



IMAGING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF PRAVABATI DEVI – THE UNSUNG HEROINE OF SAMBALPUR IN THE INDIAN FREEDOM STRUGGLE

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ABSTRACT:

A large number of female freedom fighters in Odisha took an active part in all three phases of the Indian freedom movement. They made tremendous sacrifices, suffered untold miseries, became the victim of lathi charges, and arsons, and spent their lives in different jails for years together for the liberation of the motherland. Among them, some came to the limelight. But most of them were neglected. They did not get the proper recognition and find a place in history or receive the due honor that they deserve. They remained unsung, unnoticed, and lamentably neglected. This paper is a humble attempt to portray the contributions of one such unsung heroine of Odisha- Prabhavati Devi.



KEYWORDS: Ashra, Charaka, Yagnya, Khadi.

INTRODUCTION

Pravabati Dash, also known as Pravabati Devi or Praba Nani, was an ill-fated girl from her very childhood. Though born in a well-to-do Brahmin family in the Nayak Para of Bargarh on 18th October 1910, her early childhood was full of miseries. Dhanapati Dash, her father, and Manikya Dash her mother being conservative Brahmins could not discard the child marriage system then prevalent in Odisha and performed her marriage with one Jagadish Dash of the village Bargaon near Kantapali of Bargarh Sub-Division when Pravabati Devi was just only five years old.¹ Pravabati Devi had no clear memory of her marriage. What she distinctly remembered was the occasion when she was told that she became a widow. At that time, she was barely ten years old and was then reading in class V at a nearby school. The whole world seemed to have changed for her when her childhood husband died. She was stopped from going to school and was asked to put on white clothes and strictly avoid colored ones. Misfortunes never come alone. After this mishap, she had to face another grave mishap. Her mother, died a year after Pravagati Devi became a widow. Her father married a second time. Her stepmother, treated her very bitterly, so she did not want to become a life-long financial burden on her father.²

Freedom fighters of the undivided district of Sambalpur like Bhagirathi Patnaik, Fakir Behera, Laxminarayan Mishra, Ghanashyam Panigrahi, Dayananda Satpathy, Nrusingha Guru, Durga Guru, and Ram Chandra Puri traveled from village to village and house to house for spreading the programs of Non. The cooperation started under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. In this connection Fakir Behera the M.L.A. came to Nayak Para of Bargarh and gave a lecture to the assembled people regarding the non-cooperation movement started by Gandhiji. Pravabati Devi has said that she listened to Fakir Behera's speech from behind the door of her house. The speech of Fakir Behera created a great stir in her mind. She, therefore, made up her mind to join the freedom movement.³

Fortunately for her, a few days later, Malati Choudhary a renowned freedom fighter from Cuttack came to Bargarh to address a meeting. The meeting was held on the bed of the river Jira which flows by Bargarh. Pravabati Devi was the only woman among those who attended the meeting. Malati Choudhary was very happy to see her and asked her what she wanted. Pravabati Devi told her that her only aim in life, was to serve the cause of the motherland, and for this, she wanted to join with her. She further informed her that she would be writing to Rama Devi, her elder sister-in-law, to allow her to be taken to Bari where an Ashram had been established to train women to help the Indian National Congress in its fight against the British. ⁴Alaka Asharm, known as the Sabarmati of Odisha remained the citadel of the freedom movement in Odisha. Situated over 55 Acres of land on the bank of river Alka in Jagatsinghpur town of Odisha. This Ashram played a significant role in giving training to the freedom fighters and Banar Sena. The socioeconomic importance of this Ashram reached its zenith during the quit India movement.⁵

Pravabati Devi agreed to her proposal and waiting for the message from Rama Devi. And the message came one day and Parvati Devi prepared herself to leave for Bari. Accordingly, Pravabati Devi together with Parvati Devi left Bargarh in the company of Jambubati Patnaik and Ram Chandra Puri. Pravabati Devi's maternal uncle, Raghav Chandra Dash, extended all possible help to enable Pravabati Devi to join the Ashram at Bari.

At Sambalpur, they stayed for a day in the house of Prahallad Rai Lath, which was then functioning as the office of the Indian National Congress, and then proceeded towards Bari. The Ashram at Bari, known as Sabarmati of Odisha, was about forty kilometers from Cuttack. As per the suggestions of Mahatma Gandhi this center was established at Bari for the whole of Orissa where women from all parts of Orissa were trained.

The inmates of the Ashram got up early in the morning. After prayer, they attended the spinning of thread with the charka and spun thread from cotton for about an hour. The Ashram premises and the lavatories were then cleaned. Cleaning work followed by bath and breakfast. In the evening eminent freedom fighters like Godavarish Mishra, Nilakantha Dash, and Acharya Harihar used to deliver speeches on the progress of the freedom movement and on Gandhiji's objectives and methods.

