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Maa Rama Devi's Vision on Women's Livelihood and Empowerment- An Ethnographic Study of the Youth Leadership in the Village of Odisha

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Abstract:

In this paper, I will discuss the evolving role of women's leadership in Nuapatna, a weaver's village in Odisha. Following Ma Rama Devi's clarion call for women's freedom, agency, livelihood, and selfhood, I will discuss youth leadership in a weaver's village in Odisha. While doing fieldwork among the weavers in Odisha in 2019, I came across a Digital Foundation Center office run by two youths, Sunil Rana and Gayatri Patra. The center is located on the first floor of a building on the main road of this town. One room is devoted to computer training; across the corridor, another house sewing training. The young women who come to learn sewing and computers mainly belong to impoverished families in the cluster of weaver's villages. After high school, poverty and family responsibility have kept many away from higher education or professional skill training. Some go to local colleges for Intermediate and Bachelor of Arts degrees. However, given the scenario of massive unemployment in the state, the future of these girls remains unknown.

I will discuss the leadership of Sunil Rana and Gayatri Patra, a mother of a 4-year-old daughter who has been mentoring hundreds of youths, primarily women from the villages of Nuapatna. There is hardly any discussion, and little is known about these young, unsung activists in the academic literature. The mentorship of Rana and Gayatri Patra of the youth in the village connects to their personal economic development and psychological well-being. I will explore the empowering aspects of youth activism tied to learning new skills, a sense of agency, and belonging to a community; Rana and Patra's dedication promotes women's voice and personal growth with a sense of duty and ethical integrity. They are training young people for their livelihood and making it an empowering experience for themselves and the marginalized young women in the community. They find small, effective ways to strengthen their position in the family, with friends, and the broader community.

Keywords: *Ma Rama Devi, Weavers village, Nuapatna, Odisha, Women's Livelihood Training, Small Scale Activism, Women's Empowerment*

1. Introduction: A Reflection on Rama Devi's contribution to Women's Empowerment:

It has been thirty-nine years since Ma Rama Devi (1899 -1985) passed away, but she remains a towering figure in the freedom movement, especially women's empowerment. Because of her



dedicated interest in women's higher education and livelihood, Rama Devi Women's College, now known as Rama Devi University, was established in 1964. On her 'Punyatithi', it is pertinent to reflect on her immense contribution and analyze her impact on women's leadership and empowerment in Odisha.

Rama Devi belonged to an illustrious family - she was the daughter of the brother of Great Madhusudan Das, the first barrister in Odisha and one of the closest followers of Mahatma Gandhi. She married Gopabandhu Choudhuri, the son of a famous lawyer, Gokulananda Choudhury of Cuttack. Rama, the young wife, showed remarkable courage to consent to her husband Gopabandhu to resign as a deputy district collector (a powerful position for an Odia to occupy at that time) after getting into the British Civil Service. On his posting in Jajpur, a rural town in the district of Cuttack, - rivers, all tributaries of Mahanadi, flooded the surrounding countryside. As the district administrative officer, he reported the situation to the British higher administration but was asked to keep quiet about it. He resigned from the civil service in protest. His family wealth had declined after his father's death, but he was resolute. Rama and Gopabandhu started a life of courageous and selfless service to the poor and oppressed in Odisha. In 1921, Gandhi came to Odisha and asked for donations for the cause of the *Harijans*, 'the children of God' as he called the untouchables. Rama took all her jewelry - an enormous amount of gold that her wealthy parents and in-laws had given her at her wedding - and put the bag in the Mahatma's hands. She made an irrevocable decision to serve the poor and marginalized. When her sister-in-law Malati Choudhury, a Bengali Brahmo, married Gopabandhu's younger brother Nabakrusna, it was Rama devi who gave her protection and moral support when her mother- in- law already widowed, would not let her serve food and drink or enter the kitchen.

