



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Foremost Women Litterateurs: The Torch Bearers of Freedom Struggle in Odisha

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Abstract:

Literature is the mirror of the society and the litterateurs endeavour to reflect the ditto of the society in it and disseminate all source of information to the people through their writings. Their objective is to renovate and rationalize the society. They inject ideas and morals in their valuable works that it acts like a weapon to realize and put to action in various directions. Literature also helps the people to create nationalistic feeling among themselves and inspire and encourage them for spontaneous participation in any movement of the country. This situation occurred in Orissa by the valuable writings of Oriya litterateurs in the 19th century. They created social consciousness among the people and helped in the political regeneration of the land through their writings. In this context, role of the some of the Oriya women writers is noteworthy. They are Annapurna Devi, Aparna Devi, Kuntala Kumari Sabat, Reba Roy, Sarala Devi, Nirmala Devi, Kokila Devi, Sitadevi Khadanga and Suchitra Devi etc. who had contributed a lot to create national consciousness among the people during British rule.

Keywords –Odia Women, Poetesses, Poems, Dramas, Anthology

Introduction:

Growth and development of Odia literature took to change in Odisha during the second half of the 19th century due to impact of English education and western ideas. Therefore, it created a new urge in the poets and novelists like Radhanath Roy, Fakir Mohan Senapati, Madhusudan Rao and Nanda Kishore Bal etc to provide new dimension to literary activities in Odisha. Literature became a new vehicle for social makeover. In this circumstance, the Odia women also played a vital role in transforming conservative society to a radical apotheosis through their beautiful writings. Their intrepidity, valour and patience contributed a lot to the fulfillment of the freedom struggle. In making the movement vibrant, they kept the spirit high. Certainly, they were the torch – bearers of the freedom movement and elixir of social advancement.

Women are the part and parcel of the society and without their active participation, the progress of the society is unthinkable. Even Gandhiji felt sinquanon participation of women in the freedom struggle. Through speeches and powerful writings earnest appeal was made to bring the women to the gamut of freedom movement. The Odia women jumped in to the whirlpool of the movement and their fellow sisters to raise voice of protest against social injustice.

The new beginning in Odia literature is generally attributed to the period from 1866 to 1903 because it is during this time that Pan – Odia nationalism embarked on to grow. The women writers had felt the need to arouse the Odia from their deep slumber so that the nation would be survived. Some of the well-known women writers who created national awakening and injected the nationalistic feeling among the people verse through their novels, dramas and stories are the subject matter of this article. They also exposed various anomalies and bitterness designed by the British administration so that the people spontaneously moved towards freedom struggle. A few are discussed briefly below-:

1. Annapurna Devi (1883- 1948) – A Harbinger of Renaissance in Odia Literature-

Annapurna Devi was a genius as Odia poetess. She was born in a poverty-stricken family in the district of Ganjam. So, her education was confined to Pathasala only. Amidst poverty and deprivation, the self – educated woman wrote more than one thousand poems. She got inspiration from her husband Sriram Pattnaik, who was working as a clerk under the Raja of Badakhemundi to write the lyric ‘Bichheda Milan. From that day onwards, she ceaselessly composed poems on social, educational, cultural aspects and contemporary situations like purdah and universal brotherhood of men¹.

In ‘Kalpakunja’, she had aspired for the betterment of the world and mankind as a whole. In her social sphere, she tipped off that every living and non- living being has to undergo the chains of beauty, bounty and prosperity. She cautioned the readers to refrain from the mundane world. Peaceful co – existence and fraternal feeling would make the society and world magnificent, hale and hearty. She criticised social condition which propped up favouritism, where self-centeredness and self-importance had widened the gulf between man and man. She held that man should follow of endurance and graciousness to keep well – being the social will be in motion.

She not only centred on truth, love and propagation of universal brotherhood but also the emancipation of women. It was because the conservative Odia society wanted to suppress the self – expression of the Oriya women. She entreated for their liberation. She created a sympathetic attitude for the same through her writings. She wrote numerous letters and organized meetings for providing women their due place in the society. She organized ‘Mahila Samiti’ and strove for the spread of female education through the village Pathasalas. Annapurna Devi was very critical of the seclusion of women and insisted on doing away with the purdah². She had written extensively in ‘Ganjam Guna Darpana’, ‘Sambalpur Hitaisini ‘and other periodicals. She had even edited a monthly magazine ‘Sahakara’ run by Laxmi Narayan Sahu of Balasore. Her literary work ‘Padyamala’ part I & II was published in 1904 and 1905 respectively. Her poetic collection ‘Pakshighara’ was published by the Puri Jagannath press in 1907.

