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## Rama Devi and Freedom Struggle-Story of an Enlightened Lady

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Rama Devi, affectionately called Belu, is younger daughter of Gopala Ballav Das and Basanta Kumari and niece of Madhusudan Das. She was born in an aristocratic Zaminadar family. She married Gopabandhu Choudhury, son of Gokulananda Choudhury, another aristocratic Zamindar. Gopabandhu joined as Deputy Magistrate in British bureaucracy. While posted in Jajpur he witnessed misery of people in a flood affected area, Bari. He reported the plight of people and commented on the inaction and apathy of people which infuriated his superior and he was advised to change the report. He mooted the idea of resigning from service and discussed it with Rama Devi. She told him that Gopa Babu should act according to dictat of his conscience. He resigned and joined Congress. They both adopted to follow Gandhian principles in life. That meant giving up luxurious lifestyle, not educating their children in Government schools. Rama Devi decided to look after the children and help in Swadweshi movement while remaining within threshold of the house i.e. did not participate in public demonstrations.

Gandhiji launched Lavana Satyagraha to break the salt law and marched to Dandi from Savarmati Ashram. He took a vow that he will not return to the Ashram until India wins independence. Gopa Babu was given the responsibility of leading Salt Satyagraha in Orissa. The first group started to march to Inchudi in Balasore district from Cuttack. Gopa Babu was detained on the way and was brought to Cuttack for a trial. Consequently, Acharya Harihar took the command and he was arrested at Inchudi. On being released from detention, Gopa Babu went to Balasore for meeting to chart the future course and was quickly arrested there. Most of the leaders of Orissa were in detention awaiting trials.

Rama Devi stepped out and joined the movement from the commencement of Salt Satyagraha. She travelled to Balasore to participate in the meeting when Gopa Babu was arrested. The next day four ladies, Rama Devi, Malati Devi, Kiran Bala Sen, Janhabi Devi among others headed towards Inchudi to get a firsthand experience of the action. They started their journey in a car from Balasore. However, they had to get off and walk to Inchudi since the condition of the road was very bad. It was very hot in April. The 'observers' were overwhelmed and spurred by the tremendous response they received from villagers, especially from the women folk, they decided



to plunge into Salt satyagraha directly the next day. It was decided in a woman-only meeting that next day will be the day to make salt at Inchudi. There were fifteen hundred women ready to march to the river Kantiachara. They collected the soil from the river, dissolved it in water and distilled to prepare the illegal salt. It continued the whole day. There was a slight disappointment; the police did not show up to arrest the law breakers. Apparently, there was an instruction not to intervene and arrest the women Satyagrahis. The gathering of fifteen hundred women to make salt is unprecedented in the annals of the history of Salt Satyagraha of India. The two sisters-in-law, Rama and Malati, emboldened by their success at Srijanga-Inchudi decided to launch the Satyagraha in other villages on the Bay of Bengal at Paradeep. The two ladies played havoc from the perspective of the British administration. The women participated in large numbers. On one occasion, the queen of Paradeep participated in making the salt. She and Rama Devi traveled in dead part of the night to the site and arrived at dawn. A huge crowd had assembled. They were surprised to see the queen volunteering to break the law. Both Rama Devi and Malati Devi had to endure a lot of hardship. Once the monsoon struck the Sayagraha was suspended. The two ladies traveled from village to village to spread the message of Swaraj and collect donations. It is important to recall what they went through and how the administration was trying to contain them. Naba Babu propagated a no-taxation movement. The Congress workers went door to door persuading villagers not to pay tax. This movement took an ugly turn in Srijanga. There were physical push and pull between the police and some villagers. The situation escalated. Some villagers and police men were injured, especially one policeman was seriously injured. Then the force came in large number and punitive tax was imposed. They camped on the bank of a big pond and unleashed terror. The men were beaten up mercilessly and women were molested. I was told, almost 90 years later by some old people of Srijanga that even some women were raped. Under this terrifying conditions, women folk fled to other villages and took shelter in the house of the relatives. Lakshmi Narayan Sahu reported the misdeeds to Utkal Pradesh Congress Committee. A fact-finding mission consisting of Rama Devi, Malati Devi and Surendra Patnaik were sent to Srijanga.