Rama Devi and her husband, Gopabandhu, believed in Gandhi's call for social justice. In the words of the famous philosopher Jatindra Nath Mohanty, her maternal nephew, "She was a unique person the likes of whom you will not find anywhere." Prof. Mohanty (2023) has dedicated his memoir to Rama Devi, a rare tribute from a distinguished scholar for a family relative. Beautiful, elegant, and wealthy, she deliberately reduced herself to a pauper with almost no material possessions. Affection, love, and compassion for all beings radiated from her. She never uttered a strong word, even for the worst offender. She was a consoling mother, and everyone loved her. In 1975, when Indira Gandhi imposed emergency laws upon the country, at the age of 75, Rama Devi distributed leaflets at the Cuttack city center, urging people to disobey the laws nonviolently and thereby courted arrest. People of Odisha, irrespective of caste and creed, economic and political opinions, capitalists, and communists called her 'Ma' (mother) and were willing to abide by her mediation. She was above politics and had become a pioneering institution in Odisha. She had never attended school, but Utkal University conferred an honorary



doctorate in law. She told Mohanty. “I did not want to disappoint the university” (Mohanty, 2023, p. 30)¹. When the Govt of India awarded her a large sum of money as the recipient of the fifth Jamanalal Bajaj prize for outstanding social work, she immediately used that money to establish a center in Cuttack for free early detection of cancer. When she died, Indira Gandhi, then Prime Minister of India, named one of India’s coastguard naval ships after her.

In this paper, I will highlight the resilience of young women of a weaver community in Nuapatna, Odisha, and how they have embraced new opportunities by overcoming challenges in a patriarchal setting with determination and fostering personal growth. These women have shown courage and leadership amid cultural constraints and structural discrimination of a girl child in a poverty-ridden patriarchal family. Ma Rama Devi always said, “The day a young woman comes out of her home alone without fear of her safety and stands on her own, the society will be equitable” (personal conversation, June 25th, 1981). She advocated feminism as women’s equality irrespective of class, caste, creed and sex. She would be so happy to see the strength and agency in our young women!

Following the footsteps of Rama Devi, I will discuss the leadership of Gayatri Patra and Sunil Rana, a mother of a 4-year-old daughter who have been mentoring hundreds of youths, primarily women from the villages of Nuapatna. There is hardly any discussion, and little is known about these young, unsung activists in the academic literature. The mentorship of Rana and Gayatri Patra of the youth in the village connects to their personal economic development and psychological well-being. I will explore women’s activism tied to their agency, a sense of duty, ethical and moral integrity, and belonging to a community. They find their voice by learning new skills and realizing personal growth. Sunil and Gayatri are training young people for their livelihood and making it an empowering experience for themselves and the marginalized young women in the community. They find small, effective ways to influence family, friends, and the broader community.

2. Theoretical underpinning:

Smith and Mac (2018),² in their study of prostitutes, emphasize them as professionals rather than vulnerable victims and demand respect, recognition, and empathy from feminist scholars as well as readers. They report that if feminism is about equality, the most maligned voices should have an equal seat at the table, as viewed by Rama Devi. They refute the notion that the vulnerable, voiceless prostitute needs sympathy; instead, they narrate the complex perspectives of real women who work in the sex industry from an international perspective. In my study of

¹ Mohanty, J.N.(2023). *Between Two Worlds East and West, An Autobiography*. Black Eagle.

² Mac, J. and Smith, M. (2018). *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights*, Verso.



the village women deprived by gender, class, caste, and patriarchy, I highlight their demand for personhood. Scholars have considered village women as vulnerable and must be advocated for rather than people who should be met with open ears when they advocate for themselves. This account of small-scale activism in the village and the voices of these women must shape state policies.

