

## **PRAVABATI DEVI: A FACE IN THE CROWD**

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**Paper Received On:** 21 JUNE 2021

**Peer Reviewed On:** 30 JUNE 2021

**Published On:** 1 JULY 2021

**Content Originality & Unique:** 85%

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**Abstract**

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*In addition to being the better half of man woman is an integral part of society but for whom man cannot bring any change in the society. History stands a great testimonial to this. The freedom movement of the nation would not have been possible without the participation of the women. Many women of Odisha forwent their domestic work, crossed their conservative boundary of family and joined the freedom movement of India. In this context, the women of Sambalpur had not lagged behind. One such luminary of the soil is Prabhavati Devi who had shown her valour and valiant role in the freedom struggle of the land. She went to Bari Ashram with the noble mission of imbibing all the virtues from the inspiring company of Malati Devi and Rama Devi. Thereafter, she took active part in various national movements such as Satyagraha, Non cooperation, Salt Movement, Individual Satyagraha, Quit India movement and Bhoodan Movement and went to jail. She carried out many social activities by establishing Matruniketan and Balniketan to serve depressed and deprived people. Because of her unique contribution both in political and social field, she has been accorded many awards both from government and non- government organizations.*

**Keywords:** Bari Ashram, Congress, Wardha Ashram, National movement, Social work.



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### **1. Introduction:**

With the formation of Indian National Congress in 1885, the Indian National Movement took a different turn as INC gave a remarkable boost to nationalism and political awareness. Above all, with the coming of Mahatma Gandhi in national politics in 1920, the scenario of the freedom struggle underwent a significant transmute and it presumed a national character. Gandhiji gave new strength and inspiration to the movement. It was by dint of his charismatic personality that he was able to draw both men and women to the whirlpool of the long-drawn freedom struggle. Therefore, a large number of women came out of seclusion and

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left their domestic grim and jumped into the frying pan of Indian national movement. They determined to walk with equal foot with men counterparts and to march shoulder to shoulder with them.

In this context, India is whole, Odisha in general and undivided Sambalpur district in particular a large number of women being influenced by the Gandhian ideology and leadership and participated in the freedom struggle of India with great zeal and enthusiasm. Furthermore the visit of Gandhi in Western Odisha in several occasions also inspired and encouraged the women of this region to join the national mainstream. Though most of them were belong to orthodox families yet they came out from indoors even without caring the future and plunged themselves in to the task of national struggle.

Among the women of undivided Sambalpur such as Parbati Giri, Krishna Devi, Jambuvati Devi, Guubari Meher, Rukmini Devi Lath, Tulsi Devi, Hiravati Devi and Ketaki Devi etc, Prabhavati Devi was most popular. She was a child widow left home in her teenage and threw herself into the national cause without caring for the then vehement criticism of the orthodox society. Let us discuss her life related incidents in these following points.

## **2. Early life of Pravabati Devi-**

Pravabati Devi was the daughter of Sri Dhanapati Dash and Smt. Manikya Devi of Bargarh. According prevalent system her marriage was performed by an early age of four or five with Jagadish Dash of Bargaon village near Kanthapali. But unfortunately she lost her child husband at the age of ten when she was student of class V. She had not known the meaning of marriage when she lost her better half.

Right from this time her misfortune began as she had to suffer the pain of widowhood. Being widow she was not allowed to continue further study. Her horoscope was thrown into the fire. Not only she was directed to put on white clothes but also to observe fasting Ekadasi days. Her bad luck did not come to an end rather became doubled when she lost her mother who died of getting shock of her husband's death. Consequently, her father married for second time with a girl as young as Pravabati named Sobha Dash. However, her relation with Prabhavati was no sot good1.

Prabhavati silently tolerated all the misfortunes and unhappy incidents and devoted herself in reading Epics and Puranas. After that, the conservative Brahmin traditions could not confine her within four walls of house. She began to revolt against the blind beliefs of the society.<sup>2</sup>

During non co-operation movement many freedom fighters of Sambalpur region like Bhagarathi Pattnaik, Lakshminarayan Mishra, Ghanashyam Panigrahi, Nrusingha Guru, Durga Guru, Dayananda Sathpathy and Ramachandra Puri etc joined in this movement with the call of Gandhiji and were frequently visiting different places of western Odisha to propagate aims and objectives of Indian National Congress and disseminated the message of Gandhi among the people. These activities of Congress workers also influence to her.

### **3. Persons influenced her to join in freedom movement -**

One occasion Prabhavati got a chance to listen the speech of Fakira Behera who was addressing the gatherings at Nayak Para regarding the message of Gandhi and Non Co-operation movement. Sri Behera was leading the leadership of Congress movement in Bargarh region. After heard the speech, her heart got enlightened and she was made up her mind to participate in Gandhian movement. So, she contacted to Ramachandra Puri, a distinguished freedom fighter of Bargarh region whom she expressed her longing in joining the movement. Mr Puri was surprised to notice the devotion, confidence and strong determination of Prabhavati and assured her to make some arrangement in this regard.

