

**Jyotatsi Jangyanseni**

Research Assistant,
Maa Rama Devi Chair,
Rama Devi Women's
University BBSR

jyotatsijangyanseni323@gmail.com

Lost Legacies - Exploring the Absence of Memory Spaces for Maa Rama Devi

Jyotatsi Jangyanseni

Abstract:

During the 20th century, Rama Devi Chowdhury emerged as a prominent figure in Odisha's independence struggle. The legacy of Maa Rama Devi, remains a subject of fascination and inquiry for researchers, academicians, literary writers and students. Yet, amidst the vibrant tapestry of historical narratives, there exists a conspicuous absence – the lack of dedicated memory spaces to commemorate her life and contributions. This abstract delves into the exploration of this absence, examining the societal dynamics, historical amnesia, and institutional oversight that have contributed to the neglect of Rama Devi's memory spaces. During the freedom struggle in Odisha, both men and women played pivotal roles, though the society's patriarchal norms made it rare for women to engage in mainstream activism. A cinematic reflection of this gender dynamics can be seen in Satyajit Ray's Bengali film 'Ghaire-Baire'. I will reflect on 2-3 movies in my paper to illustrate women's roles in society during that time.

Through an interdisciplinary lens, encompassing historical analysis & socio-cultural perspectives, this paper seeks to uncover the nuances surrounding the absence on the preservation and perpetuation of Maa Rama Devi's legacy and it's contemporary relevance. It examines how societal attitudes, political climates, and cultural shifts have shaped the preservation, or lack, of her memory. The Study aims to explain how the lack of something affects our shared memories, cultural heritage, and how we see ourselves. By interrogating the reasons behind the neglect of Rama Devi's memory spaces, it endeavors to provoke critical dialogue and stimulate action towards rectifying this historical oversight. Ultimately, this abstract advocates for the recognition and commemoration of Maa Rama Devi's enduring legacy, proposing avenues for the creation of meaningful memory spaces that honor her contributions to our historical heritage of Odisha.

Key Words: Maa Rama Devi, Legacy, Contemporary relevance, Socio-Cultural, Historical overview, Memory spaces, Political, Patriarchy, Indian Movies, Freedom Struggle, Women

1. Introduction:

India's freedom struggle is a story of sacrifices and the struggles of numerous freedom fighters, regardless of their age, sex, class, caste, or race. Each region of India had its own heroes who played their roles in helping India achieve freedom. Everyone fought the good fight: some on the front lines, others behind the scenes. Indian women were a great part of Indian National Movement. During this period, several



oppressive practices against women in India, such as sati, the isolation of widows, child marriage, and women illiteracy, were abolished. The women of India began redefining their traditional gender roles. The women freedom fighters were not only battling against the British, but also against the societal evils, deep-rooted cultural and traditional norms, age-old belief systems, and sometimes even against their own near & dear ones. This paper focuses on the contributions of Rama Devi Chowdhury, a prominent female freedom fighter from Odisha, and analyzes the portrayal of women in the freedom struggle through three movies that highlight the socio-cultural and political factors affecting women's participation in nationalist movements during that period.

2. Literature Review:

Indian women played a crucial role in the freedom movement, challenging both colonial rule and societal norms. Their struggle was not confined to external challenges alone; it was also an internal battle. "If you want something said, ask a man; if you want something done, ask a woman," Margaret Thatcher once said about women's innate quality to act, not react. These resounding words hold true everywhere in the world, and more so in India (Panday 2021)

Although in India, colonial rule and the freedom struggle marked the beginning of an awakening among women, differing streams within the anti-imperialist, anti-feudal struggle posited different, even contentious images of identities for women (Sangali and Vaid 1989). Rama Devi Chowdhury has played an important role in Odisha during freedom movement. Despite being surrounded by powerful men, she created her own identity and actively participated in the freedom struggle, inspiring many others. This paper also reviews three films—Satyajit Ray's "Ghare-Baire" (1984), the Kannada historical film "Kittur Chennama" (1961), and Tarun Majumdar's "Alo" (2003)—to understand how patriarchy affected women and their role in nationalist movements.

3. Objectives of this Study:

- 1) To highlight the contributions of Rama Devi Chowdhury to the Indian freedom struggle.
- 2) To examine the portrayal of women's roles during the freedom movement through selected films and relate them to Maa Rama Devi to express my point.
- 3) To analyze the socio-cultural and political factors affecting women's participation in nationalist movements.
- 4) To emphasize the need to preserve the historical memory of female freedom fighters.
- 5) To discuss the impact of patriarchy on the recognition of women's contributions to the freedom struggle.
- 6) Through these objectives, my paper will highlight how Maa Rama Devi contributed to the freedom movement. By examining three movies, I aim to reflect on the socio-cultural and political scenarios of that time and how they affected women. Additionally, my paper serves as a heartfelt request to the government and stakeholders to preserve the memories of female freedom fighters and ensure their legacies do not fade away.