To facilitate understanding of women's struggles, [Harcourt and Escobar \(2002\)](#)³ have provided a framework called "Women and the Politics of Place" (WPP). An outcome of second-wave feminism, WPP argues that women's diverse experiences, the local economy, and the environment are critical factors for a politics of place that offers the hope of challenging the inequalities of neoliberal globalization. It mainly concerns the political struggles around the place that link minority voices with collective action against inequality and repression. In rethinking political responses to modernity and global capitalism, it is essential to build on the creativity, knowledge, and experience of women's groups engaged in place-based politics (Harcourt and Escobar 2002:13). WPP reiterates the feminist dictum that the personal is political (cited in Panda and Pandey, 2020). In this study, women exude a sense of agency demanding personal is political.

3. Small-Scale Activism: A Study of a Sewing and Computer Center, Nuapatna:

The Center for Monitoring the Indian Economy (CMIE) found that only 10 percent of working-age Indian women in 2022 were employed or looking for jobs. Only 39 million women are in the labor force compared to 361 million men. It does not mean that women are not working. They work in abundant numbers in informal labor forces such as construction, home health care, maid service, and factories, among other service industries, but remain invisible. Women's lack of participation in the formal workforce results in a vicious cultural cycle of dependence and servitude. It has an adverse economic impact, dampening productivity and growth as fewer young girls aspire to full-time work because there are fewer female role models from whom they can learn. This trend is even more marked in rural and tribal India, as women tend to be even more marginalized because of their restricted mobility and lack of education, among many other barriers. Women are less likely to be highly mobile and have limited access to resources and human capital (Raju, 2013).

Based on UN-Habitat's survey of five cities, Bangalore (India), Johannesburg (South Africa), Kampala (Uganda), Kingston (Jamaica), and Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), the United Nations State of

³ Harcourt, W. and Escobar, A., (2002). "Women and the Politics of Place". *Development*, 45(1): 7-14.



Women in Cities in India 2012/13 report found that fifty percent respondents identify lack of gender equity in access to education and skills as a barrier to women's economic empowerment. Women's empowerment is linked with economic productivity, and lack of education and appropriate knowledge and skills were the main obstacles for women in attaining this (in 24 percent of cases), followed by a lack of access to productive resources. The statistics found that women in India are still far behind in livelihood. In this context, I will discuss the efforts of two rural youths, Gayatri Patra and Sunil Rana, the teachers of a training center in rural Odisha, to empower women.

4. An Ethnographic Study of the Digital Foundation Center, Nuapatna:

In 2019, I was introduced to 24-year-old Sunil Rana and Gayatri Patra through a designer friend when I was the president of the South Asia Study Initiative (SASI), a U.S.-based nonprofit organization. Sunil and Gayatri, run the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) in Nuapatna. Sunil manages the computer center, and Gayatri leads the sewing center. The two initially joined the center as teachers, but at the end of 2019, due to a lack of funding, the NGO closed its office in Nuapatna and asked them if they would take over the center.

They mustered the courage to run the center with ten computers and six sewing machines. On the first floor, one room is devoted to computer training; across the corridor, another is dedicated to sewing machine training. They had to pay the rent for the building and take care of all the operational expenses. They started with six students, and in 2023, the student strength has reached 140. The center, operational during the COVID-19 pandemic, trains young local people for their livelihood and finds small, effective ways to influence young women, their families, friends, and the village community. The young women who come to learn sewing mainly belong to impoverished families in the cluster of weaver's villages. After high school, poverty and family responsibility have kept many from higher education or professional skill training. It provides a social networking space for these young women outside their homes. Sunil runs three to four batches of computer classes with 15 to 20 students each.

Gayatri belongs to a weaver family, but her parents are ailing and too old. She got married at an early age and lives with her parents. Her husband is short-tempered and abusive. Her four-year-old daughter adds to her worry as the in-laws consider a girl child a burden rather than a blessing. Sunil credits her for the overwhelming response to the center. Young women from several villages come to Gayatri for sewing training. She nurtures ambition in women to succeed, learn new skills, and get a job. Many girls have turned to marketing their weaving products without any middlemen. Belonging to the local community, they both exude a sense of agency, a



feeling of duty, and ethical integrity to help find the voice of numerous young women, learn new skills, and develop personal growth.