Her sonorous, simple and tenderly writings had influenced many contemporary writers. Madhusudan Rao commented that her poetic genius was inborn, clear like crystal and illustrious. Many prominent poets

praised her talents and advised her to go forward with her literary activities unhindered. Annapurna Devi is regarded by many as the harbinger of renaissance in Odia literature and her place in the galaxy of Odia literature is assured.

2. **Aparna Devi (1899- 1962) – Follower of Gangadhar Meher**

She was a poetess of the British period. Despite pressing domestic engagements, she never ceased to write and evoked the value of Indian culture through her poems. Her important poems like 'Indumati', 'Aryalalana (1934)' and 'Baramasi' were praiseworthy. She voiced for the safeguarding of the pride of the Arya women and the revival of humanistic ideology. Aparna Devi was very much influenced and inspired by Gangadhar Meher. Her prose works are 'Dasakumara Charita' and 'Dasakumari Charita' written on the model of Sanskrit works 'Dasakumara Charitam'. Besides, she had also written the books 'Chinta' and 'Kavitanjali', 'Kanchanamala', 'Galpa', 'Asadha' and 'Bhadra' were published in Utkala Sahitya, the leading literary magazine of Odisha.³ The writings of Aparna Devi intensify national consciousness and infused enthuse among the nationalists.

3. **Kuntala Kumari Sabat (1900-1938) – A Poetess of polyglot**

She was well versed in Odia, Hindi and English literature. Her creative writings depicted the various cross – sections of the society, starting from the secluded women in the house to that of the bonded Odia labourers in the tea gardens of Assam and the Jute mills in Kolkata. She devoted her time to writing Hindi drama and articles. She also edited 'Stree Bhusan', a Hindi magazine. Apart from that, she had also edited 'Jeevan', 'Manmauji', 'Nari' and 'Bharati'. Through her writings, she awakened and revitalized the Odia youths by injecting into them the idea of nationalism. During non- cooperation movement, she became an ardent champion of Swadeshi and Khaddar.⁴

To wake up the somnolent Odia, she wrote, 'Archhana' in 1927. Through 'Sphulinga' (1929), she tried to infuse nationalism in the minds of the people and implored them to join the national cause. She was a great supporter of the Civil Disobedience Movement and Salt Satyagraha in Odisha. Further in her 'Aahwan', she spread the objectives of Gandhiji's Civil Disobedience Movement. She had opportunity to preside over many women conferences of Odisha and India. She had also chaired the 'Arya Nari Sammelan' held at Bareilly from 7 to 9 February, 1932.

Kuntala Kumari was very much nostalgic about the glorious past and rich cultural heritage of Odisha. For the amalgamation of the scattered Odia – speaking tracts under one Government, she put forth vigorous arguments logically. She pleaded that she was an Odia first and Indian next. In her letter she expressed,

.....does Odisha comprise Puri, Cuttack and Balasore only? Are we helpless, destitute, weak and poor? Will the entire body ache if the little finger hurts? If India claims for greater nationalism, then what the Bengalis, Biharis and Telgus are doing to the Oriyas at present, is it just?⁵.....

Kuntala wished to call the Odia the lions of Kalinga (Kalinga Kesari). The poetess earned respect as a fearless freedom fighter through her fierce writing. She was a staunch swadeshi from the very core of her heart. She wanted that India should make the country self –reliant. Her strident pen wrote,

....We are lazy, we are envious. We do not see our good things. We do not care to identify our noble things in the world.⁶

Her writings and her deep concern for nation were portrayed in brief in 'Delhi Chithi' column of 'Sahakara' the monthly magazine published from Cuttack.

Kuntal Kumari was a promoter of social reforms in India. She was against Casteism. In 'Naatundi' she had vehemently opposed the caste system in the society. In her view, caste system was very bad and against the will of God.

