

Katika Mani Mohapatra; A Lesser Known Freedom Fighter of Mayurbhanj in Odisha

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Mayurbhanj was a premier Garjat state of Odisha having a largest area of 4243 square miles and highest population (8, 46,745 in 1931) than the other 25 states during the colonial rule¹. The kings of Bhanja dynasty were ruling over the state since the Gupta period up to the merger with the union government². It was predominantly a tribal state. The tribes were generally simple, innocent and peace loving in nature. They work hard in the field and forests for their livelihood. Most of them were less than the marginal farmers who lived from hand to mouth unless supplemented by wages earned as daily labor. They were reasonably treated well by the state where the stringent exploitation was absent³. The people of Mayurbhanj had no ideas about the outside world nor had the political awareness or about the National events. They only love and respect their Maharaja to whom they considered as their protector. They did not have the ideas on colonial administration and exploitation in the state. Then gradually the news about the Gandhian movements of noncooperation and civil disobedience mild ripples in their mind⁴. The people's movement led by Banamali Das at Nilgiri had tremendous impact on the people of Mayurbhanj. Then the people of Mayurbhanj joined in the congress movement only after the advent of Gandhi in politics.

The visit of Gandhi with his family to Odisha on 23rd March 1921 was a turning point in the freedom movement in India⁵. During his visit Gandhi addressed the people of Bhadrakh, Cuttack, Puri and Berhampur to join in the non cooperation movement. With the call of Gandhi the young leaders of Odisha like Harekrushna Mahatab, Nabakrushna Chaudhury, Nityananda Kanungo and Nanda Kishore Das joined in the National congress. They were greatly inspired by the Gandhian thought and ideology. They propagated the message of Gandhi and convinced the people about the aim and objectives of the National movement in Odisha. In the year 1921, 127 delegates from Odisha attended the Allahabad session of Indian National congress⁶.

The people of different Garjats openly participated in the congress movement, but the participation of Mayurbhanj was not visible due to various reasons. According to the Regulation No 2 of 1908, the state had the power to expel any undesirable person from Mayurbhanj within 24 hours. Again the circular order No-3 of 25th April 1925 was issued which restricted the freedom of speech and banned the public meetings in the state⁷. The king appointed the educated Bengali and coastal people as Sardars, Pradhans and other high posts, who exercised judicial and police power in the state. The general people had no right to redress their grievances. The rigorous punishment to the revolutionary leaders of the *Meli* of 1917 in Mayurbhanj was not vanished in their mind. As a result of the above reasons the people of Mayurbhanj dared not to join in the congress movement or to invite the leaders of the other state⁸. The All India States People Conference largely aware the people of Mayurbhanj to come to the mainstream of the congress movement.

The border district of Balasore and Midnapur in West Bengal had a saluting effect on the people of Mayurbhanj who could not escape the fire of Nationalism. They came to know about Gandhi, the salt Satyagraha of Inchudi where thousands of congress volunteers had been arrested for breaking of salt law and the prohibition order of the police. The leaders like Gourmohan Pradhan of Belanpur, Panchanan Raisingh of Kundapali, Manmohan Dibedi of Patisari, Sanatan Pradhan of Khiripada, Suryamohan Das of Bhaliadiha village of Mayurbhanj participated and arrested in the salt Satyagraha at Inchudi⁹. During that critical situation Bansidhar Behera a dynamic and dedicated young leader appeared in the political horizon with an aim to end the rule of the Raja in Mayurbhanj and the British rule from India.

Sarat Chandra Das, a dedicated Nationalist leader took the leadership of the congress movement in Mayurbhanj. He was Vice President of the Baleswar Congress Committee from 1920-1925¹⁰. His father was established at Ambajoda near Betnoti as he was serving under the Maharaja of Mayurbhanj. Sarat Chandra practiced law in Baripada court. At that time the Prajamandal began to draw more attention and public support.

