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## Maa Rama Devi and Mahatma

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I was very fortunate enough to meet *Maa Ramadevi* personally during 1981-82, during my graduation days, at Ravenshaw College Cuttack. We had invited her as Chief Guest for one student's function those days, when she received prestigious Jamanlal Bajaj Award for her exemplary social service work. The very first look at the motherly face of the gracious lady was sufficient enough for a life time remembrance with deep reverence, for her.

Maa Rama Devi was born on December 3, 1899, in Satyabhamapur village near Cuttack, to a very influential family of Utkal Gaurav Madhusudan Das (her bada-bapa) and his collector father, Gopal Ballabh Das. She was also married to an equally influential zamindar family, to Gopabandhu Chaudhuri, the then deputy collector and lawyer from Cuttack, in April 1914. Had she wanted, she could have spent most comfortable and luxurious life. But, on March 24, 1921, as she listened to Mahatma Gandhi's two public meetings, at Kathjodi and Vinod Bihari premises in Cuttack, she decided to give up all the comfort, all the luxuries and riches. She was so impressed by Gandhiji's speech that she started wearing cheap sarees from the very next day. She donated her precious 200 grams of gold ornaments and many other valuables to Gandhi's Swaraj Fund.

Along with her husband and in-laws (includes Maa Malati Choudhury), she was in touch with top leaders of swaraj movement, both from our state as well as at national level. Ramadevi took the main responsibility of the Civil disobedience movement of 1930, Salt Satyagraha, 8 August 1934, Gandhi's Shreekeshra Harijan Samavesh. During Mahatma Gandhi's two days' visit to Cuttack in August 1925, Ramadevi stayed with him like a shadow and was in charge of Odia translation of Hindi speeches.

Those days, Gandhiji started the work of establishing a leprosy home in Cuttack (known as Gandhi *Kusthaashram*), other *harijan* related welfare work.



Ramadevi's constant involvement in swaraj movement had deeply disturbed the British government. On November 8, 1930, she was imprisoned and lodged in Cuttack jail for eight months. In 1942, the British government again sentenced Ramadevi and Gopabandhu to two years in jail for their direct involvement in the Quit India Movement.

Even after the death of husband Gopabandhu (April 29, 1958), Maa Ramadevi continued her selfless social service. During the 1962 China-India war, she had taken the seva dal and gave courage to the Indian soldiers who were in distress. Again during Indira Gandhi's emergency period, when Jayaprakash Narayan was dealt with very badly, Maa Ramadevi had organized a huge gathering in Bhubaneswar in full support of Jayaprakashji and for protection of Indian democracy and human rights. Maa Ramadevi was also associated with Vinobaji's Bhoodan Yajna, in 1955.

On her inspiration, her son Manmohan Chaudhary and daughter Annapurna had also decided to serve the society. All her family members have set an example by involving themselves in this noble cause.

Maa Rama Devi will be remembered with reverence for her active role and participation in Salt Satyagraha, Khadi Movement, Bhoodan, and Gramdaan Movement (of Vinoba Bhave) and for the Bari Ashram. She lived a true and an exemplary Gandhian life with dedicated service to the society.