, but also created condition for their entry into national movement. Gandhiji's powerful addresses

motivated not only men but also women and created an unprecedented mass awakening. Women broke the barrier of isolation and seclusion. Sarala Devi motivated her husband to quit the legal profession and join in Gandhiji's movement and she succeeded in it. Smt. Sarala Devi was the first Oriya woman to join the Non-cooperation Movement in 1921. She gave up all her ornaments to Swaraj Movement and promised not to wear any ornament or foreign goods. She preferred *khadi* to wear in day-to-day life.

In 1924 she established a Mahila Sangathan 'Udyog Mandir' at Berhampur in Ganjam and Alka Ashram at Jagatsinghpur. With her sole effort she constituted 'Utkal Mahila Sammilani' which was affiliated to All India Women Association. She had written in Utkal Dipika "My life is successful because whatever I dreamt comes true." She moved from place to place addressing large gathering by her fiery revolutionary speeches and succeeded in attracting many women to freedom movement for which she was imprisoned several times. The active participation of Sarala Devi in emancipation of women under the caption of freedom struggle irritated the Britishers who became furious on the women activists.

The Orissa Pradesh Congress Committee decided to launch Salt Satyagraha at Inchudi, Balasore in response to Gandhiji's Salt Satyagraha at Dandi, Gujrat in 1930. Sarala Devi with her supporters extended their cooperation to Mr. Gopabandhu Choudhury at Inchudi. When the leaders like Harekrushna Mahtab and Pranakrushna Padihari were at Patna Jail, women leaders like Rama Devi and Sarala Devi broke the salt law at Ganjam which was first of its kind in Orissa's history that in the absence of male leaders women leaders took the responsibilities and succeeded in it. The movement was so furious and violent that the British Government had no

option but to arrest Smt. Sarala Devi under section 117 of Indian Penal Code to maintain law and order. She was the first woman prisoner of Orissa. She was ordered a six months imprisonment at Chatrapur Jail. But due to strong untiring agitation, *bund*, *hartal* of the people of Berhampur to release her from jail, the British Government forwarded her to Vellore Jail.

After her release from Vellore Jail she was given a royal welcome on 8th December 1930 at Cuttack. At this meeting she gave a fiery speech about the anti-women behaviour of the Britishers which agitated the sentiments of Orissa's women. They openly denounce British Policy. For all the women activists, reformists, feminist Sarala Devi was a role model and leader.

In the Karachi session of Indian National Congress, young and dynamic Sarala Devi compelled national leaders like Gandhi and Nehru to conduct the next session of INC at Kathajodi, Cuttack. She also adopted a resolution from Mahatma Gandhi to declare Orissa as an independent state in the Round Table Conference.

Orissa became a separate province on 1st April 1936. In the 60 seated Orissa Assembly Smt. Sarala Devi was the first elected woman legislator of Orissa from Cuttack constituency from INC ticket by defeating Smt. Latika Devi with a margin of 2000 votes. She proved herself as one of the brilliant, dynamic, brave legislator in the gentlemen organisation of Orissa Legislative Assembly politics which was primarily a men's show. In the house she fought for the development of women education, discouraged the child mortality rate, raised voice against early marriage, Sati, property rights for widows, dowry system. She argued and succeeded in providing scholarships, free books, clothes for Scheduled Caste and Schedule Tribe students. Her advice

during the second world war to control the price of essential commodities was praiseworthy.

When she was requested to function as a speaker for a single day on 24th March 1939, she took a dynamic step to prove her regional feelings to conduct all the business of the house in Oriya language and it was accepted by most of the members of the house. She dared to demand for non-payment of pay and D.A to the legislators those remained absent in the house. As a legislator she had presented many significant Bills like, "Orissa Dowry Prevention Act 1939", "Rectification of Child Marriage Act of 1929", "Land Legislation Bill," "Women Reservation Bill", "Hindu Women's Right to Property Bill" etc.

It would be incomplete if one will not touch Sarala Devi's vibrating literary aspects. She was a versatile, prolific, fiery, revolutionary reformist writer whose writing reflects socio-economic reformations. Educational qualification did not refrain her from the creative writings which shocked the writers of all ages. Her writings were so powerful that it illuminated many women to break the seclusion and assimilated themselves in the national stream. She could able to create a political consciousness among Oriya people, especially, the women folk. She activated the attention of women for constructive social works as well as for articulating the neo identity of Oriya women. Her role was effective in creating a feminist consciousness among the Oriya women. She was the first feminist of Orissa.

Sarala Devi was First Woman of Orissa to :

1. Join the Non-cooperation Movement
2. Wear Khadi
3. Deliver speech in INC, Karachi session
4. Represent in Nehru's Planning Commission
5. Be a member of Senate Board of Utkal University

6. Join the educational committee constituted by Dr. Radhakrishnan
7. Be prisoner of Orissa by breaking salt law
8. Be member of All India Congress Committee
9. Be elected twice to standing committee of All India Women Conference
10. Be awarded twice by Orissa Sahitya Academy
11. Be elected as Woman Legislator of Orissa Legislative Assembly
12. Be act as a temporary speaker of Orissa Legislative Assembly
13. Be the Director of Indian Women Bank
14. Be the Vice President of Utkal Sahitya Samaj
15. Be the President of Women Development Cooperative Society

16. Be create a political consciousness among Oriya Women through her writings

Her sacrifices would not be successful unless and until the present generation takes inspiration from her achievements and idealism who chronicled the manners of society, the problems of married women, the trauma of widows, the ill practice of Sati, the consequence of child marriage, the injustice to women, the impact of gender inequality. Sarala Devi is an unchallenged woman leader of Orissa for all ages to come.

Bijaya Lakhmi Jena, Lecturer in Political Science,
Berhampur City College, Berhampur.