As a dedicated social worker Sarat Chandra did not sit silently. He convened a meeting of young nationalists on 24th March 1939 at Ambajoda¹¹. The meeting was attended by a large number of likeminded persons, viz. Jagannath Kamila, Girish Chandra Roy, Gourmohan Pradhan, Gajendra Nath Patnaik, Laxmidhar Tripathy, Sakila Soren, Ramchandra Mohapatra, Adityanath Lal, Kailash Chandra Naik and others¹². They took a pledge, in the name of God, to work as faithful and devoted soldiers of the nonviolent freedom struggle and would gladly accept the sufferings and privations that may come on their way. This gave birth to Mayurbhanj Prajamandal organization, though it was not formally announced.

Sarat Chandra Das and other leaders toured from village to village to unite the people. They created awareness among them against the feudatory rule in Mayurbhanj and for the freedom of the country. During his tour he brought to notice about the public grievance, where he was greeted with love and respect as their leader¹³. He set up Pragana Samities in different villages. The village level social work like village cleaning, construction and repair of village roads, construction of dams for irrigation purposes, removal of illiteracy and untouchability and to create a village fund by collecting donation were undertaken. Sarat Das gave up his legal practice assuming full time President of Prajamandal organization with an aim to reconstruct the rural village for the welfare of the common people¹⁴.

The social reconstruction programme of Sarat Das gave much importance on the emancipation of women from the Purdha system¹⁵. Again he had experienced about the role of the women in the freedom struggle in the different parts of Odisha. So he enlisted the women in the Prajamandal movement. The first meeting of women was organized at Madhunanda village of Patalipura grampanchayat under Baisinga Tahasil¹⁶. As Baisinga was very near to Baleswar the wave of nationalism entered through Baisinga and then Ambajoda village of Betnoti Tasil became the centre of the Prajamandal movement in Mayurbhanj. Madhunanda was a small hamlet, but the inhabitants were educated. Sarat Chandra Das, Gourmohan Pradhan, Madanmohan Panda, Prasanna Kumar Dash, Radhamohan Patnaik of Merda, Adaita Prasad Lala of Uttarapal decided to hold a meeting of the women at Madhunanda. The women like wife of Gourmohan Pradhan, Aditya Nath Lala, Madan Mohan Panda and few others assembled in the meeting wearing long veil¹⁷. They were inspired by the volunteers on the Gandhian ideology of Ahimsa and Satyagraha. They also cited the examples of Ramadevi, Malati Devi, Haimabati Devi, Arnapura Devi and other volunteers, who dedicatedly working for the sake of mother India.

The most prominent women freedom fighter of Mayurbhanj was Katikamani Mohapatra. She was born in the village Charabadi of Tentulia Grampanchayat under Nilgiri Block on 11th March 1907 in a landlord family. Her father was Bansidhar Nayak and mother was Suduri Nayak. She studied at Tentulia middle English school. At the age of 19 she married Ramchandra Mohapatra of Kundapada village near Sainku¹⁸. As an educated woman and the wife of a freedom fighter she stepped out with other women like Sabitri Mishra, Kamili Kamila, Bhagabati Pradhan and others to participate in the freedom movement. They hold periodical meetings in the house of Girish Chandra Roy near Jaipur to avoid the attention of the police. Katikamani was a leading member of the Sevadal training camp. She was highly praised by S.N.Subba Rao, the National leader of Sevadal and Padmalochan Das, the Superintendent of Odisha Sevadal training camp. She directly involved in the Prajamandal meetings at Puruna Baripada and Tentul near Manatri. Her most remarkable achievement was the participation to break the salt law at Inchudi by the call of Gandhi.

The Prajamandal leaders again decided to hold another meeting of the women Pratimadei pur of Patalipura grampanchayat of Baisinga Tahasil. This village was ten kilometers from Baisinga and forty two kilometers from Baripada. The nearest villages were Madhunanda, Kathpal, Khiripada, Belanpur, Dhanapal, Deopal, Nakhra and others. The villages were dominated by the non tribal well to do families. So the meeting of the women was held at Pratimadei pur, where twenty two numbers of women participated¹⁹. Katika Mani Mohapatra was the leading figure of the meeting. The women present in the meeting promised to join in the movement and decided to support the freedom led by the congress volunteers, which encouraged the common people of Mayurbhanj.

