

Role Of Women Of Odisha In The Freedom Struggle

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Abstract

India's Independence and its freedom struggle witnesses' contributions from various parts of India irrespective of region, religion, caste, section, age group etc. Our state Odisha was not too different during this journey against the British Raj to make free our mother land. There are many warriors both men and women have sacrificed their youth, family, life, career, comfort etc. for the betterment of the society and to provide a fresh breathing air for the next generations. Our mothers, daughters and sisters of Odisha were not far behind. Across the state and in every nook and corner of the village's women have brought their never dying spirit.

Numerous woman leaders have contributed their own eyes to motivate people, to keep them motivating to work for the nation and making them successful in bringing them in the part of India's impendence. Apart from taking care of the families, kids, houses common women were inspired by the great leaders and their visionary path. There are so many known and unknown woman leaders in Odisha during freedom struggle. To name some of the important and popular names were Rama Devi and Sarala Devi worked hard to popularize Gandhi's slogan "*Kuti Khaa Kati Pindha*" or make your own food and make your own clothes. Along with them there are other women freedom fighters Annapurna Maharana, Kuntala Kumari Sabat, Malati Choudhury, Parbati Giri, Jambubati Devi, Janhabhi Devi, Kokila Devi etc.

The contributions of women in Odisha's freedom struggle highlight their resilience and strong leadership. Despite societal constraints and cultural challenges, Odia women played a pivotal role in critical stages of the independence movement, such as the Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, and Quit India movements. Their active participation inspired local communities, turning Odisha into a center of resistance and advancing the path toward India's independence.

Keywords: Women in Odisha Freedom Struggle, Odia Women Leaders, Role of Women in Indian Independence, Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, Quit India Movement, Women Freedom Fighters of Odisha, Gandhi's Leadership in Odisha, Socio-Cultural Contributions of Women, Resilience of Women in Colonial Odisha, Odisha's Role in India's Independence, Rama Devi, Sarala Devi, Annapurna Maharana, Malati Choudhury, Kuntala Kumari Sabat, Women's Leadership in Odisha.

INTRODUCTION

India's struggle for freedom was a multi-dimensional and multifaceted movement. One of the important facets of India's freedom movement was the growing participation of women. This struggle which gained momentum in 20th century, threw up stalwart like Mahatma Gandhi,

Lala Lajpat Rai, Motilal Nehru, Abdul Kalam Azad, C. Rajgopalachari, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Gopal Krishna Gokhle, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Subhas Bose. Their number and stature often give us an erroneous impression that it was only a man's movement. The narrative of India's struggle for independence would be incomplete without acknowledging the pivotal contributions of women. Their sacrifices and bravery will forever be engraved in our collective memory. With untiring spirit and relentless courage, they faced numerous challenges, including torture, exploitation, and hardship, to secure our freedom. When many male freedom fighters were imprisoned, women stepped forward and assumed leadership roles, ensuring the continuation of the struggle. The list of remarkable women who have left an indelible mark on India's history through their dedication and selfless service is extensive. Notably, women's involvement in the freedom movement dates to 1817, with Bhima Bai Holkar's valiant resistance against British Colonel Malcolm. The legendary Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi exemplified patriotism through her heroic leadership. In the 20th century, leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, Vijay Lakshmi Pandit, and Annie Besant made lasting impacts in both the political and battlefield arenas, leaving behind a legacy that continues to inspire us today.

The period of freedom struggle saw women playing a significant role in the motherland. Their participation in the Indian struggle for independence was extremely significant. The list of great women who dedicated their lives to India's freedom struggle is long, including Bhima Bai Holkar, Rani Lakshmi Bai, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Aruna Asaf Ali, Annie Besant, and Sarojini Naidu.

After a century of revolutions, struggle, bloodshed, and sacrifices, India achieved independence on August 15, 1947. Women's contributions to the freedom struggle are invaluable, and their sacrifices will occupy a foremost place in history. They fought with true spirit and unafraid courage, facing various tortures, exploitations, and hardships to earn freedom.

Women from Odisha played a vital role in India's freedom struggle, and their contributions will always be remembered. Their dedication, sincerity, and selfless sacrifices have immortalized their names in the annals of the Indian Freedom Movement.

Odisha played a significant role in the Indian freedom struggle against British colonial rule. While the contributions of men in this struggle are well-documented, the role of women from Odisha remains relatively unexplored. This paper aims to highlight the significant contributions of women from Odisha in the freedom struggle. Despite facing numerous challenges and restrictions, Odia women played a crucial role in various phases of the national movement, including the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, and Quit India Movement. Their participation and leadership helped stimulate the movement, and their sacrifices and dedication show the way for India's independence.