Kuntala Kumari had also targeted at the purdah system existing in the society through her novels. She encouraged the women to wage continuous war against this social evil. An elevated position of Odia women is a focus of interest in her novel 'Raghu Arakshita'.

In her poetry deep devotion to God and truth was clearly perceptible. She had not confined God to any particular religion. To her God was universal. God according her conceptions was within and without all religions. Through such liberal views she propagated the value of religious toleration and secularism.⁷

The laconic style of Kuntala Kumari's writings contributed to invoking the Odia from their deep slumber politically, socially and economically. Her writings aimed at presenting Odisha in the national arena as a great and bright nation. Therefore, she was honoured with the title of 'Utkal Bharati' by the 'Mahila Bandhu Samiti' of Puri in 1925.⁸

4. Reba Roy (1876-1957) – A great of Champion Of Female Education

In the beginning of the 20th century, women of Odisha started writing literary criticism leaving the devotional songs and took literature as a means of reforming the society through education. Among those social reformers who took to literature as a passion Reba Roy was one. She was the daughter of Jagannath Roy, the brother of Madhusudan Roy and the wife of Sadhu Charan Roy of Jajpur. Despite of her domestic engagements, she devoted herself to works of social reforms, especially for the spread of female education. In 1888, she edited 'Asha.' After the death of her husband in 1898, she composed some tragic poems full of pathos which included 'Ekavarsa Purna', 'Charivarsa Purna' and 'Latika' etc. She also published the poem 'Sadhana' in commemoration of her husband's memory.⁹

In 1903, 'Anjali' an anthology of 40 poems was published. Her story book 'Sakuntal' was published in 1904. It was the first social short story written by her. The belief in monotheism of Brahmo movement and the ideas of social reform were the central theme of her poems and short stories. In 1905, she founded the Model Girls' School at Cuttack and pioneered the 'Cuttack Mahila Sangathan' to promote the cause of women. She also edited a monthly magazine 'Prabhat' through which she not only voiced against the oppression of women by orthodox people but also illiteracy and other social evils. Her writings were filled with untrammelled exposition of women in the society.

5. Sarala Devi – A Sonorous Lyrist of Nationalism

She was the top women freedom fighters of Odisha who took to literature as a means of intellectual awakening. She believed that pen was mightier than sword. Most of her writings revealed the women's awakening in Odisha and the importance of motherland. She was one of the founder members of 'Sabuja Sahitya Samiti' (1921 – 35) and focused on the then Odia society in 'Jugabina'. The prime objective of that group of writers was to stamp out the social evils and to provide equal rights to both men and women in the society. She contributed one chapter to 'Basanti' a novel written by the 'Sabuja writers'.

In her essays, “Gopal Krushna Pratibha” and “Sarala Mahabharatara Nari Charitra”, she has outstandingly highlighted the character of Odia women. Her essay ‘Kuntala Kumarinka Kabi Pratibha’ is also a great product. She had published a collection of stories ‘Pancha Pradipa’ which has she established herself as a matured story teller. Many other writings of Sarala Devi through which she gave clarion call to the womenfolk were ‘Biswa Biplabini’, ‘Bira Ramani’, ‘Bharatiya Balanka Katha’ etc¹⁰. Bira Ramani, Biswa Biplabini and Janabai were her biographical works. Apart from that, she also edited a number of works like Satidharma, Banimla, Amulyanidhi, Katha Ramayana and Abhayabani. For excellent literary contribution, she was rewarded by Orissa Sahitya Academy in 1969 for her magnum opus “Raya Ramananda”.

6. Nirmala Devi - A poetess of Anthology

She was contemporary to Kuntala Kumari Sabat. Nirmala Devi is also one of the prominent Odia women poetesses during British rule. She contributed the anthology of poems ‘Dinante’ (1935), ‘Supta Chaitanya’, ‘Gitanjali’ and ‘Simanta’ etc. In her works she had portrayed various problems of society.

7. Bidyut Prabha Devi (1927 – 1977) – A Romanticist

She was the first and foremost romantic poetess but her two wonderful works ‘Sabita’ (1947) and ‘Utkal Saraswata Pratibha’ (1947) bear the evidence of nationalism. She was, called the descendant of Pallikabi Nanda Kishor Bal as the above two literary works depict the rural life of in Odisha in its true spirit. Besides, she was very much influenced by the writings of medieval and modern poets like Sarala Das, Gopabandhu Das, Godavarish Mishra and Kuntala Kumari Sabat.