Katika Mani Mohapatra with some other women volunteers went on tour to aware and includes the women of different villages in the freedom movement of India. They propagated the message of Swaraj, end of feudalism in Mayurbhand and establishment of responsible government and to end the British rule in India. They visited the villages like Paharduba, Brahmansahi, Bhanpur, Kantisahi, Sainkul, Sanraikali, Puruna Baripada, Sankerka, Arpata, Uttarapal and Satdaharia, of Khunta, Betnoti and Udala Blocks of Mayurbhanj district.

Katika Mani Mohapatra organized a meeting especially for the women in the village Kundapada village of Sainkul grampanchayat, under Gopabandhu Nagar Block of Khunta.²⁰ Kundapada was twenty two kilometers from Khunta and forty kilometers from Baripada. Most of the villagers were financially sound and educated. She was assisted by Prasanna Kumar Dash of Baripada, Ram Chandra Mohapatra and Panchanan Raisingh of Kundapada, Pandit Sribatsa Mishra of Sainkul, Ramchandra Majhi of Surukana and Ramhari Beshra of San Raikali village of Gopabandhu Nagar Block.

More and more women of the nearby villages attended the meeting. Katika Mani Mohapatra presided over the meeting at Kundapada²¹. She addressed the women to come out from the four walls of the house and to participate with enthusiasm for village transformation. Gradually the ice of Purdha system began to melt and the women worked with the members of Pragana Samities for the development of rural villages. The women gave up their shyness and had no problem in joining meetings together with men folks. This was the great achievement of Sarat Chandra Das and his young volunteers to end the Purdha system, which brought a great social change in the mind of the women.

The construction of earth-dam for irrigation purpose was one of the most important achievements of Prajamandal movement in Mayurbhanj. On the inaugural function of the construction of Badjod dam near Betnoti a large number of women come to encourage the volunteers. They blew conches and uttered hulahuli. Some of them were coming in the afternoon finishing their domestic work to pour earth on the dam²². Many tribal of Bathudi community and non tribal women participated in the construction work. When Sarat Das had gone to Delhi and met with Sardar Patel, he tried to show him the photographs of the construction work of Badjod dam and other social activities of the Prajamandal volunteers²³.

The Prajamandal leaders observed the Republic Day on January 26, 1943 at Naranpur of Mantri Pragana²⁴. On this occasion it was decided to construct a dam on the river Budhi. The flood in this river affected the people and damaged crops of the large area in the district of Mayurbhanj and Baleswar in rainy season. In spite of severe cold in winter, thousands of volunteers come to take part in the construction work. They built temporary hut with palm leaves in the mango grove of that village and spent the night²⁵. Under the responsibility of Girish Chandra Roy and Prasanna Kumar Dash, the construction work was advanced. They were assisted by the local leaders like Gouramohan Pradhan, Adayta Nath Lala, Dhruba Charan Rout, Laxman Parida and other volunteers.

The women volunteers under the leadership of Katika Mani were participated in the construction work. After finishing their household works they collected rice, vegetables and money from different villages for the maintenance of the camp²⁶. Some of them were carrying basketful of earth and poured on the dam. They considered the construction work as a religious duty for them²⁷. Gradually the number of women volunteers increased and the work was completed in time. The women were the source of inspiration of the Prajamandal movement. The dam is now popular as, 'Sarat Bandh' in Mayurbhanj²⁸..

Lastly it may rightly be said that Katika Mani Mohapatra is a lesser known freedom woman freedom fighter of Mayurbhanj. She contributed a lot to aware and unites the women to end the feudalism, establishment of social justice and responsible government in Mayurbhanj and to end the British Raj from India under the leadership of Sarat Chandra Das, who is popular as 'Mayurbhanj Gandhi'²⁹. She inspired the women by the Gandhian movement for the greater interest of the nation. She followed the foot print of Gandhi and propagated his ideology even in rural villages. He gave importance for the cultivation of *Copa* to prepare clothes by which the people able to boycott the foreign clothes. She took part in the construction work with the women, which enhance the courage and confidence of the masses to participate against the Raja and the British Raj. As a woman freedom fighter of Gandhian era, when the people of Mayurbhanj dared not raise voice against the Durbar administration, she stood at the front line and fought for the nation. She should be given tribute as the daughter of the soil for her sacrifices and uncompromising endeavor for the lager interest of the country.

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