Prominent women leaders of Odisha were Sarala Devi, Malati Devi, Rama Devi, Jambubati Devi, Janhaba Devi, Kokila Devi and others. It is interesting to note that several foreign women along with hundreds and thousands of Indian women dedicated their life for the cause of freedom. Notable among them are Sister Nivedita, Annie Besant, Meera Ben and Sarala Ben. The state Odisha formerly known as Orissa and also known as Kalinga is located in the eastern part of mother India. It's place rich with forest, hills, mountains, rivers and also surrounded by the sea in the eastern part. As per the 2011 census¹ SC (17.13%) and ST (22.85%) constitutes 40% or 2/5th of the total state population. Out of which almost 1/5th constitutes the tribals. When we look at the sex ratio as per the census² it's almost the same i.e 979 females for 1000

¹[https://www.rtiodisha.gov.in/pa/REVQVC8xMS8xNDcvMTk=#:~:text=The%20State%20of%20Odisha%20occupies,%25%20as%20per%202011%20census\).](https://www.rtiodisha.gov.in/pa/REVQVC8xMS8xNDcvMTk=#:~:text=The%20State%20of%20Odisha%20occupies,%25%20as%20per%202011%20census).)

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<https://www.census2011.co.in/census/state/orissa.html#:~:text=Sex%20Ratio%20in%20Orissa%20is>

male. This indicates almost 1/10th of state population is the tribal women. When we are discussing about tribal culture as explained by Neelachala Panigrahi³ in the Orissa review of January 2006 edition “Tribal Culture during the Colonial Rule”, these are the ways of life, their belief, languages etc.

DISCUSSION

When we are discussing or navigating the role of women in Odisha during freedom struggle, it is important to pay attention various perspectives.

Societal Structure was one of the critical aspects which had affected the freedom struggle among the women of Odisha. Indian society and also Odisha society was predominantly patriarchal or male dominated. There were so many social customs and traditions which was discouraging the women to come out of the house and freely move from society to society or place to place to interact, educate and create awareness among the village women.

Educational System is key or foundation of any changes or part of any struggle. Education was not available to all the women of a society. It was only specific to some of the people. Women who had exposure to this education were trying to best utilize to educate other women in the same or different villages.

Before the advent of Gandhi in the political scene, Indian women had limited participation in politics. Barring a few women of royal and aristocratic families common women were not coming forward to lead and even be part of this mass movement. Gandhi wanted to India's freedom struggle into a mass movement. He sincerely wanted to bring women into the main stream of the movement. He had a belief that in a plan of life, based on non-violence, woman has as much right to shape her destiny as man has to shape his life. Odisha was fortunate to have a leader like Gopabandhu Das, who propagated Gandhian ideas, which had considerable effect on women in Odisha.

In fact, Gandhi's first visit to Odisha to preach the gospel of Non-Cooperation Movement led to political awakening among Odia women. Women of Odisha gladly accepted the political thought of Gandhiji. Mohan Das Karamchand Gandhi held a meeting at Binod Behari in Cuttack and inspired them to join freedom struggle. Gandhi provides them proper guidance of nationalism. The call of Gandhiji brought about a dramatic and revolutionary change in the static political life of Odia women.

The historical emergence of Odia women into political limelight coincided with the Non-Cooperation Movement launched by Gandhi in 1921. In 1922, Rama Devi along with Padmavati Devi and Hiramani Devi attended the Indian National Congress held at Gaya. Though political consciousness was marked among a few women, their participation in the Non-Cooperation Movement was less in number. No women were arrested. But the small group took the lead and mobilized the masses during the next phase of Gandhian movement, i.e. Civil Disobedience Movement.

Gandhi chooses to mobilize man support through *Salt Satyagraha* and other constructive programmes. In Odisha Civil Disobedience Movement involved women activists like Rama Devi, Sarala Devi, Malati Choudhury, Laxmi Bai, Jambubati Devi and others. The Odia women in general responded warmly to the call of Gandhi and jumped into the mainstream of national politics. The manufacture of salt continued ceaselessly by the women especially at Inchudi and Kujang in Odisha. A large number of women led by Rama Devi broke the salt law at Inchudi. The Civil Disobedience Movement was called off by the Congress followed by Gandhi-Irwin pact in 1931. A women's conference was held at Balasore with Kuntala Kumari Sabat as President. Thousands of women from all over the state participated in the conference. This historical conference developed their orientation towards politics.