Malati Devi was arrested on September 29, 1930 and first kept in Ward No. 12 in the Cuttack jail as an under trial. Ward No.12 was designed as an isolation ward in Cuttack jail to confine the prisoners who were suffering from infectious diseases. There was a wall surrounding the No.12 Ward. It has been waiting for years to be sanctified. Malati Choudhury entered this ward as the first female political prisoner. She was sentenced to six months of imprisonment and sent to Bhagalpur jail with her two-year-old daughter Uttara. Rama Devi continued to campaign. She addressed a meeting at Cuttack on November 10, 1930. She was arrested and taken to Cuttack jail and was lodged with convicted women criminals. Eventually, she was tried in the court and was handed over six-month prison sentence to be spent also at Bhagalpur. How did the citizens of Cuttack react to her arrest? There was total Bandh of Cuttack. All shops, schools, colleges



were closed. For a thirty-year-old woman, who had just stepped out to public life at the beginning of that year it was a mark of respect and honour she commanded and how people had taken salt satyagraha to their heart. One daily newspaper reported that Pranakrushna Parihari, the famous freedom fighter, made a public statement that Rama Devi indeed was the uncrowned empress! And how did her illustrious uncle react? He was outraged that Belu was arrested after sunset and the court sat in the night. According to the law, at that time, women are not to be arrested and taken to jail/court after the sunset. First, he lamented, look whose daughter and whose daughter-in-law had to walk on the street? He was going to write to the Viceroy about the whole episode. It seems, Swami Bichitrananda Das and few others explained that Belu is fighting for a great noble cause; in this struggle they accept whatever is meted out to them from the servants of the Empire. There is no legal battles in a court of law. Then Madhu Babu refrained from any action.

The situation is best described in Gopa Babu's unpublished diary in Odia (now available). The entry on November 11, 1930 reads, *"I shall remember this date for a very long period of my life. First of all, today is the day when my Belu's life and my life were entangled it was sixteen years ago. Who knew that this date will once again very deeply enjoin Belu's life with mine. I was taking a walk after a bath in the afternoon. Jadumani came running to me with a newspaper and showed me the headline that Belu has been arrested. A long awaited and preserved ambition of mine was fulfilled. My mind was filled with excitement. I felt an unbounded joy in my heart, a sense of glory and pride and at the same time a shade of melancholy crossed my mind. The joyous sensation is to admire the works done in Utkal. Moreover, I was overwhelmed for the good fortune Belu has. As the soldiers of Gandhi, they have advanced on the path of self-sacrifice. A sense of pride, because my wife and sister-in-law (Malati Devi) have been imprisoned. Belu will not be able to bear the hardship of this prison life. What will happen to Belu and Chuni?"*

The entry of November 12 is quite interesting. He went back to his daily routine like prayer and study of Ramacharit Manas and recorded his remarks, "suddenly, I recalled an embarrassing moment of the last evening. Nibaran Babu (Dasgupta) visited me to congratulate on the occasion of Balu's arrest. Suddenly, Nibaran Babu, a fatherly figure and who is like my Guru, touched my feet and said practice dharma with the wife " (Sanstrik dharmacharyet)". I was so dumbfounded!

Now fast-forward to November 16. I continued with Ramayan today. I am making better inroad since I am regularly reading it. I studied Gita and then Ramayan after my bath. I had finished reading Gandhi and Lenin; however, I browsed it again. I recalled one striking difference between the two since one was influenced by oriental culture and the other by the western culture. There is a distinct difference in their approach. The people of the Western world have struggled with nature and they have acquired everything for their comfort. People had to go



upstream against elements in those countries against adverse conditions. On the other hand in the Eastern world, they were endowed with abundance of nature and conditions were favorable to them. The orientals prospered with the favorable conditions offered by nature. As Tagore says one fights with nature and the other worships nature.

I went to Ward No.3 in the afternoon. I met Nilakantha Babu (Dash). He congratulated me for the arrest of Belu. In his words "you should remove a very large chunk to cause a landslide". Now he has begun to appreciate the Law of sufferings.

I heard for the first time from him "British are determined to lose their Empire". He writes on the same page (about Nilakantha Babu) "until now he had faith in politicians; however, his faith in them is wavering". Pandit Krupasindhu (Hota) became very emotional and said "This is real sacrifice". Gopa Babu write in his diary: "But he is unable to comprehend; this is just prelude to the sacrifice. It is the first step of fearlessness. The ultimate boundary of sacrifice is extremely beautiful; the brightness will expel all darkness from its surroundings. It will destroy all the impurity of mind and soul and anybody who comes in contact with the flame of sacrifice would be sanctified."

We see that souls of Gopa Babu and Rama Devi had intertwined to serve humanity way back in 1930 while they were in separate prisons.