4. Methodology of this Study:

A qualitative research approach, combining historical analysis and film analysis has been used to study this topic. Primary sources include historical documents, writings by and about Rama Devi Chowdhury, and field visits to significant sites related to her. Secondary sources include scholarly articles, books, and films. The selected films are analyzed to understand the representation of women's roles in the freedom movement & around that time and also looks at the socio-cultural and political context of their struggles.

5. Findings:

During the Indian freedom movement, many courageous women joined the struggle to liberate their motherland from the British Raj. Their contributions, often made in the face of immense personal and societal challenges, are irreplaceable and form a significant part of India's journey to independence. Their stories of bravery, sacrifice, and unwavering dedication continue to inspire generations, reminding us of their high spirit and their pivotal role in shaping the destiny of a free India.

Similarly, in Odisha in the 20th century, a female freedom fighter named Rama Devi Chowdhury took the forefront in the freedom movement. Her struggles, sacrifices, devotion, dedication, spirit, and leadership made her 'Maa' for all the Odia people. She was ahead of her time. She was related to powerful people as she was the daughter of Gopal Ballabha Das, who was a deputy collector and the writer of Odisha's first novel, Bhima Bhuyan, and the niece of Utkala Gourava Madhusudan Das. She was also the daughter-in-law of advocate Gokulananda Chowdhury, the wife of freedom fighter Gopabandhu Chowdhury and sister-in-law of Nabakrushna Chowdhury. Although she was surrounded by powerful men since her childhood, she was not intimidated by them but rather inspired by them, which helped her create her own identity later in life. She joined her husband in the freedom movement, sacrificing her comforts.

But in that century, when women were expected to be confined to household chores and bound by the purdah system, many courageous women stepped forward and actively worked against the British. Maa Rama Devi was one such woman who broke free from the confines of the four walls and dedicated herself to visiting places and uniting people to join her in the freedom struggle. She was also surrounded by powerful women like Sarala Devi, Malti Devi, and Kiranbala Sen in her journey. They all took part in the salt satyagraha at Srijung&Inchudi. Maa Rama Devi is known as the first female freedom fighter of Odisha, yet we hardly found one or two pictures of her in Inchudi during a field visit.

Through generations we have seen names like Baji Rout, Gopabandhu Chowdhury, Madhusudan Das, Jayee Rajguru, Buxi Jagabandhu Bidyadhara, Veer Surendra Sai, etc. highlighted in books or films of Odisha, showcasing their contributions, bravery, and sacrifices. In both the public and private education systems of Odisha and India, male freedom fighters are always emphasized,

while many female freedom fighters are lost in the shadows of history. Women were not only involved in promoting Swadeshi goods or using the Charkha; many took up arms and fought against the British, sacrificing their lives in the process. Mahatma Gandhi believed that women are not weaker or inferior to men; rather, he regarded them as morally superior.

Men and women are two sides of the same coin, capable of working together for the betterment of society. Rama Devi and Gopabandhu Chowdhury exemplified this harmony, united in their efforts towards India's freedom movement. Together, they formed a formidable pair, seamlessly blending their strengths and dedication for the common cause of liberation. She followed her husband and joined Indian National Congress in 1921.

Maa Rama Devi was greatly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and decided to join the Salt Satyagraha in Odisha. Under the leadership of Gopabandhu Chowdhury, the salt Satyagraha started in Inchudi&Srijung in Balasore district of Odisha, which brought Maa Rama Devi to the forefront in 1930. Rama Devi gathered 1,500 women for the Salt Satyagraha. She also took the lead in several sessions of the Indian National Congress (INC). Despite this, while there is a memorial for Mahatma Gandhi commemorating his visit for the Salt Satyagraha, there is scant recognition of Rama Devi or other women activists at the site. The same year in November, she was arrested. She also actively participated in the Bhoodan, Khadi Movement, and Gramdaan Movement led by Vinobaji.

I have analyzed three movies dealing with women; patriarchy and nationalism which will help us understand how patriarchy has affected women and how women were part of nationalist movements back then. The socio-cultural and political factors will also be highlighted. The first movie, I am reviewing is the 1984 Bengali movie of Satyajit Ray, "Ghare-Baire", which is set against the backdrop of the Swadeshi movement in early 20th century Bengal, the film explores the complexities of nationalism, modernity, and gender dynamics within a traditional household.

The story centers around Bimala, a devoted wife confined to the inner quarters of her home, who is encouraged by her progressive husband Nikhil to step out and engage with the world. Nikhil's friend, Sandip, a passionate nationalist leader, enters their lives, bringing with him the fervor of the Swadeshi movement, which advocates for the boycott of British goods and the promotion of Indian-made products. As Bimala becomes increasingly drawn to Sandip's charisma and revolutionary zeal, she grapples with her own sense of identity and duty. The film deftly portrays her internal conflict, caught between the traditional roles prescribed by her upbringing and the allure of a broader, more active participation in the political sphere.