,940%20as%20per%20latest%20census.

³ https://magazines.odisha.gov.in/orissareview/jan2006/engpdf/Tribal_Culture.pdf

After the suspension of Civil Disobedience Movement in 1934, the activities of Congress women were directed in three directions, i.e. (a) implementation of the constructive programme, (b) entry into the Legislature and (c) formulating a socialist ideology. Rama Devi and her followers turned to the implementation of the Gandhian constructive programme such as uplift of Harijan, Kisan, Women & fighting against untouchability etc. They organized meetings, public debates and contributed articles to newspapers relating to Harijan Movement. Her able leadership attracted others to follow her path.

The other section of the Congress women decided to enter Assembly. Sarala Devi and A. Laxmi Bai were two prominent women leaders who brought remarkable change to the society through proper legislation.

In sharp contrast to the above two categories, the third group started a socialist movement under the leadership of Malati Choudhury. They were inspired by Marxist philosophy and wanted to channelize Congress Movement along with the lives of class struggle.

On 9 August 1942, Gandhiji gave his call for the Quit India Movement. In Odisha the movement became virulent due to active role of women. Women participated in alternative activities and achieved spectacular results. They adopted bold and daring roles. The women satyagrahis learnt the art of '*Satyagraha*'. Women from different strata of life came forward in large number to join the political movement. Thus, for the first time in the history of Odisha the mass participation of Odisha women in the movement was a unique phenomenon. They boycotted and burns to foreign goods and started popularizing *Khadi* and *Charkha*. Women displayed their gallantry when they heard about the arrest of prominent leaders of Odisha. S,N Dwivedy, acting as guide to Malati Choudhury spearheaded the protest march in Odisha.

In Cuttack, Mangala Devi was arrested along with 12 other women while burning the uniforms of Choukidars and Police officers. On arrest of Priyambada Das, Godavari Dei, the freedom fighter burnt the Post office in Kaipada. Police ordered for firing and women leader Shanti Mallik was killed. The mob set fire to the official records of Police station, Government offices at Tirtol. Massive arrest was done by the regressive British ruler. Jails of Cuttack was filled with women Satyagrahis. Rama Devi, Malati Devi and Surama Devi were among the arrestees. In Balasore, Eram firing issue over hundreds of women is a black spot of modern history. Eram firing in 1942 said to be the second Jallianwalabag, where police started firing on the unarmed people. As a result of police firing at Eram, 56 persons injured. One Pari Bewa, a country-side women of Eram, in the Balasore District is said to be the first women martyr of 1942 Quite India Movement.

In Koraput, Congress women workers under the leadership of Laxman Naik, organized meetings, attacked on excise shops and government establishments. Prominent women satyagrahis like Budwal Devi and Sobha Ganda took the leadership in the area for fighting against the colonial ruler.

Western Odisha was also burning with hartals, protests, ransacks by the people. In Sambalpur shops were demolished by women satyagrahis under active leadership of Jambubati Devi and Parvati Devi. Bimala Devi and Gana Manjari Devi in Puri district played vital role in creating consciousness among the women for freedom struggle. Ganjam district created many women leaders who has shown their sacrifice in getting the free India. Active participation of Laxmi Bai, Champa Devi, Srimati Suryama in hartal, picketing and bandh, has inspired so many women to participate in Quite India Movement.

Thus women of Odisha played important role in Gandhian struggle, which impressed Gandhiji who appealed to women of other states to follow the footsteps of Odisha Women.

“Sandi Sabar”- The Story of a Brave Tribal Woman Freedom Fighter

During India's Independence movement Tribal women of Odisha had played a major role. One

of the prominent tribal woman leaders was *Sandi Sabar* from the *Saura* tribes. She was born in 1922 and almost within 7-8 kms of Gunupura area. Between 1942 to 1946 at a very young age of 22 she played a pivotal role in organizing the tribal women from *Gunupur* area. She was greatly influenced by her father and brother to dedicate the life for the Indian independence at whatever capacity she can. Sandi used to organize the ladies from the nearby twenty villages and used to train them to do the cotton cultivation and adopt the indigenous products by boycotting non-Indian products and produces. Her son used to explain how his mother (Sandi Sabar) fought with a bear while she had been to forest to collect forest produces (Mahula) of forest. Even though it's quite common for the tribal women to consume natural alcohols, Sandi was never in consumption of alcohols and related juices. Sandi had inspired and motivated to go against the British rule and fight for India's Independence.