Fortune favoured her when Malati Choudhury and Nabakrishna Choudhury, two freedom fighters of Odisha during their tour to Sambalpur and Bargarh to arrange a meeting of the Congress workers on the bank of river Jira in 19383. During addressing the gathering, Malati Devi laid stress to organize the women. In this meeting only woman Prabhavati Devi had attended. At the end of the meeting, she met Malati Choudhury and expressed her wish to serve the nation as a congress worker. Malati Devi was fascinated to know Prabhavati's motive and wrote a letter to Rama Devi, her elder sister in law by requesting her to take Prabhavati to Bari Ashram which is known as Sevaghara for initial training. Prabhavati went to Bari with her maternal uncle Raghava Chandra Dash to enroll in Congress against the will of her parents in 19384. Prabhavati left home so the villagers boycotted her family from the social customary.

From the incident, one can imagine the pathetic and pitiable condition of the widow of that time in Sambalpur. The social boycott was withdrawn when they knew that Prabhavati was in the ashram of Rama Devi.<sup>5</sup> In the meanwhile Parbati Giri, the niece of Ramachandra Puri, also desired to join Bari Ashram who came from Samalipadar to accompany Prabhavati. Ultimately both Prabhavati along with Parbati Giri proceeded to Bari Ashram with the strong opposition and unwillingness of her fathers and relatives.<sup>6</sup>

#### **4. Pravbhavati at Bari Ashram -**

Pravbhavati stayed at Bari Ashram for two years from 1938 to 1940 under the guidance of Rama Devi and received training regarding Satyagraha, cutting of cottons, spinning of khadi, Fundamental education, Cottage industry, Adult education, Women upliftment, Animal husbandry and took training in National Linguistic Education and how to render others and to live independently<sup>7</sup>. In this ashram, she learned a lot which helped in her ensuing life. This ashram had been established with the collaboration of Gopabandhu Choudhury, Surendra Patnaik, Rama Devi, Godavari Devi, Sushila Devi, Tulasi Devi, Mangala Sengupt and Annapurna Devi.

#### **5. Prabhavati Devi and Congress activities in Sambalpur –**

After taking training at Bari, she took part in police station gherao in Bargarh, and distribution of Congress propaganda pamphlets etc. For this reason she was arrested and went to jail for one and half year.

During 1940's when the freedom movement was in full swing in Odisha but shortage of congress workers were felt in Sambalpur region. For this reason both Prabhavati and Parbati Giri were sent to Sambalpur for filling up the gap<sup>8</sup>. In 1941, Prabhavati as a devoted and dedicated congress worker who toured village to village in Sambalpur district and preached about spinning, knitting and weaving khadi by using charkha. Besides that, she spread the message of Gandhi about value education, prohibition of untouchability, cleanliness of houses and villages, boycott of foreign goods, propagated Swadeshi movement and also urged both men and women to join Gandhian movement. She often took part in the freedom fighters meeting of Panimora.

#### **6. Prabhavati Devi and Individual Satyagraha –**

During individual Satyagraha, Prabhavati along with Prahallad Rai, Manglu Pradhan, Bhagarathi Pattnaik, Upendra Panigrahi, Ghanashyam Panigrahi and many other people participated and courted arrested.

#### **7. Prabhavati Devi and Quit India Movement –**

Prabhavati Devi participated in Quit India movement at the age of 26. She was arrested by police on 23rd August, 1942 due to picketing of government offices at Bargarh and circulation of Congress propaganda and pamphlets and sent to Sambalpur jail for six months.<sup>9</sup> Within three days of her release after the end of her jail term, she was arrested again for distributing anti- British pamphlets among the people and sentenced for two years

imprisonment.<sup>10</sup> She was kept first in Sambalpur Circle jail and thereafter, shifted to Cuttack jail where she stayed with Rama Devi, Malati Devi. She kept herself busy in spinning, teaching spinning and writing literature for the other female prisoners. She was released from jail with them in 1945. Then she resumed the work. So, she was again arrested and sent to Cuttack jail for 6 months. On release she gave a remarkable push to her nationalistic activities participating in the meeting of eminent freedom fighters and Congress workers of Sambalpur which was held at Panimora Village of present Bargarh district.