In this movie, there was a scene where Bimala, as the protagonist, explains how her room was inside and there was a colorful glass corridor to reach her room, which she never crossed. Nikhil, being progressive, made her cross the corridor. This symbolism reflects how socio-cultural norms kept her confined in the room, but education and encouragement from her husband made her break those norms and enter the outside world. This corridor represents the link between the inside and the outside world.

The second film is "Kittur Chennama," a Kannada historical film released in 1961, is set in the early 19th century during the era of British oppression and expansion in India. The film revolves around Kittur Chennama, the resolute and valiant queen of Kittur, who emerges as a formidable leader of her people. Following the death of her husband, she fiercely opposed the British Doctrine of Lapse, exemplifying her courage and strength.

The movie vividly portrays her bravery and strategic prowess in battling the British forces, contributing significantly to the broader Indian independence movement. However, the narrative also highlights her ultimate betrayal from within, leading to her capture. This poignant depiction underscores the pervasive patriarchy of the time and illustrates how Queen Chennama's defiance bruised the egos of the British by defeating them in the first battle that they planned to anyhow defeat her by bribing her own people. The film eloquently showcases how women played a crucial role in safeguarding culture, tradition, and the nation amidst the turmoil of colonization.

The third movie I reviewed is "Alo", a Bengali film directed by Tarun Majumdar in 2003. It basically means light. It offers a socio-political narrative that delves into the intricate dynamics of gender roles, societal expectations, and personal autonomy within a traditional Indian context. The film centers on Alo, portrayed by Rituparna Sengupta, whose journey reflects the struggles and resilience of women in a patriarchal society. Set against the backdrop of a middle-class Bengali family, Alo's life is shaped by deep-seated cultural norms and expectations. The film critically examines how these societal structures impose limitations on women's roles, confining them to domestic responsibilities and subordinating their personal aspirations. Despite these constraints, Alo's character emerges as a symbol of hope and change, challenging the status quo with her unwavering spirit and determination.

A significant aspect of the narrative is Alo's relationship with Subhankar, representing a small-scale representation of the broader societal expectations of marriage and love. Their bond, while deeply emotional, also underscores the sacrifices and compromises women are often compelled to make. As Alo navigates her path, she confronts not only personal adversities but also the socio-political barriers that seek to confine her. Her story is a testament to the internal and external battles

women face, from societal judgment to the struggle for self-empowerment. The film's climax, wherein Alo must make pivotal decisions about her future, serves as a critical commentary on the need for female agency and autonomy. It stands as a socio-political critique of gender roles and societal norms, celebrating the resilience and strength of women who strive to redefine their identities and reclaim their autonomy in the face of pervasive patriarchal constraints. The film is a call to acknowledge and support women's contributions and rights within the broader societal framework.

These three films are a testament to the significant role women have always played in the socio-cultural and political dynamics of society in all times, despite their path never being filled with roses. Whether as first-generation learners or as figures often criticized by their own communities, these women navigated the challenging institutions of their time. We are all entrenched in the functionalism of societal structures; instead, we should rethink the practices that shape them. Women are usually celebrated for their patience and sacrifice. However, in these three movies, we see three different portrayals of women: one who adhered to her culture but was eventually influenced by the outside world, another who fought bravely for her and her people's rights, and another who illuminated the lives of other women by being an inspiration.

Society consistently celebrates male freedom fighters, yet overlooks the contributions of women. If we search for the top 10 movies on the Indian freedom movement on Google, IMDb reports 10 movies, out of which only one is about a female freedom fighter. This shows how the sacrifices of women freedom fighters have been overshadowed over the years. As someone rightly said, everyone, regardless of their age, knows that Mahatma Gandhi is the father of the nation, but hardly anyone remembers that Sarojini Naidu is considered the mother of the nation.

In the context of these movies, it is important to highlight how tradition constrained women in the past, yet their socio-economic backgrounds provided them with opportunities for empowerment. Whether Bimala in Ghare-Baire or the Queen of Kittur, both came from privileged socio-economic backgrounds that shaped their life trajectories. Women have historically suffered under patriarchy, but those from lower socio-economic backgrounds faced even greater challenges.

Similarly, Maa Rama Devi hailed from a wealthy family, benefiting from a strong socio-economic foundation that influenced her path in life. Surrounded by influential men who inspired her, she was motivated to engage in mainstream politics, demonstrating remarkable foresight for her time. Despite her privileged background, she never distanced herself from others; instead, her leadership, sacrifices, strength, and humble demeanor endeared her to the people of Odisha, earning her the title of 'Maa.'. She participated in many movements and went to villages to inspire

women to come and join the movement. She went outside Odisha for various activities related to national movement. She also went to the Assam borders to help Indian soldiers injured in the Indo-China war in 1961. She continued to follow in her husband's footsteps even after his death.

