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## The Saga of Rama Devi

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Rama Devi. The very name evokes reverence among Odia people. The reasons for this are very simple. She was a prominent freedom fighter, a devoted follower of Gandhiji and an inspiring role model for women in the state. Rama Devi worked as a social activist and played a key role in several important social movements like the Bhoodan Movement and the Sarvodaya Movement under the leadership of Vinoba Bhave and Jaya Prakash Narayan.

Rama Devi's distinguished political pedigree equipped her to play a significant part in the history of modern Odisha. She was the niece of Utkal Gaurava Madhusudan Das. As a child, she grew up hearing lively discussions about social development and how her native place Odisha could achieve its true destiny in the residence of her illustrious uncle Madhu Babu. From her childhood, she developed a strong desire to be a part of the nation-building initiatives and social reconstruction. In her autobiography aptly titled *Jeevana Pathe*, she recounted an unforgettable meeting with Mahatama Gandhi, where the great man had supposedly asked her what drew her into the field of social service. In reply, Rama Devi had said that it was her uncle Madhu Babu's example which had inspired her to become a social activist. Like her uncle who believed in divine providence, Rama Devi too dedicated her life to a higher cause and followed the path of social service and sacrifice.

In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, prevailing social conditions were extremely unfavorable to women in Odisha. They were not allowed to play an active role in the public domain. During those times, Odia society was quite conservative. Girls' education was not encouraged due to the widely prevailing practice of early marriage. Superstitions and blind beliefs against women's education dominated people's mindset. It was generally believed during those times educating women would bring misfortune to the family. The same sentiment has been captured brilliantly by famous writer Fakir Mohan Senapati in his iconic short story 'Rebati'. It tells the story of a young girl whose parents' death was attributed by her grandmother to her receiving instructions from a private tutor at home. Rama Devi also came in contact with the adopted daughter of Madhu babu, Saila Bala Das and her sister Sudhansu Bala Hazra. Both Saila Bala and Sudhansu



Bala were instrumental in promoting women's education in Odisha. They hailed from a middle-class family in Midnapore district and happened to be the daughters of Ambika Hazra, who was a close friend of Madhu Babu. In 1908 Saila Bala took up the charge of Ravenshaw Girls' School which was then only a lower primary school. She was instrumental in making it a high school. Ravenshaw Girls' High School was the nucleus out of which emerged Saila Bala Women's College in Cuttack. Sudhansubala incidentally became the principal of Ravenshaw Girls' High School. She also became the first woman lawyer in India. Thus, Rama Devi grew up in an atmosphere charged with growing awareness about the need for expanding choices for women.

At the age of fifteen, Rama Devi got married to Gopabandhu Choudhury, son of Gokulananda Choudhury, a close friend of Rama Devi's father Gopalaballva Das. At the beginning of his legal career, Gokulananda served as a junior to Madhusudan Das, the elder brother of Gopalaballava. Notwithstanding the political differences between Madhu babu and Gokulananda Choudhury, the former gave his consent for the marriage alliance. Rama Devi, after her marriage, could strike a nice balance between her husband's family and her own while carrying on the good work. This ability to reconcile contraries was probably a family trait, which she learnt from her mother Basanta Kumari Devi.

Rama Devi mastered the difficult art of being a good homemaker while leading an active public life. Her husband, who was a deputy collector, resigned in 1921 and both of them engaged themselves in doing social work. Like many others of her era, Rama Devi's encounter with Mahatma Gandhi at a mahila sabha in the premises of Binod Bihari Mandir in 1921, introduced a new world-view to her. Inspired by Gandhian philosophy, the couple discovered a new purpose in their life. She embraced a Gandhian way of life and began to shun ostentation and luxury. Rama devi acquired a thorough understanding of Gandhi's concept of Swaraj. For Gandhi, the very essence of swaraj of the self-meant self-control. To achieve self-control, he recommended eleven vows (Ekadasa Brata; namely, non-violence, truth, non-stealing, celibacy, non-indulgence in food, non-possession, manual labour, fearlessness, equal respect for all religions, use of local products, (Swadeshi) and abjuring untouchability). According to Gandhi, to attain political swaraj or self-rule, building a strong national character based on self-control was absolutely essential. After gaining political swaraj, he advocated Gram Swaraj which meant in free India that villages can become republics. Rama Devi had properly grasped the philosophical underpinnings of this great Gandhian concept and its usefulness in establishing a non-violent order. Along with her husband, she actively got involved in Sarvodaya Movement.

Rama Devi's formal entry into politics happened when she along with her husband Gopabandhu Choudhury joined Indian National Congress in 1921. Both of them got actively involved in Non-cooperation Movement. Rama Devi led a life of exemplary austerity and decided to eschew all



forms of luxury. She also participated in Khaddi Movement. It was Madhu Babu whose firm belief in using swadeshi clothes to dress oneself in a way, had inspired Rama Devi to use the spinning wheel even before 1921. She and her husband got associated with Alaka Ashram, situated near river Alaka, to motivate the local population to join the freedom struggle. Taking a cue from Satyabadi School in Puri, Rama Devi also introduced training programs for youth with the objective of making them change agents in villages.

Responding to Gandhi's call, she actively participated in Salt Satyagraha in Odisha along with Malati Devi, Sarala Devi and many other women. She whole heartedly supported Gandhi's opposition to the draconian Salt Act of 1882. The couple took part in Quit India Movement in 1942 and courted arrest. Earlier, Rama Devi was also arrested in 1930 and 1932 for her involvement in the freedom struggle.

In 1934, the couple's decision to set up an ashram known as 'Sebaghar' in Bari was influenced by Gandhi's vision of rebuilding India from its villages. Bari was Rama Devi's karmabhoomi and here, Rama Devi, her husband and their daughter Annapurna tried to arouse the rural belt from centuries of slumber. She was indeed trying to realize Gandhi's vision of Gram Swaraj. Undeterred by her husband's death in 1958, Rama Devi continued to work on her dream project with the same fervour till she died in 1985.

Post-independent Odisha saw Rama Devi becoming part and parcel of Vinoba Bhave's Bhoodan and Gramdan Movements. Her commitment to the redistribution of land can be gauged from the fact that in 1952, she and her husband embarked on a historic padayatra that covered more than 400 miles in the state of Odisha to make an emotional appeal to rich landowners to transfer land to the poor and needy.

Great personalities of Indian politics always left a deep impact on Rama Devi. In 1974, Rama Devi took a plunge into the JP's movement launched to save Indian democracy. In quest of a new social order based on the philosophy of Gandhi, Vinoba and Jayaprakash Narayan, she unfailingly pursued her cherished goals. A life of sacrifice and dedication made Rama Devi an iconic figure who is still fondly remembered by Odia people for her noble and seminal contributions.

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