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The Transformative Impact of Maa Ramadevi's Leadership on Society

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Abstract:

Women in Odisha have long played pivotal roles in shaping the cultural, social, and political fabric of the region, from ancient mythology to contemporary times. Maa Rama Devi Choudhury, a prominent figure among the women freedom fighters of modern Orissa, stands out for her transformative impact on society. Born into a family deeply rooted in literature and administration, her upbringing instilled values of education and social service. Influenced by her uncle Madhusudan Das and her husband Gopabandhu Choudhury, she embarked on a journey of activism that would define her legacy. Joining the Khadi Movement in 1921, she embraced Gandhian principles and became a leading figure in the freedom struggle. Establishing the Alakashrama ashram and actively participating in the Salt Satyagraha and Civil Disobedience Movement, she galvanized the people of Orissa against British oppression. Beyond politics, her dedication to social reforms, particularly in eradicating untouchability and uplifting Harijans, showcased her commitment to social justice. Even after India gained independence, Maa Ramadevi's tireless efforts continued, focusing on education and land reforms. She established educational institutions, including the renowned Rama Devi Women's College, and advocated for gender equality and empowerment. Despite facing adversity during the Emergency, her resilience in fighting for civil liberties further solidified her legacy. Today, Maa Rama Devi Choudhury's life serves as a beacon of inspiration, emphasizing the values of service, sacrifice, and social responsibility. Her contributions, recognized through honors and institutions named in her honor, underscore the enduring impact of one individual in shaping a more inclusive and equitable society.

Keywords: Women, leadership, Freedom Movement, Transformative, Post-Independence

1. Introduction:

Mythological and epic references show that Women in Odisha have played pivotal roles throughout history, from ancient to modern times, significantly shaping the region's cultural, social, and political landscapes. In ancient mythology, women are celebrated, such as Queen Satyabhama from the Mahabharata, believed to be from Odisha. They participated actively in socio-religious practices, contributing to rituals, festivals, and temple activities. During medieval times, royal women like Queen Durlabha Devi of the Bhauma-Kara dynasty were



prominent for their administrative skills and support of Buddhism. Women also made literary contribution and the devotional works of women make influenced notable poets like Adikavi Jagannath Das. The early modern period saw Odisha's integration into larger empires, with women's roles primarily domestic but also active in social and religious spheres. They participated in resistance movements against foreign invasions, supporting revolts against the Mughals and Marathas.

In the 19th century, social reformers like Madhusudan Das and Gopabandhu Das championed women's education and rights. During the freedom struggle against British rule, women leaders like Rama Devi, Malati Choudhury, and Sarala Devi played crucial roles in movements such as Non- Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, and Quit India. The colonial period also saw the establishment of educational institutions for women, enhancing literacy and educational attainment. Post-independence, women in Odisha made significant strides in politics, with leaders like Nandini Satpathy serving as Chief Minister and promoting women's empowerment. Women have led grassroots movements for land rights, environmental conservation, and social justice. They continue to contribute significantly to Odia literature, arts, and culture, with contemporary figures like Pratibha Ray and Paramita Satpathy excelling in their fields.

Today, women in Odisha are increasingly active in various economic sectors, from traditional agriculture and handicrafts to modern education, healthcare, and technology. Significant improvements in education and healthcare have led to better socio-economic outcomes, supported by initiatives from both governmental and non-governmental organizations. *Maa* Rama Devi Choudhury, a luminous figure among the women freedom fighters of modern Orissa, emerged as a legend in her lifetime. Her contributions to the Indian independence movement and her relentless social work had a profound and transformative impact on society. Her leadership not only inspired the people of Orissa but also set a benchmark for women's participation in political and social spheres.

2. Early Life and Influences:

Maa Rama Devi was born on December 3, 1899, in Satyabhamapur, Cuttack district, into the family of Gopala Ballabha Das and Basanti Kumari Devi. Her father, a Deputy Magistrate, a prominent figure in the realm of Odia literature and administration during the British colonial period in India. Serving as a deputy magistrate and assistant to the Odisha commissioner, Das played a crucial role in the governance and cultural landscape of the region. Beyond his administrative duties, he left an enduring legacy as a prolific writer, with contributions spanning novels, poetry, and translations, and her mother provided a nurturing environment



that valued education and social service. Her lineage also included the esteemed Utkal Gaurab Madhusudan Das, her uncle, whose ideals of social reform and political activism significantly influenced her. At the tender age of 15, she married Gopabandhu Choudhury, then a Deputy Collector, who would later become a staunch ally and partner in her socio-political endeavors.

3. Entry into the Freedom Movement:

The year 1921 marked a turning point in Rama Devi's life when she joined her husband, Gopabandhu Choudhury, in the *Khadi* Movement, becoming a staunch follower of Mahatma Gandhi. Her direct involvement with Gandhi began when he visited Orissa to attend the Women's *Sammilani* at the Binod Bihari market complex in [Cuttack](#).¹ This meeting with Gandhi ignited her passion for the freedom struggle and solidified her commitment to Gandhian principles.

4. Establishment of Alakashrama and Early Activism:

In 1928, on the banks of the river *Alaka*, Rama Devi established an ashram known as Alaka Ashrama to care for disease-affected people. She organized a brigade of young girls, transcending class barriers, to distribute medicines among the poor. Her leadership in organizing mass public meetings and spreading the message of *Purna Swaraj* during the Lahore Session of Congress in 1930 was significant in galvanizing the people of [Orissa](#).²

5. The Salt Satyagraha and Civil Disobedience Movement

Mahatma Gandhi once said "As long as women of India do not take part in public life, there can be no salvation for the country. As long as women do not come to public life and purify, we are not likely to attain *Swaraj*, even if we did, it would have no use for that kind of *Swaraj* to which women have not made their full contribution". In his thoughts, Rama Devi played a crucial role in the Salt Satyagraha and the Civil Disobedience Movement. Inspired by Gandhi's decision to break the Salt Law at Dandi, the people of Orissa saw an opportunity to reclaim their traditional rights to manufacture salt. Rama Devi, along with other leaders, led batches of volunteers to Inchudi and other coastal areas to defy the British-imposed salt laws. Her arrest during these protests only fueled the movement further, as successive batches of *Satyagrahis*³ continued the struggle.