Life at the Ashram was carried on in a disciplined manner. Food was cooked by others for the inmates, but the rest of the work was done by them. They had to look after the garden and water the plants. They helped in growing vegetables in the adjacent garden and in looking after the livestock kept on the premises. All their personal work too was to be done by them. They had to keep their own rooms as well as the Ashram premises clean. Gandhiji laid great stress on self-help and self-dependence. The women in the Ashram were, therefore, taught how to render help to each other and how to be self-dependent. Gandhiji also believed that unless women in India are educated, they could never develop confidence in themselves. All that was done in the Ashram was, therefore, directed towards making the women educated in the true sense of the term and to bring out the quality of self-confidence that in them.

The inmates were required not just to learn the virtues of cleanliness, self-help, and self-dependence, but also to impart the same values of life to the women folk of the nearby villages. Hence, they went to the nearby villages one after the other and cleaned the approach roads where the villagers had defecated. Then they asked the women folk to assemble at a place where they spoke to them about the freedom struggle, about the Programme of Gandhiji and his ideals. They also encouraged them to learn the alphabet and to keep their premises clean. Further, they taught them spinning with the help of charkha and explained to them Gandhiji's philosophy of weaving and the use of khadi. They went to the houses of Harijans and cleaned them. They also tried to dissuade them from drinking wine and beef.⁶

In the villages, they worked with the laborers and agriculturists to share their views with them and thus create an awareness of the freedom movement among the illiterate masses. This was the only way, according to Gandhiji, "to convert the freedom struggle into a mass struggle and only by such a struggle the Britishers be forced to leave India."⁷

All this work gave great pleasure to both Pravabati Devi and Pabati Giri. Deeply committed as they were to serve the nation and participate in the national struggle for freedom, they could quickly adjust themselves to the new way of life in the Ashram with ease.

All the inmates of the Ashram were treated with great love and affection by Rama Devi, Prabhavati Devi used to tell later that because of the motherly treatment they got from Rama Devi, they could adjust themselves easily to life at the Ashram. Further, because of the affectionate behavior of Rama Devi, they were unable to disobey any of her advice on any issue.

Pravabati Devi later also said that after she left the house of her father, her father's family was ostracized by the Brahmin community of Bargarh because a daughter of the orthodox Brahmin family had gone away to a place about which they had no idea. When Pravabati Devi wrote to her father that she was not only getting some training in the Ashram at Bari but was also performing all the customary duties of a widow. The people of the community were now convinced and allowed her father to return to the fold.⁸

Pravabati Devi continued the practice of spinning thread with the charkha and always used only khadi. Spinning of thread with the charkha, Gandhiji remarked, was an act of *yagnya*, or a sacred sacrificial act. Hence, he exhorted all Indians to take to khadi. And Pravabati Devi religiously adhered to this prescription of Gandhiji throughout her life.

In Ashram, she developed a sense of dignity in her own self. She was no longer an unwanted widow in a family. She now had the self-confidence that characterizes independent and enlightened human beings and felt that she was capable of carving a niche for herself in the Indian freedom struggle.

After the Non-cooperation Movement of 1920 and the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1931, Gandhiji started the Individual Satyagraha or Individual Civil Disobedience movement in 1940 in protest against the British decision to send Indian troops abroad to fight along with the allied Forces against the Nazis during the Second World War. Consequently, in order to break the backbone of this movement, the British Government in India arrested Gandhiji and other leading freedom fighters immediately after the launch of the movement. Gopabandhu Choudhary and Rama Devi, like other leaders in other states, courted arrest in Orissa and were sent to jail. There were difficulties in managing the Ashram at Bari in their absence. In addition, local leaders in all places including Sambalpur courted arrest. There was thus a paucity of workers at the district level. For all these reasons the women undergoing training at the Seva Ghar were sent back to their respective places to work for the Indian National Congress whose local leaders had been arrested. Pravabati Devi and Parbati Giri returned to Sambalpur and both began to work for the Indian National Congress.⁹

In the villages, they told the village folk that they must educate themselves to enable them to move from the darkness of ignorance to the light of knowledge because, they said, through knowledge alone, one could have power. They also informed them that they could participate in our struggle for freedom more effective only if they were properly educated. Further, they exhorted them to keep their houses and villages clean. They narrated before them the dangers of drinking wine; untouchability, they said, was a disease that was making the social fabric of India weak and vulnerable. Hence Gandhiji treated the lower caste people as Harijans, the loved ones of the Lord. Foreign clothes, they said, were symbols not only of the exploitation of the Indians by the colonial rulers but also made the Indian weavers poorer and sometimes also jobless. Hence, they requested people in the villages to use homespun khadi and discard foreign clothes.¹⁰

