

Sarala Devi: The Forgotten Revolutionary Woman of Odisha

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ABSTRACT

In a culturally conservative society where women were traditionally confined within domestic boundaries, the Indian freedom movement opened new spaces for female participation in public life. In Odisha, one of the most remarkable yet under-recognized figures of this transformation was Sarala Devi (1904–1986). A freedom fighter, social reformer, legislator, and literary personality, she played a pioneering role in mobilizing women during the Gandhian era. This paper examines her contribution to the nationalist movement, her advocacy for women's emancipation, her organizational leadership, and her literary engagement as instruments of social reform. The study argues that Sarala Devi represents a significant bridge between regional nationalism and early feminist consciousness in Odisha. Despite her immense contributions, she remains marginalized in mainstream historiography. Reassessing her legacy is essential for reconstructing a more inclusive narrative of India's freedom struggle.

KEYWORDS: *Sarala Devi, Odisha, Women's Empowerment, Nationalism, Gandhian Movement, Feminist Thought, Odia Literature.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In a culturally rich and conservative society, where women were confined to the four walls of their homes-expected to manage household chores, cook, serve their in-laws, and follow the strict instructions of their husbands-many women of Odisha, inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's ideals, participated in the freedom struggle. In their hearts, they nurtured extraordinary courage, unwavering self-confidence, determination, dedication, fearlessness, and patriotism.

I have dared to write about this revolutionary woman, though only a few scholars may be familiar with her. Many might not have even heard her name, or know anything about her life. Questions naturally arise: Who was Sarala Devi? What did she do? Why has her name not reached popular consciousness? These are complex and unresolved questions.

The reason lies in the fact that during her time, Sarala Devi focused entirely on her work rather than public recognition. Had she lived today, her achievements might have brought her high social status, prestigious positions, and widespread media attention. But in her era, she remained dedicated to action, far removed from the desire for fame. Consequently, she has remained underappreciated in historical discourse.

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This courageous, revolutionary, and noble woman is Sarala Devi. She devoted herself to liberating her homeland, Odisha, from foreign rulers, pledging to break the chains of colonial oppression. She did not let the traditional restrictions of newlywed life, such as veiling or foot-binding, hinder her from stepping onto the battlefield of social and national struggle. She rose against the injustice, cruelty, and exploitation of the British government, playing a pivotal role as a woman leader. Awakening to the Gandhian ideals of truth and nonviolence, she committed herself wholeheartedly to the struggle for India's independence.

II. Early Life and Social Awakening

The revolutionary woman, Sarala Devi, was born on August 19, 1904, in a respected family in the village of Narilo, Jagatsinghpur district. She was married at the tender age of 14 to Bhagirathi Mahapatra. Although married young, her mind was stirred by numerous unresolved social questions, which ignited the spark of activism within her.

Embodying the spirit of rebellion, she emerged as a revolutionary and defiant woman, fiercely advocating for women's liberation and empowerment. She courageously opposed practices such as the purdah

system, social superstitions, and other oppressive norms, lighting the flame of protest in every sphere of social reform. In essence, Sarala Devi was the first revolutionary woman prepared to challenge the entrenched patriarchal and orthodox traditions of her contemporary society.

Women of Odisha played a pivotal role in the Indian independence movement. The power of women is unparalleled, and the women of Odisha, with their courage and determination, were no less capable than the bravest men. Whether it was the civil disobedience movements, the Salt Satyagraha, non-cooperation campaigns, or the Harijan and peasant movements, Odia women led from the front, confronting British authority and oppressive practices with fearless resolve. They mobilized public awareness, united women, and advanced the cause of women's awakening.

III. Participation in the Freedom Movement

Their leadership and active participation were instrumental in every sphere of struggle. The primary objective of these efforts was the empowerment of women, highlighting their strength, resilience, and vital contribution to the freedom struggle.

At the invitation of Gopabandhu Das, when Mahatma Gandhi visited Odisha on March 23, 1921, during the full moon, the first women-only meeting was organized. The following day, March 24, the meeting was held at Binod Bihari's hall in Banka Bazar, Cuttack. Women leaders from nearly all districts of Odisha attended, including Ramadevi, Malati Devi, Sarojini Chaudhuri, Rasamani Devi, Parvati Giri, Sunamani Hota, Shailabala Das, Laxmi Devi, and Kokila Devi. Among them, Sarala Devi's name stood out prominently, as under her leadership, nearly 40 women participated in this historic gathering.

During the meeting, Sarala Devi translated Mahatma Gandhi's Hindi speech into Odia, captivating the audience with its clarity and conviction. Additionally, she immediately offered all her jewelry to the "Swaraj Fund" and pledged that she would never wear ornaments again. Inspired by her example, all the other women voluntarily donated their jewelry to the Swaraj Fund as well. This episode highlights her profound self-confidence, her fearless and disciplined spirit, and her unwavering dedication to the nation's cause.

