

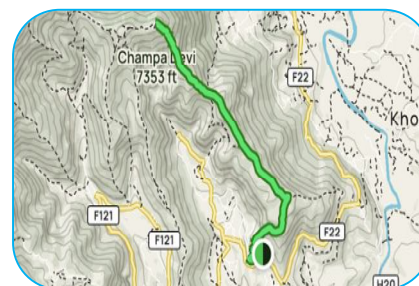


MAPPING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF CHAMPA DEVI - A FORGOTTEN HEROINE OF THE CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE MOVEMENT IN ODISHA

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ABSTRACT:

Champa Devi was one of the most daring, dedicated and courageous female freedom fighters of Odisha. She became widow after seven years of her marriage. Being inspired by the speeches of Mahatma Gandhi, the writings of Sribatch panda and Jayamangla Rath, she dedicated her whole life and resources for the cause of women's uplift and freedom of the motherland. Salt Sathyagraha was organised in Ganjam under the leadership of Saraladevi and herself. For her anti British activities, she was imprisoned for four times and spent the life of a prisoner in Chhatrapur, Bhanjanagar, Berhampur and Hazaribag jail. She sold all her gold ornaments and established one bidhabaasrama at ichhapur and another at Charrichak in Phulbani for orphans, handicapped and destitute, she also participated in Gandhiji's Harijan padayatra in Orissa for abolition of untouchability. But she did not receive the proper recognition and place in history, that she deserved. she remained unnoticed and lamentably neglected. This paper is a small attempt to asses her contribution for the liberation of her mother land and uplift of the untouchables and widows.



KEYWORDS: *Purdah, Padayatra, Bidhava, Champa Nani School.*

INTRODUCTION:

The Victim of child marriage and early widowhood, the lifetime worker Of women's emancipation, preacher of widow marriage and the daring female freedom fighter Champa Devi was born on 23rd March 1903 at Ambapua near Berhampur. Her father was Yudhisthir Padhy and mother was Apariti Devi. She was given marriage to Krushna Mohana Padhy of village Dura near Gopalpur of Ganjam district at the age of nine. But they used to stay at Manjusha, as her father in law Hariharapadhy was a priest of the Jagannath temple of Majusha. To her misfortune her husband died at a very premature age and she became widow at the age of nineteen.¹

But she did not lose her heart and took a vow to work for the emancipation of women and freedom of India. Psychologically and socially it was a turning point in her personal life. The teachings, writings and meetings of Sribatcha Panda and Jayamangal Rath, (both were prominent social reformists-cum-District Congress Committee office bearers) had a tremendous influence on Champa Devi.²

The condition of women in Orissa during 19th and first quarter of 20th century was far from satisfactory. It was regarded as a garden of superstitions like *sati, purdah, dowry, child marriage, secluded widowhood, human sacrifice and female infanticide*. It was very backward in the realm of female

education. Regarding the miserable life of the widows in Orissan Society one western scholar remarked " She was either to lead a life of immorality or had closely shaved her head and became a slave of the family"³. In spite of that, Odia women displayed their great enthusiasm for participating in the Indian Freedom Struggle. Several factors were responsible for this. Among them, the introduction of western education, the impact of socio-religious reform movement, publication of nationalist and revolutionary writings, formation of women's associations and the spread of feminist consciousness maybe reckoned with to the awakening of women in Odisha. But, Gandhiji's first visit to Berhampur in March 1921 during Non-cooperation movement gave the great impetus to the resurgence of Odia women. Gandhiji visited Berhampur on 29th March 1921 and addressed a mammoth gathering in the Barracks ground of the town.⁴

He had strong faith on women. In course of his speech he remarked that "a powerful force and a great success in India could be possible if other half of the human race participated in the freedom struggle"⁵, he gave a call for the flooding of prisons with volunteers, he said " our triumph consist of in thousands being led to the prisons like lambs to the slaughter house".⁶ Inspired by the speech women in Ganjam district defied laws and courted arrest in large number.

She travelled the different parts of Odisha and delivered speeches on the importance of female education against the child marriage, secluded life of young widows, the custom of *Sati*, *Purdah*, and *untouchability* to create awareness for Indian freedom struggle.

