



Sarala Devi as a Freedom Fighter

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Participation of women folk of India was quite significant in Indian struggle of Independence. Mahatma Gandhi encouraged women folk to take part in this struggle. Odia women were not an exception to this and Odia women like Rama Devi, Sarala Devi, Janavi Devi and many of them voluntarily jumped into this struggle.

Sarala Devi played a heroic role among these women folk and could place her at a conspicuous place.

Sarala Devi was born on 9th August 1904 at village Narilo near Balikuda of Jagatsinghpur, the then undivided district of Cuttack. She was born in a well to do Zamindar family and she spent her childhood with her uncle who was a Deputy Magistrate in the colonial Govt. Her uncle took a lot of care for her studies and she was inspired from her childhood to become a poet a leader and a social worker. At Banki she could know about Rani Suka Devi and was quite influenced by her sacrifice and patriotic spirit. She thought from her childhood that “God has created male and female in human race without making distinction between the two”. This revolutionary thought from her childhood subsequently gave her



spirit to be equal with males. During this period, the girls were forbidden for higher studies and thus she read privately at her home and became fluent in Odia, Bengali, Hindi and English. She got married at the age of 14 as per the custom to Late Bhagirathi Mohapatra who was an advocate and was a soldier in the freedom struggle. The early marriage did not satisfy her. But she was fortunate enough to have a loving, caring and sympathetic husband like Bhagu Babu, who guided her to be a participant in the mainstream of national freedom movement.

Being an enlightened women, she felt very much for the subaltern position of women in India in general and in Odisha particular. She devoted her energy and potentiality how to emancipate the women from their downtrodden position. In true sense Odisha was lacking behind in the struggle of emancipation of women in comparison to Indian scenario. Sarala Devi became bold and brave and without caring the social customs and tradition, she emerged as an emancipator of women setting aside her domestic life. She was mostly influenced by Late Naba Krishna Choudhury (Late C.M of Odisha) and



met Mrs. Frida Das wife of Er. Sarangadhara Das who encouraged her to come out of home and to do something for motherland.

Sarala Devi joined in the 'Mahila Samaj' "Sponsored by Smt. Lavanyabati Devi, the daughter of prominent author of "Odia Bhasha Kosha", Gopal Krishan Praharaj. This organization encouraged the women fold of Odisha to join in the Freedom Movement. In 1924, the provincial conference was organized at Cuttack Municipality ground for the freedom struggle. Though a lot of women attended this meeting, but they were seated behind a bamboo curtain and listened to the speeches. One uncommon thing happened that Sarala Devi suddenly emerged out of the curtain and delivered a long firing speech. Her act was not appreciated by the other women like Rama Devi, Haimavati Devi, Sorojini Choudhury etc. She broke the Odia tradition by coming out from the four walls of the house and went to attend the 35th Congress Session at Nagpur. In the year 1921, while Mahatma Gandhi was addressing a meeting at the river bed of Kathjodi in Cuttack, nearly 40 women including Sarala Devi attended this meeting. The charisma of Gandhiji's speech moved the mind and heart of Odia women to such an extent that Rama Devi, Sarala Devi, Shailabala Das and Kuntala Kumari Sabat, donated in free hand to "Tilak Swaraj Fund". Always she sincerely worked for the Congress Party. The Dandi Yatra of 1930 steered by Gandhiji gave a good impact. In Odisha Gopabandhu Choudhury took active part in the salt satyagraha at Inchudi. In another part at Huma, Sarala Devi went with her force to take part in this Satyagraha. She carried out her campaigning at Berhampur. She established an Ashram named as "Udjoga Mandir" at Berhampur and made it her battle ground. At that time Ganjam was under Madras Presidency. Madras Govt. took Sarala Devi to police custody

and sent her to Vellore Jail. She was the 1st lady prisoner of Odisha and Sarojini Naidu was the 1st lady prisoner of India. Madras Police took her in the Madras mail and in every station thousands men and women greeted her. She was set free and came back to Cuttack. At Cuttack a great meeting was held. Kuntala Kumari Sabat presided over this meeting to pay ovation to Sarala Devi. During her stay at Vellore Jail she came in contact with Durga Deshmukh Devi and Padmabati Subhadra Devi. In this jail Sarala improved her English knowledge and she read a lot of English books and could write letters to her husband in English. She formed "Nikhila Utkal Parisada" in which women from various walks of life were included. During this period, to educate the women (both socially and politically) Sarala Devi started to perform several dramas by making road shows. In true sense this performance mobilized a lot of women who were initiated with the principle of self liberation. Sarala got involved in a number of different organizations, may it be a social or political organization. She gave eloquent speeches and sang patriotic songs in every meeting. In 1933, Sarala Devi organized a women voluntary organization for the 46th congress session which was held at Puri. Through this voluntary organization, she could organize branches in every town of Odisha. In 1933 Sarala Devi along with Nabakrishna Choudhury attended a huge peasant meeting at Anakhia. She encouraged peasant movement when she was an M.L.A. In the later part of her life she was attracted towards socialism and became an active member in the Utkal Congress Socialist Party in which leaders like Nabakrishna Choudhury, Malati Choudhury, Bhagabati Panigrahi were active members. She was mourning for the peasant and their poor living. She took all initiative to uplift them from the state of poverty. When Mahatma Gandhi came to Odisha in 1933 to organize



“Harijana Seva Sangha” in Odisha, Sarala Devi took an active part in this organization and visited village to village to propagate the ingrained ideology and for the upliftment of Harijana and eradication of untouchability.

Sarala Devi was the first lady to join in the non-co-operation movement. She was influenced by “Satyabadi Jatiya Vanabidyalaya” which was considered as a man making work shop, and this led her to establish “Alaka Ashram” at Jagatsinghpur with the help of her husband with a handsome donation of lands and cash.

In the year 1936 Odisha became separate province, Sarala Devi became a M.L.A. (from 1936 to 1941). In the assembly she could deliver speeches both in English and Odia very fluently. She took a prominent role and placed bills for women education and their upliftment, eradication of child marriage, dowry system. During her tenure the bill for establishing “Utkal University” was passed. She was a prominent member and officiated as a Speaker in the Assembly.

Thus Salara Devi struggled for more than 3 decades and could place herself in a conspicuous figure in Odisha. After independence she was not satisfied with the working style of the Congress Party and joined in Praja Socialist Party. Before joining the party she wrote a letter to Jawaharlal Nehru expressing her dissatisfaction for the

working style of the Congress Party. She used to write to Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru and even to Mr. Churchill the then P.M. of England. She was perhaps the 1st Odia lady who was not afraid of at all to express the views independently to anybody.

She suffered a lot in her life. The untimely death of her husband and only son gave her good deal of sorrow and agony. But she did not give way and worked as usual. She passed away in 1986 leaving behind a history for herself and Odisha.

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