I met Rashmita, one of the many women trained by Gayatri, on Dec. 20^o, 2022. The timid 38-year-old, clad in a cotton sari, looked sad and lost. She admitted to having many problems at home. Gayatri told me that Rashmita came to the center about two years ago to learn to sew. Fearful and traumatized, she could not handle physical and mental abuse at her husband's home and moved to her father's house with her five-year-old son. At the center, she could not remember simple steps such as putting thread into the bobbin. Her brother said she was worthless. However, Gayatri was persuasive, and Rashmita was persistent. She wrote down every step of her lessons; it took her two years to complete a three-month-long course. Now, she has become competent at sewing. Gayatri has ensured her success in sewing, as it is her only way out of her daily struggle. Rashmita now works part-time in the village but would benefit from a permanent job to support her and her son.

I have been working with Sunil and Gayatri since 2019 to promote the artisans in Nuapatna and provide them with a free global platform on a worldwide market website. In 2019, on behalf of SASI, we planned professional sewing and advanced computer training for young women, and in December 2023, we raised money to provide 24 sewing machines to well-trained girls to earn a living.

However, youth activism is not smooth. Sunil laments that he has no extra earnings; his family pressures him to get a steady income and get married. Gayatri's family situation is dismal; she does not have any means to make more money, and she sometimes feels life is useless if she cannot provide medicine for her ailing parents. But seeing the women making a difference, she realizes that breaking the boundaries of social norms is not always easy, but it is not impossible. Sunil and Gayatri's efforts to motivate the artisans to be self-governing and self-supporting have yet to fill many barriers, young women face family constraints to get married at an early age, curtailing their dream to be self-reliant, and the lack of availability of jobs in the villages makes it hard for women to be self-dependent. Even if small shop owners hire these talented women, they do not pay them and harass them after long work hours. Yet, Gayatri and Sunil persist in creating an ideal community without hierarchy and collaboration in sharing resources, know-how, and mutual support. In a neoliberal society, their successes (and there are some) and failures point to the challenges of creating a sustainable life within market capitalism and state-sponsored lopsided development.

In April 2024, a member of SASI discovered that the Odisha govt started a free, year-long, residential dress-making training program for poor women with high school degrees. When SASI



discussed with the girls at the center, they were reluctant to apply for this program and insisted that their parents would not allow them to leave the village. SASI had a Zoom meeting with the girls and proposed they visit the center and see the facility as a first-hand experience. SASI financed a trip for Sunil, Gayatri, and nine young women to visit the dress-making training center at the ITI, Bhubaneswar. Now, all nine of them have applied for the program. They have discovered their wings to fly.

A collaboration between the local youth, Gayatri and Sunil, the international NGO SASI, and state government initiatives has brought a visible change in the women's situation in the village. Studies also suggest the importance of strengthening partnerships between all levels of government, NGOs, civil society, and grassroots women's organizations working on the ground and building multi-stakeholder alliances and partnerships. This study suggests that village women are not isolated but open to opportunities and exposure. Kingsolver (2009) observed that the power of village women derived from their ancestral values of sharing and giving, helps them promote a sense of community. In my study, the efforts of these youth in the village introduce us to this power of giving promoted by Rama Devi. The new awareness and the wisdom of rural artisans will help guide us in recentering ourselves. RamaDevi had a vision to strengthen the power of women in the village and the power of giving. The youth in Nuapatna promote a sense of equanimity and democracy in a hierarchical society. Professor George Santayana used to say that we live in two worlds — one given to us by nature, and the other we create ourselves in our stories, life experiences, poetry, prayers, and other things we bring to life. These two worlds are interconnected, and our acknowledgment will center us and make us feel less alienated.

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