While they were busy mobilizing people to join the freedom struggle Gandhiji began, in 1942, the Quit India Movement and gave a call to the British to quit India. The movement soon spread to different parts of India like wildfire. Volunteers in large numbers picketed before the Government offices, distributed leaflets asking the British to leave India and thus courted arrest.¹¹

Pravabati Devi joined this movement with a joyous heart. On August 23, she was arrested for picketing government offices at Bargarh and was sent to Sambalpur jail for six months. Within three days of her release at the end of the jail term, she was arrested again for distributing anti-British pamphlets among the people and, as she had committed an offense for the second time, she was now sentenced to a two-year jail term. She was kept in Sambalpur jail for one year where she met other

freedom fighters of Sambalpur like Ghanashyam Panigrahi, Laxminarayan Mishra, Nrusingh Guru, Dayaananda Satpaathy, and also Parbati Giri. She was then transferred to Cuttack jail where she found Rama Devi, Malati Choudhary, and other freedom fighters for her company.¹²

Inside the jail, she was given rigorous punishments like grinding stones to prepare flour from wheat and cleaning rice *and MUGA dal* for cooking. During the jail term, she devoted her time to making the illiterate women prisoner's literate and in reciting the Oriya Bhagawat, Ramayan, and Mahabharat. These books made her acquainted with the true philosophy of life that was found in the heroes and heroines of the two epics. Above all, they taught her how to face the adversities of life with courage and equanimity.¹³

She was released from jail in 1945. The same year Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust was formed to commemorate the memory of Kasturba Gandhi who passed away on 22 February 1944, at the Aga Khan Palace in Pune. Rama Devi was the only Trustee of the Trust from Orissa and at her behest, both Pravabati Devi and Parbati Giri went from house to house in the then-undivided Sambalpur district collecting four annas from every individual. Their efforts were so intense that they along with others were able to collect Rs. 75,000/-, the highest amount from any single district in Orissa, for the Trust. The amount was given to Mahatma Gandhi at the Aga Khan Place in Pune by Sri Prahallad Rai Lath, the then President of Sambalpur District Congress Committee.¹⁴

As the freedom struggle was almost in a culminating stage, Gandhiji decided to stop all agitation and wait and observe the activities of the British Government before they left India. In view of this, all the eminent freedom fighters and Congress workers of Sambalpur district decided to meet in 1945 at a village called Panimora near Sohela in the then Bargarh Sub-Division of Sambalpur district. This village had the distinction of providing thirty-two freedom fighters, the largest from any single village in Orissa. The freedom fighters, therefore, agreed to meet in this village to decide on their future course of action. Each freedom fighter gave his own suggestion, but it was generally agreed that they should engage themselves in the reconstruction of rural India. Many freedom fighters, therefore decided to devote their time to the constructive and creative programs of Gandhiji which aimed at uplifting the rural masses through the implementation of the creative and constructive plans already suggested by Gandhiji. Upendra Panigrahi of Bargaon and some other freedom fighters like Ghanashyam Panigrahi of Manipur near Larambha and Shiba Narayan Padhi of Sambalpur decided to start a Mahila ashram at Bargaon where the wives, daughters, and sisters of freedom fighters would be trained in order to enable them to work for the welfare and improvement of rural women and for the proper education of children in their early childhood they suggested to Pravabati Devi to work with them for his Mahila ashram and she readily agreed to do so. Bargaon then became the center of her activities.

In order to perform her duties in the Mahila ashram more effectively she went to Seva Gram near Wardha for training in midwifery. During this training, she had the good fortune of spending about fifteen days in the company of Mahatma Gandhi at Wardha. She got the opportunity of not only working with the Mahatma but also of observing him from very close quarters. Her simplicity, her fearlessness, the joy she felt in serving the poor and the needy, and her steadfast adherence to truth were the qualities she had imbibed from Gandhiji's life. She used to say that these fifteen days in her life were the most memorable days of her life.¹⁵ Meanwhile on 15 August 1947 India became an independent country. Pravabati Devi worked in the Mahila Ashram and served the community till her last breath.

Thus, pravabati Devi left behind her a legacy of self-sacrifice and selfless service to the community. Her legacy is symbolized in the Mahila Arsham which she established. In nutshell, it can be said that Pravabati Devi remained an icon of supreme sacrifice and dedication to the cause of the liberation of the motherland and service to the orphans, destitute and downtrodden. She has created a niche for herself in the history of the freedom struggle. But the irony of fate is that she did not receive the proper recognition that she deserved.

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