IV. Organizational Leadership and Women's Mobilization

On June 30, 1924, the first "All Odisha Women's Conference" was held at the Swaraj Ashram in Cuttack. The session was presided over by the distinguished freedom fighter Acharya Prafulla

Chandra Ray, while the inaugural addresses were delivered by Gopabandhu Das and Madhusudan Das. The principal organizer and driving force behind the conference was Sarala Devi.

The primary objectives of the conference included the boycott of foreign-made cloth, promotion of Swadeshi attire, eradication of child marriage, expansion of women's education, elimination of untouchability, and the broader goal of women's emancipation. Through this pioneering initiative, the conference sought to address pressing social issues and lay the foundation for women's active participation in public life.

The renowned woman Sarala Devi had not only her own distinguished identity but was also the devoted partner of the eminent freedom fighter, patriot, and first editor of the Odisha Provincial Congress Committee, Shri Bhagirathi Mahapatra. Being the wife of a dedicated public servant, she was always prepared to carry out her responsibilities with ease and dedication. Whatever work she undertook for the welfare of the state and the nation, she had the full support of her husband, Bhagirathi Mahapatra.

She delivered heartfelt speeches at major gatherings and committee meetings, and in a time when men dominated public forums, her powerful and resonant voice drew the attention of the masses, leaving a remarkable impression. At every organization, event, or assembly of that period, she was always at the forefront, actively participating and achieving her objectives with dedication, consistently impressing all with her efficiency and zeal.

In 1930, Sarala Devi played a leading role in the Salt Satyagraha and became the first woman from Odisha to be arrested under Section 117 of the Indian Penal Code by the British authorities. She was imprisoned in the Vellore Jail. During her six months in jail, her motherly heart wept at the suffering she witnessed, yet she remained steadfast. Ultimately, she was released due to widespread criticism of her imprisonment. Her resolve to protest injustice and oppression was deeply ingrained, evident in every fiber of her being.

In the 1940 "Quit India Movement," under the guidance of Mahatma Gandhi, Sarala Devi was the first to raise the call of "Bharat Chhodo" (Quit India) at Chaudhury Bazaar in Cuttack. For this, she had to endure imprisonment. During her time in jail, she witnessed how, abandoning the path of truth and non-violence, people succumbed to narrow-mindedness and became entangled in corruption and disorder. Unable to tolerate such a situation, Sarala Devi

resigned from the Indian National Congress, taking a principled stand for truth and justice.

Despite the constraints of contemporary politics, the courageous and resolute Sarala Devi transcended traditional gender expectations to undertake extraordinary work for the nation. By stepping into the public sphere as an ordinary woman, she helped realize collective national aspirations in an exceptional manner. In 1931, when she established the "Mahila Swachhasevi Dal" (Women's Voluntary Service Corps), many young women voluntarily joined her cause. Her contributions extended far beyond this-she played a leading role in movements such as 'salt satyagraha', prohibition, the boycott of foreign goods, and the eradication of untouchability. Through these efforts, Sarala Devi emerged as a pivotal figure in social reform and women's empowerment.

V. Legislative Contributions

Between 1936 and 1941, while serving as a legislator, Sarala Devi actively worked to advance women's education, eradicate child marriage, and introduce bills in the Legislative Assembly to protest and outlaw the practice of prostitution. Her well-reasoned arguments and immense courage have made her unforgettable. However, despite her pioneering contributions, she has yet to receive the recognition and honors she rightfully deserves-a profoundly regrettable situation.

Sarala Devi could not tolerate the commodification of women in a materialistic world. As a result, she dedicated herself wholeheartedly to women's awakening programs, using the instrument of rebellion to address women's issues comprehensively. She believed in the guiding principle:

"When women awaken, families will awaken; when families awaken, the nation will awaken; and national life will prosper."

In line with this vision, she was one of the creators of the novel *Basanti*, set in the era of the Green Age. She personally wrote the majority of its chapters. Through the character of *Basanti*, the protagonist, Sarala Devi expressed her own consciousness, the call for women's freedom, a voice against orthodox traditions, and a spirit of rebellion. She aimed to inspire readers to build a healthy and harmonious society, elevating *Basanti* as a model heroine.

Sarala Devi strongly criticized the practice of dowry and sharply satirized human greed, stating:

"In society, the need for women is an extremely indirect matter; women are treated with contempt and neglect. By the price of money, by the price of land,

by the price of jewelry, a woman's value rises and falls. She is now being traded openly in the market."