¹ Behera, Manas Chandra., *Rama Devi :The First Woman Freedom Fighter of Odisha*, 2019, pp.58-59

² Mohanty, Gopinath., *The History of Indian National Congress*, Bombay, 1944, vol. I, pp. 363 -64.

³ Rath. Prabodha Kumar., *Salt Satyagraha in Orissa*, 2011, pp.15-16.



6. Social Reforms and Work for Harijans:

Beyond her political activism, Rama Devi was dedicated to social reform. She vehemently opposed untouchability and worked tirelessly for the upliftment of *Harijans*. She selected the *Ashram* at Bari in Cuttack district as her base, living among *Harijans*, washing their clothes, sweeping their floors, and educating their children. Her efforts to eradicate untouchability and communalism were instrumental in fostering social harmony.

7. Post-Independence Contributions:

After India gained independence, Rama Devi's dedication to social service did not wane. She aligned herself with the Bhoodan and Gramdan movements initiated by Vinoba Bhave. Traveling over 4,000 kilometers on foot across Orissa, she propagated the donation of land to the landless poor. Her speeches and relentless efforts inspired landlords to donate land generously, significantly impacting the lives of the poor.

8. Educational and Social Initiatives:

Rama Devi's commitment to education and social upliftment was unwavering, leaving a lasting impact on the lives of countless individuals, particularly women and children. Through a series of educational initiatives and advocacy efforts, she sought to empower marginalized communities and promote gender equality. One of Rama Devi's notable contributions was the establishment of educational institutions aimed at providing quality education to women. Among these institutions was the Utkal Khadi Ashram, which not only promoted education but also emphasized vocational training, empowering women with practical skills for self-sufficiency. Additionally, her establishment of a Teachers' Training Institute in Ramchandrapur served to enhance the quality of education by training a new generation of educators dedicated to social progress and empowerment. A crowning achievement of Rama Devi's educational endeavors was the founding of Rama Devi Women's College, a pioneering institution dedicated to women's education. Recognizing the crucial role of education in fostering societal advancement, she tirelessly worked to ensure access to quality education for women, thereby laying the foundation for their socio-economic empowerment. In recognition of her exemplary service and contributions to the nation, *Maa* Rama Devi was bestowed with several honors and accolades. The prestigious Jamnalal Bajaj Award, conferred upon her on November 4, 1981, served as a testament to her outstanding efforts in promoting the welfare of women and children. This accolade underscored her tireless advocacy for gender equality and social justice, acknowledging her as a beacon of hope for marginalized communities.



Furthermore, *Maa* Rama Devi's dedication to social causes was duly recognized by Utkal University, which conferred upon her the Doctor of Philosophy (Honoris Causa) on April 16, 1984. This honorary degree symbolized the profound impact of her lifelong commitment to education, social upliftment, and empowerment, cementing her legacy as a visionary leader and champion of human rights. The school Shishu Vihar started by her at Cuttack is now named [Rama Devi Shishu Bihar](#).⁴ Rama Devi's educational and social initiatives not only transform individual lives but also laid the groundwork for a more inclusive and equitable society. Her tireless advocacy for education, coupled with her unwavering commitment to social justice, continues to inspire generations, serving as a testament to the enduring power of compassion and dedication in effecting positive change.

9. The Emergency and Later Years

During the Emergency imposed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975, *Maa* Rama Devi continued her fight against injustice. Her newspaper, established under the *Gram Sevak* Press, was banned, and she was arrested along with other leaders. Her resilience and commitment to democracy during this period further cemented her legacy as a champion of civil liberties.

10. Legacy and Recognition

Maa Rama Devi's life and work left an indelible mark on society. Her autobiography [Jeevan Pathais](#)⁵ considered a masterpiece, reflecting on her extraordinary life and contribution. She is remembered among the Oriya as *Maa* for her transparent character, selfless sacrifice, and compassion towards the helpless and destitute. In recognition of her immense contributions, the Government Women's College in Bhubaneswar was renamed Rama Devi Women's College. Her legacy continues to inspire future generations to uphold the values of service, sacrifice, and social responsibility.

Conclusion:

Maa Ramadevi Choudhury's leadership stands as a beacon of inspiration, illuminating the path of service, sacrifice, and social responsibility. From her early activism in the freedom movement to her unwavering dedication to social reforms and education, she epitomized the essence of selfless service to humanity. Her legacy transcends time, echoing through the corridors of history as a testament to the transformative power of compassion and resilience. Renowned for her transparent character and tireless advocacy for justice, she continues to

⁴ Bhanja. Sangha mitra., *Maa Rama devi The Great Woman Of Jeeb Anapathe*, IJRAR, Volume 7, 2020, pp.646

⁵ Mohapatra, Prabhukalyan., *Rama Devi: An Epitome of Women Emancipation*, Orissa Review, 2008, pp.25



inspire generations to uphold the values she championed. As her legacy endures, embodied in institutions named in her honor and in the hearts of those she touched, *Maa Rama Devi's* life serves as a reminder of the profound impact one individual can have in shaping a more inclusive and equitable society.

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