Gandhiji regarded Salt tax as the most iniquitous of all from poor man's stand point. He started his historic 24days Dandi march from his Sabarmati Ashram by Padayatra to Dandi to violate the salt law. He declared "salt is necessary for life as air and water given by nature is essentially necessary". He also declared his vow " I will return with my want or else my deadbody will float in the Arabian ocean". He reached Dandi on 6th April 1930 broke the salt law at 8.30am by picking up a handful of natural salt for selling. He declared " with this I am shacking the foundations of the British Empire".⁷

The movement spread rapidly like wildfire. The movement produced a number of women leaders in Odisha. A notable feature of the movement was the wide participation of women. The famous women leaders were Rama devi, Sarala devi, Malati Devi and Champa Devi. Salt Satyagraha was organized in Ganjam under the leadership of Sarala Devi and Champa Devi and Kishoremani Devi. Sarala Devi, Champa Devi. The spontaneous response of village women from remote areas of Orissa is a remarkable feature of the National Movement more particularly during the civil disobedience movement. The participation of 1500 illiterate rural women in the Inchudi and 500 in Kujang Salt Satyagraha camp, 1000 women in Huma (Ganjam), salt sathyagraha, 200 women in kotavalasa and 700 women braving police lathi charge at Iram was a unique phenomenon.⁸ So also the response of tribal women is quite noteworthy". The participation of women in large number in Civil Disobedience Movement mad it a mass movement in Orissa.⁹

"The Awakening of women in orissa has been possible because of the salt sathyagraha."Dr.H.K.Mahatab commented "The degree of awakening of women, that has occurred in Odisaha is not to be found even in Bihar. This awakening which is the outcome of sathyagraha would not have been possible in normal course even by hundred years efforts".¹⁰

She travelled to various parts of undivided Ganjam and Phulbani districts and delivered lectures on social welfare, mainly on women education, against child marriage, child widow remarriage, against prohibition and making people aware towards freedom struggle and invoking them to participate in demonstrations and picketing. With a large number of congress activists she picketed in front of a liquor selling shop in Naa-Thuthosahi in Bhanjanagar (erstwhile Rasulkonda). The British police arrested her and sent to Bhanjanaga Jail. After released from jail she again started demonstrations and picketing in front of the same liquor selling shop. The British Government could not resist the public action and had to close that liquor shop. Hence, Champ Devi started a school in the premises of the said closed Liquor shop. Until a few decades ago the school was known, with local people as Champa Nani School.¹¹

She was an active member of Indian National Congress. All those arrested including Champa Devi were jailed in Chatrapur jail. Due to her activities, she was imprisoned four times in Russalkonda,

Chatrapur, Berhampur and Hazaribaug jail. Influenced by Sarala Devi, she sold all her Gold ornaments and established one Ashram in Ichapur (Now in Srikakulam district of AP). She also actively participated in the Gandhiji's Harijan Padyatra in Odisha with her followers.

Gandhiji was immensely pleased with their sincerity and commended them in the following words "I have marvelled at the manner in which Smt. Rama Devi, Champa Devi and their girls have discharged themselves during the tour.... These ladies allowed themselves no rest. They immediately went out among the Harijans fearlessly with greatest freedom.They have never needed or claimed any special privilege. No where have I seen anything quite like with Rama Devi and her little band have been found to do gracefully and naturally"¹²

The salt satyagraha was a spectacular success it became a mass movement throughout India. Therefore the news papers of different foreign countries made it a headline " *Where as Britain had lost America on tea, it is going to lose India on salt*".¹³

Quit India Movement was launched throughout India from 9th August 1942. Gandhiji's *mantra* " Do or Die" worked miraculously in every nook and corner of India, but the British Government arrested all the front ranking leaders and put them behind the prison bars. Consequently, the local freedom fighters took the leadership in many regions of Orissa to spread the Quit India Movement. Champa Devi was one of them who organised this movement in and around Berhampur. But atlast she came under the orbit of the police and was arrested. She was imprisoned in the Bhanjanagar jail for 8 months in 1945.

After the Independence of India also she never remained idle. She established one Ashram in Charichak in Phulbani district for the physically disabled, orphans, helpless women, children and rehabilitation of needy people particularly *Adivasis*, Harijan and down trodden. Greatly influenced by JayamangalaRath, a great reformist of those days. She embraced to "Brahmoism ". Champa Devi was committed to the abolition of untouchability.

Champa Devi was a symbol of inspiration to several men and women during Civil Disobedience Movement and Harijan Padyatra in Odisha. Her bravery selflessness, devotion hard work and strong will power inspired a number woman to fight against all evils of life.

She always preached against the pernicious social practice that was regarded as a blot to Hinduism. She urged her upper caste audiences to eat with the lower castes, to help them to be educated and to allow them to their temples. She engaged congress and Harijan workers in taking classes and cleaning the harijan colonies. She walked miles to speak to the people. As she was a philanthropist. She donated her housing plot to Geeta Bhavan situated at Giri Road of Berhampur. This great soul breathed her last on 12.03.1975 in Phulbani.

From the above discussions it is revealed that inspite of her multifarious activities for the uplift of the widows and downtrodden, dedication for abolition of untouchability and sacrifice for the freedom of motherland, she has not received due place that she deserved in History, if this paper will bring her all life time achievements to limelight, it will definitely inspire the girls in future to dedicate the services to the Nation.

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