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Freedom Movement and Rama Devi

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Odisha occupies a pivotal place in the annals of India's freedom movement. To the roll-call of frontline Odia women freedom-fighters and social activists, the ever-cherished name of Rama Devi comes first. Mesmerized by the Gandhian ideas, she came to the forefront of public life during Gandhiji's first visit to Odisha in the year 1921. Since then, she had left no stone unturned to free our country from the shackles of Britishers. She was virtually the embodiment of sacrifice and suffering. During her early days she was greatly influenced by her father Gopal Ballav Das, the then Magistrate, paternal uncle Utkal Gourav Madhusudan Das, Sri Aurobindo Ghose and Swami Vivekananda. Moreover, Young Khudiram's hanging had ignited her to fight against the Britishers.

She along with her husband Gopabandhu Choudhury, who had just left the job of Deputy Magistrate jumped into the fray of freedom struggle amidst opposition from some quarters but that did not deter them. Rama Devi started wearing khadi and concentrated on spinning activity. By immersing herself in constructive activities with unwavering dedication she also joined the non-cooperation movement. On his first visit to Odisha, Gandhiji addressed a meeting of women folk at Binod Bihari temple premises at Cuttack in which Rama Devi along with nearly forty women attended the meeting. While addressing the meeting, Gandhiji requested the women present in the meeting to contribute whatever valuables they had for the cause of the freedom struggle. Rama Devi handed over a bunch of cotton yarn which had attracted Gandhiji most. On the instruction of Gandhiji. National Week was observed from April 6 to April 13 to make silent protest against the Ghastly Jalianawala tragedy. Fasting was to be made on the first and the last day. Scrupulously following the norms Rama Devi went on fasting and took to spinning activity during the National Week.

In 1928 Rama Devi along with her husband left for Gaya to attend All India National Congress Conference. In the same year after attending Calcutta Session of All India National Congress Conference, she got drowsed in the spirit of nationalism. To champion the cause of constructive activities she spent her youthful years at Alakashram near Jagatsinghpur and devoted herself to the activity's life promotion of Khadi, upliftment of women and children, eradication of untouchability, superstitions and blind dogmas and instill spirit of nationalism among the inmates



of the Ashram as well as the among the nearby villagers. She firmly believed that without social equality and economic justice, attainment of political independence carries a little meaning. Her prime focus was on ameliorating the condition of the reflected sections of the society so that they would join the national mainstream on equal footing.

During those days untouchability was a deep-seated malaise eating into the vitals of our society. Rama Devi could realize that untouchability is a great crime against humanity. For the removal of untouchability in true letter and spirit All India Harijan Sevak Sangha was setup at Delhi in the year 1932 and in line with this Central Sevak Sangha, Pradesika Harijan Sevak Sangha was formed with Rama Devi as its Secretary. With co-workers she started visiting their colonies and rendered services like educating their children, distributing medicines and first aids to the patients, cleaning them and fervently appealing them to give-up liquor and other intoxicating products and enlightening them by going through the holy scriptures to make them aware of their duties and responsibilities. When Gandhiji came to know that Rama Devi and her co-workers were doing wonderful work for the upliftment of untouchables, he remarked.

"I hope, therefore, that the example of the workers of Cuttack will prove infectious and that the work begun by Smt. Rama Devi and her companions will be continued in spite of the difficulties and disappointments that they might have to face."

In 1930 Salt Satyagraha started across the country after the famous Dandi March by Gandhiji. The objective was to break the Salt Law & force the British Government to come to terms. Our region also witnessed lot of upheavals during this Satyagraha movement. Rama Devi got actively involved in organizing Salt Satyagraha in different parts. She along with Malati Devi Choudhury and Kiranbala Sen proceeded to words Inchudi to participate in Salt Satyagraha. From Inchudi she went to Srijang village and appealed the womenfolk to come out from their house and participate in breaking the salt law. About fifteen hundred women joined the Satyagraha and succeeded in breaking the salt law by collecting salt mixed mud from the sea coast. Thereafter Rama Devi moved to Kujang to organize the Salt Satyagraha. Keeping the police officials in dark, Rama Devi with her astute diplomacy accompanied Rani of Paradeep in a ferry boat in dead of the night and reached Kaliapata and Gandakipur area. In the morning when the native people particularly, women saw their Rani in person, then were overwhelmed with joy and came out in large numbers to participate in the movement to break the salt law. With the onset of monsoon, Salt Satyagraha was discontinued. In the meantime, there was strong resentment at Srijang against the imposition of punitive tax and police atrocities. Rama Devi along with Malati Devi and Surendra Nath Patnaik reached the spot & pacified the situation. Panic had engulfed to such an extent that there was no male member in the entire village.