#### **8. Pravabati Devi and Mahila Ashram at Bargaon -**

At that time a Mahila Ashram was opened at Bargaon near Huma on 1st July, 1945 by the endeavour of Upendra Panigrahi, Ghanashyam Panigrahi, Sila Prasad Padhi, Nursingha Panigrahi and Prahallad Rai Lath for the welfare and amelioration of rural women and for the education of deprived children.<sup>11</sup> When invited, Pravabati Devi gladly agreed to serve there. There, she imparted the borders all what she had acquired from Bari Ashram. Consequently Bargaon became the centre of her social service.

#### **9. Trip to Sevagrama for Midwifery Training -**

After serving two years at Bargaon Ashram, she proceeded to Sevagrama near Wardha in Maharashtra for training midwifery so that she might perform her duties in Mahila Ashram more effectively.<sup>12</sup> There she got an opportunity to work with Gandhi for about fifteen days which became the most unforgettable days of her life. Thereafter she dedicated herself to service of the people.

#### **10. Social Work of Prabhavati Devi after Independence -**

After India got her independence, Prabhavati Devi retired from active politics and enthusiastically devoted herself to social service which had been the àà prime objective of her life. After returning from Wardha Ashram, she, on the advice of Rama Devi and the co-operation of Upendra Panigrahi and others, opened “Kasturba Matruniketan Kendra” a welfare centre for women in 1950.<sup>13</sup> Herself being a widow, she could understand the pathetic condition of widows. So, she was determined to give her best as a social worker to bring about welfare and progress of women who were socially depressed and economically backward. She also provided shelter to children in Balashram Kendra and shared their misfortune with her. She helped whomever she realised to be poor and used to say “Man is born free to help the country and the poor” This is the vow and ideal of Mahatma “I have not done anything.”

### **11. Prabhavati Devi and Bhoodan Movement -**

Prabhavati was a true follower of Gandhiji. So, she joined Bhoodan Movement of Vinoba Bhave and arranged his Padayatra( foot marching) in western Odisha in 1963. She accompanied Vinobhaji in his tour across the districts of Bolangir, Kalahandi and Koraput.<sup>14</sup>

An angel as she was, she proceeded along with Rama Devi and others to the hill block of Western Dinajpur district in 1971 to treat the Bangladeshi migrants. She even gave hospitality to the injured soldiers of Indo-Pakistan war.<sup>15</sup>

### **12. Recognition to Prabhavati Devi -**

Recognizing her yeoman service for the cause of freedom, Socio-Economic depressed Women and Children, Dedication of her whole life for the nation and people and patriotism, she had been honoured at different places on different occasions by several organizations - both governments and Private.

Some of them were –

She was awarded with a “Tamrapatra” by the then Prime Minister of India Smt Indira Gandhi in 1972.

She was awarded with “Rashtra Gourava Upadhi” by All India Freedom Fighter Samiti at Cuttack in 1984.

She received the prestigious award for the service of the nation at Varanasi, in 1986.

The Pashchim Odisha Swadhinata Sangrami Sammelani honoured her at Bargarh in 1991. Prabhavati by her personal effort founded a Balniketan at Chachanpali near Bargaon for poor and homeless children on 1st July, 1992. Prahallad Rai Lath donated one lakh rupees for improvement of this “Bal Niketan” which was subsequently renamed as “Rukhmani Lath Bal Niketan” after the name of his wife Rukmani Devi Lath. Here she served the orphans in the spirit of a loving mother. So, her concern for the poor, homeless and hopeless is praiseworthy.

She was presented with citation by the State Level Quit India Jubilee Committee at Bhubaneswar in 1993.

Prabhavati Devi was one of the women delegates of Sambalpur who attended “Biswa Mahila Sammilani” at Pune near Wardha, Maharashtra on 30th December 1997.

She had been conferred the honorary degree of “Doctors of Laws Degree” by Sambalpur University ( Jyoti Vihar) in its 18th convocation on 2nd July 1998 particularly due to her service for the women and children.

After an incessant service to helpless, homeless and needy for about fifty years after independence, Prabhavati Devi returned to her immortal soul on 13th Nov 1998 at Chachanpali Balnikitan. To fulfill the last wish of her life Dr Raseshwari Panigrahi, the niece of Prabhavati, former professor of VSS Medical College Burla and ex-MLA lit the funeral pyre and performed her last funeral rites.

### 13. Conclusion:

Rarely is history destined to eulogize and record the glory of such a dedicated and devoted lady worker as Prabhavati Devi. A childhood widow and in the face of invincible taboos she tided over all impediments and moved forward to serving the motherland as well as the needy people. She was not only a dedicated congress worker but also a popular social activist. This is the lady who has carved a niche for Sambalpur in the history of struggle for independence of India by representing the women of Western Odisha in the greatest cause of India. Though she is no more amidst us, she has remained immortal forever in the memory of each and every individual who love and adore their motherland. The nation never forgets her for her service she has rendered to it.

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