As Mohini Anjum writes, it was at the call of this charismatic leader that women from various walks of life came forward to participate in the freedom struggle and they had the support of men. But once India became a free nation, the contribution of women in the struggle was conveniently forgotten—their role in the building of Indian nation was generally forgotten or undermined. Their contribution exists only in history books or as commercial complexes or hostels for working women, and one or two roads in the capital have been named after them (Anjum 111-16).

The role of women in overthrowing British Raj was crucial, and Rama Devi Chowdhury stands out as a pioneering figure in Odisha. However, there is a noticeable absence of dedicated memorials honoring Maa Rama Devi. The impact of patriarchal norms on the historical recognition of female activists has significantly contributed to this oversight. While Rama Devi Women's University, named after her, serves to commemorate her legacy but the broader political and cultural narrative has failed to adequately preserve her historical memory.

It is important to preserve the memories of Maa Rama Devi in the contemporary times to rectify the historical oversight. The mainstream narratives have made us skip her, but now we need to rethink and re-construct those narratives. Maa Rama Devi was not only a political figure but also a social figure, her contribution and memories must be protected for the upcoming generations to come. Her house, her belongings, her memories etc., every data must be collected and safeguarded for the generations to come.

The Govt. is now taking efforts to safeguard such historical faces of Odisha. In this regard, the Maa Rama Devi Chair established in Rama Devi Women's University focuses on preserving the memories of Maa Rama Devi by preaching her life journey and life philosophies among the youth of Odisha. The journey is not easy as the history is very fragmented. Yet, the desire to keep her legacy alive for generations to come is making things possible. The government should take further steps, such as including her in school textbooks, erecting memorials to raise awareness of her societal contributions, and promoting her life story to accord her the respect and recognition she deserves. Documentaries and museums should also be planned to protect her history from fading over time. During a field visit to Satyabhamapur, Maa Rama Devi's birthplace, which is currently under government supervision and known as Madhubabu's birthplace, there was a noticeable absence of information about her childhood spent there. This oversight underscores how patriarchal norms and historical narratives have marginalized her significance, a disheartening reality.

While the Supreme Man is revered and said to be present in all, Hindu scriptures also secure a space for the reverence of "Maa Shakti." This embodiment of endless female energy symbolizes devotion, self-sacrifice, and kindness. Though this female aspect of the Eternal Source of Power is granted agency, it is stripped of authoritative identity. Therefore, even if she is the actual creator of the world, it is He who, by giving it identity, is celebrated as its progenitor. Thus, the potential to preserve, transform, and destroy the world, which is His creation, lies in Him alone. This reflects the political and cultural landscape of our country using religious source. This shows how man has always been given the due share of importance while women lose their identity.

Rooted in a sense of elation over the spiritual superiority of the East, the elevation of women to the status of mother and a goddess demanded of them a greater degree of devotion, self-sacrifice and kindness. They were emancipated undeniably, but were still pressed under the thumb of patriarchy, which in having accorded to them a status that was a degree higher, nonetheless provided them no respite in the elevation that they attained (Saxena 35).

This expresses my point well regarding loss of memory spaces of Maa Rama Devi irrespective of her contribution towards the society, state and nation building. However, many intellectuals have kept her legacy alive in their writings, and the efforts of a few social activists and institutions, like Rama Devi Women's University, have preserved her memory. Yet, more measures need to be taken not only for Maa Rama Devi but also for other women freedom fighters across India, so that future generations will not only worship "Shakti" but also recognize the power of Shakti throughout history. A woman can not only make a house a home; she can also contribute to the development of society and the nation. If she can embody Durga Maa, filled with love and patience, she can also become Maa Kali to eradicate the negativities of society.

At last, it was certainly not easy for Maa Rama Devi to leave her comfort zone and participate in the freedom movement back then, but she did it for a greater cause. Today, we can convey messages in seconds, but back then, she would walk miles to educate women and inspire them to join the freedom movement. Her sacrifices and struggle made her 'Maa' and 'Maa' should never be forgotten. Her legacy should not fade away with time but rather should be celebrated through all times.

Conclusion:

The role of women in fighting British rule was crucial, yet their contributions have often been marginalized in historical narratives. Maa Rama Devi's legacy, along with those of other female freedom fighters, needs to be preserved and celebrated. Efforts such as including their stories in school textbooks, erecting memorials, and promoting their life stories are essential to ensure their

recognition. The study underscores the importance of acknowledging and supporting women's contributions to society and the nation. As Maa Rama Devi's life demonstrates, women can be both nurturers and warriors, embodying the strength and resilience necessary for societal progress.

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