Rama Devi had to be incarcerated in Bhagalpur Central Jail for eight months. As a result of Gandhi-Irwin pact in 1931, along with other co-prisoners she was freed from the Jail. In the Lahore session of Indian National Congress, pledge was taken for Poorna Swaraj, accordingly a resolution was passed. While taking the oath of Poorna Swaraj on 26th of January 1932, Rama Devi was arrested along with her son and put to prison. After her release from the jail, she devoted most of the time in the upliftment of untouchables. In 1934 the historic Harijan Padayatra began from Puri. Rama Devi with her co-workers came in close contact with Gandhiji at the time of this Padayatra. Due to inclement weather followed with rain, the padayatra was concluded at Bhadrak. At the time of departure Gandhiji advised the workers to go back to the villages to concentrate on constructive activity. On Gandhiji's advice Rama Devi along with her family left for Bari, a flood prone and water-logged area to devote themselves in constructive work. She preached and practiced Gandhian ideals of self-reliance through khadi, cattle care, bee-keeping, hygiene and sanitation, adult education and health care and production of organic vegetables. She started imparting training to a good number of women workers of that area so that in future they would grow-up self-reliant. Rama Devi used to spin yarn for all her clothing needs.

When Gandhiji gave focus on Wargha system of Education i.e., Basic Education in 1938 Rama Devi played a key role in the establishment of basic education in Odisha. The Centers of Basic Education started at Ramachandrapur, Hatasahi, Balibila, Anyasipur, Haladibasant, Ratlanga and Aurangabad. Acknowledging the seminal work of Rama Devi in the field of Basic Education Gandhiji wrote a letter to her the gist of which is mentioned below.

Ch. Rama,

I was very happy to go through your letter. My best wishes to the teachers who have made up their mind and I hope be other teachers will make similar contribution and will not leave their schools. If this work succeeds, it will be a great service.

-Blessings from BAPU 14.2.41

Time had come for quit India Movement after the clarion call of Gandhiji on 8th of August, 1942 at Bombay. All India congress committee meeting. Like thousands of countrymen when Rama Devi was preparing herself to plunge into the movement, she along with her husband was put under arrest and had to undergo imprisonment nearly for two years in Cuttack Jail. Her built-up house named Sebaghara at Bari was declared unlawful by the British govt. and subsequently the Police officials razed Sebaghara to the ground. After the demise of Kasturba in the year 1944, a Trust was formed in her name for the upliftment of children and women. Rama Devi being a Trustee concentrated on imparting training to women workers and promoting basic education among the children. Due to her tireless efforts a member of centers were setup at different places like Bari, Ramachandrapur, Satyabhamapur, Beraboi, Phulagadia etc.



Rama Devi was an ardent votary of Gandhian ideals. Her spirit of selfless sacrifice and deep concern for the neglected sections of the society have held her in high esteem. So, to say she had sacrificed her entire life for the cause of humanity at large. Rama Devi was known for her uncommon bravery, resoluteness, unflinching dedication and exemplary devotion. Gandhiji eulogized Rama Devi in laudable terms a number of times in recognition of her service for the countrymen.

To conclude, her life was a saga of struggle against foreign rule, social ills and economic injustice. She as popularly known as 'Maa' for the people of Odisha especially for the marginalized sections, the poor and the downtrodden. Maa Rama Devi was the epitome of love, compassion and sacrifice.

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