Now also when the people of Gunupur taluka discuss about the India's freedom fight, they never miss to remember the contribution of *Kujendri Tribes* tribals. The lady who fought for India's freedom struggle, because of the lack of medical facilities she passed away at the young age of thirty three while delivering her second child. In her life she had never been jail, no police officer tortured her, however she fought in an organized manner by mobilizing the local ladies. Between 1941 and 1954, Sandi had worked tirelessly for the cotton based economy.

Abhaya Mahapatra, Retired Additional Director, Information and Public Relationship Department, Utkala Prasanga, October, 2022

Malati Chaudhury – The people's leader and Visionary

In Indian freedom struggle, there will be always a shining and bright star from Odisha, she is none other than *Malati Chaudhury*. She was born in 1904 in a family where father was a reputed lawyer and mother was a teacher and daughter of Indian Civil Servant. In 1920 she was greatly inspired by Father of Nation Mahatma Gandhi's "Non-Cooperation Movement" and decided not to study foreign education⁴. In 1927 she met *Nabakrushna Chaudhury* while they were in *Shanti Niketan* and decided to spend their rest of life together.

In the 1930 When Mahatma Gandhi encouraged or called for the great '*Salt March*' or '*Labana Satyagraha*' or '*Salt Satyagraha*' many important leaders from various parts of the country joined. Many of them were jailed because of these movement against the British government. '*Labana Satyagraha*' was the most important part of Indian freedom movement which encouraged people to march towards the sea coast and making own salt from seawater. This was a protesting against the British salt tax through nonviolent civil disobedience. In India it started from Dandi, Gujarat. However in Odisha it was led by Malati Chaudhury along with Rama Devi. It started from Inchudi (In Remuna Block) of Balasore district and slowly it spread to various places such as *Srijung*, *Rasalpur*, *Kujang* etc. Malati Devi played a major role in installing the freedom movement among the rural people⁵. She travelled village to village to meet and organize the women to prepare and get ready to participate in the non-cooperation and freedom movement.

In February 1933 Malati Devi had organized the "*Utkal Congress Samajvadi Karmi Sangh*", which later became the Orissa Provincial Branch of the "All India Congress Socialist

⁴ Utkala Prasanga, October 2022

⁵ <https://feminisminindia.com/2019/05/03/malati-devi-choudhuri-marxist-leader/>

Party". She donated huge amount of her own jewelry for the establishment organization. With her and the organization's effort they published one magazine "*Sarathi*". This magazine inspired and encouraged many youth and all the sections of the people to participate and contribute towards the freedom movement. In 1934 while Mahatma Gandhi visited Odisha he had noticed the tremendous energy and dynamism of *Malati Devi*, he had nick named her as "Tofani" or "Stormy". Malati Devi had organized many farmer's organization including a paper named "*Krushak*" which means farmers. Along with her husband *Naba Babu* she has strengthened the "*Praja Mandal*" movement. While she was arrested for participating "Quit India Movement" or "Bharat Chhodo Andolan" in 1942, she decided to establish a hostel for the poor people of scheduled caste and scheduled tribe, which was named as "*Baji Rout Chhatrabas*" or "Baji Rout Hostel". This was named after memory of a twelve year-old boy, *Baji Rout*, who sacrificed his life by not allowing the British forces to cross by boat in the river Brahmani. Malati Devi throughout her life worked for the people and with the people to sail through the Freedom Movement of India and also development after Independent.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, India's independence on August 15, 1947, was a culmination of a century-long struggle, marked by revolutions, sacrifices, and unwavering courage. Women played a vital role in this journey, shouldering critical responsibilities and making significant contributions to the freedom movement. The women of Odisha fought alongside men, demonstrating extraordinary patriotism, courage, and organizational abilities. Their dedication and sincerity in the face of exploitation, torture, and hardship have immortalized their names in the annals of the Indian Freedom Movement.

Through their participation in public meetings, picketing, Khadi sales, and national education promotion, Odia women from diverse backgrounds and socio-economic strata played a crucial role in shaping the movement's progress and success. Their selfless sacrifices will continue to inspire future generations.

While this article has highlighted the significant contributions of Odia women to the freedom struggle, further in-depth research is necessary to uncover the full extent of their invaluable contributions. Nonetheless, their legacy deserves a special place in the history of India's freedom struggle, serving as a testament to the power of courage, dedication, and collective action.

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