VI. Literary Contributions and Feminist Thought

Above all, Sarala Devi placed great emphasis on women's emancipation and protection. To realize the vision she held for women, she established an organization called the Utkal Mahila Sammilani (Utkal Women's Association). Reflecting on this, Sarala Devi wrote in *Utkal Deepika*:

"In the days of my past life, I only dreamed of such a reality. Seeing it come to life in the real world has made my existence meaningful. I never imagined that, like other regions of India, women in Utkal would experience such transformation, and that in my lifetime I would witness it."

Even after more than a century, the changes that Sarala Devi sought to bring regarding women's issues have only partially materialized in contemporary society; true and complete transformation has yet to occur. Women's freedom does not mean being unrestrained, reckless, or indulgent in unchecked liberty. While many women have adopted Western cultural practices and etiquette, even today, numerous women remain constrained and deprived of full empowerment.

Sarala Devi, a fiery leader and valiant soldier, possessed extraordinary talent and vision. Fearless, outspoken, and steadfast in her convictions, she boldly confronted arrogant and authoritarian individuals without hesitation. Despite her extensive contributions to the state and nation, she never sought personal recognition or display of grandeur.

Her formidable personality alone evokes echoes of rebellion and revolution. Devoting her life entirely to the service of the nation, she led from the front across multiple spheres during her time. Her name is historically associated with numerous pioneering achievements: the first female political prisoner, the first female temporary lawmaker, the first woman president of a cooperative society, the first female legislative council member, and the first woman to address a legislative assembly session. Sarala Devi, in all these respects, stands as a revolutionary woman par excellence.

The woman who renounced personal comfort and self-indulgence to serve her country selflessly, who broke free from traditional norms and actively participated in the national awakening, who courageously waged a monumental struggle against injustice and oppression, and who risked her very life for the full emancipation of women-such a woman today remains largely forgotten.

Who, then, is responsible for this neglect? It is neither Sarala Devi's own family, nor the jealousy of prominent figures in Odisha, nor mere lapses or narrow-mindedness on the part of the government that have led to her marginalization. Yet despite her unparalleled contributions, her legacy has faded from public memory, remaining obscure in contemporary discourse.

Beyond her social and political life, Sarala Devi's literary endeavors stand as a testament to her intellectual and cultural engagement. Drawing from her own life experiences, she composed a vast body of work—not only in Odia but also in Hindi, Bengali, and English—including essays, poetry, literary criticism, and other writings. These works provided meaningful guidance to a society in moral and cultural flux.

Through her writings, she skillfully harnessed the power of the pen in revolutionary, protest, and reactive movements, elevating her literary and intellectual contributions to the highest echelon of cultural achievement. Recognized in her time as a foremost literary figure, Sarala Devi captured the realities of society—its injustices, inequities, falsehoods, and arbitrariness—through her literary expressions, sounding the clarion call of social reform and revolution.

Her literary journey began with poetry but later expanded to translations, short stories, novels, plays, biographies, literary criticism, and essays. She published extensively in journals such as *Paricharika*, *Nava Bharat*, *Sahakara*, *Utkala Sahitya*, *Yugaveena*, *Dagara*, *Jhankar*, *Naveen*, and *Asha*, while also authoring numerous books including *Sarala Mahabharatiya*, *Narachitra*, *Bharatiya Mahila Prasanga*, *Utkalar Nari Samasya*, *Vishwa Viplavini*, *Rai Ramananda*, *Katha Ramayana*, *Kabi Gopalkrishna Pratibha*, and *Narira Dabi*.

In recognition of her monumental literary contributions, Sarala Devi was honored by the Odisha Sahitya Akademi in 1969, cementing her place as a luminary in Indian literature and a guiding figure for social progress.

VII. Marginalization and Contemporary Relevance

Along with Sarala Devi, numerous women from the towns and villages of Odisha were inspired by the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi and actively participated in the movements of non-violence, Satyagraha, Non-Cooperation, and Swadeshi, as well as in the broader struggle for women's emancipation. Their collective involvement significantly strengthened and advanced these movements.

Above all, by immersing themselves in the blazing flame of the freedom struggle, they rendered commendable services for the welfare of society. The sacrifices and contributions they made in pursuit of national liberation and social transformation are truly beyond adequate description.

VIII. Conclusion

It is an eternal truth that from creation to dissolution, the role of women remains paramount. Across ages, history has repeatedly demonstrated that women are neither weak nor powerless. Woman is the embodiment of strength; she is vigorous, radiant, and resilient. The power of womanhood is formidable and transformative.

The pages of history of both the Indian freedom movement and the struggle for women's emancipation commemorate the sacrificial contributions of several illustrious women. Among them stands the revolutionary freedom fighter Sarala Devi, whose life lamp was extinguished on October 4, 1986. Throughout her long and eventful journey, her invaluable contributions to the nation, to women's empowerment, and to literature have rendered her immortal. It can be asserted without hesitation that her legacy will continue to inspire generations and secure her place as a timeless figure in history.

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