8. Kokila Devi – A great Advocate of Women’s Cause

Kokila Devi was one of women freedom fighters of Odisha who plunged into the freedom movement to serve the people. She belonged to wealthy family. Her father Choudhury Bhagavat Prasad Samantaray Mohapatra an opulent man, was a great nationalist of Bhadrak. She got married to the highly educated Managovinda Das Mohapatra of a Zamindar family. In spite of coming from such an aristocratic ambience, she voiced against the prevailing social evils and injustice. She presented her thoughts with emotions and sympathy before the society. Through her powerful writings, she entreated the women of Odisha to take part in the freedom struggle actively.

9. Sitadevi Khadanga (1902 - 1983) – A Notable Dramatist

Sitadevi was contemporary to Kuntala Kumari Sabat and Aparna Devi. She was very much influenced by her father Harihar Panda, a notable social worker and followed his foot print. Through her writing, she raised her voice against the social evils. Sitadevi was inspired by the writings of Bankim Chandra. Her husband Banchhanidhi Khadanga also afforded her much freedom to write such things. She was also inspired by the renowned story – writer and novelist Ananta Prasad Panda.¹¹ Sitadevi wrote her first novel ‘Binata’ at the age of 13.

Her other novels were ‘Posya putra’, ‘Agraja’ and ‘Pratya baritana’ in which she depicted the pleasure and pain of common people. She had also written many plays like ‘Sahodara’, ‘Nari’, ‘Naisthika’, ‘Nispati’, ‘Prachina Panthi’, ‘Kshudhara Pida’ and ‘Matruhina’ etc. All these plays were staged at Aska and Sorada under her own direction and were immensely appreciated by the people¹². She had founded the ‘Krushna Singha Sahitya Parishad’ and the drama pendal of Aska with donation received from the Raja of Dharakot. In

her another play entitled 'Mandira Prabesa' she focused on the Harijan movement of Mahatma Gandhi. Through her plays, she protested child marriage and encouraged widow remarriage. She also published a collection of 'Chasi Chautisa' for the recreation of peasants' community. Besides such activities, she joined the national movement by defying the restrictions of purdah like Annapurna Devi of Ganjam.

10. Suchitra Devi(1881) – A poetess of folk tale

She was born in a rich family of Chanahat. She got married to Raghabananda Das of Kuruhjipur in Puri district. He was a Government Officer and a prolific writer. Being inspired by her husband, she published an anthology of short stories based upon the folk tales. However, her prominent work was 'Kabitalahari' which was published in 1901.

11. Sulakshana Devi (1829- 1901) – A Religious Poet

She was very much inspired by her son Damodar Patnaik, who was an adept in Odyssey song. Her post widowhood melancholy and nostalgia were echoed in her anthology of poems 'Parijatamala'. It was a composition of devotional songs, hymns, ballads as well as folk songs which reflected the then Kavya style and 'bhabaraga'.¹³ Her puritanical moral life was reflected in the anthology of poems.

12. Sulochana Dei(1895-1947) – A Crusader Of Women's Liberation

Sulochana Dei had served as a teacher in the Mandakini Girls' High school of Bamanda state. Apart from her academic career, she was carrying on with literary works, as her pastime. Among her beautiful writings, 'Abakasa Manjari' (1914), 'Padmini' (1927), 'Chittavikasa'(1927) and 'Banamali' (1931) are most noteworthy. The 'Abakasa Manjari' and 'Banamali' are the combination of prose and poetic expression. The other work 'Padmini' was a historical poem consisting of 7 episodes and 'Chittavikasa' was a collection of various lyrics. Her writings earned her due recognition. She was honoured with the award 'Kabita Manorama' by the Raja of Bamanda.¹⁴ From analysis, it shows that the poetry of Sulochana Dei mainly dealt with human love and love for nature and transcendental thoughts. Her poems like 'Atrupty', 'Baidhabi', 'Premamaya', 'Barsarittu', 'Phulara bhagya' etc were highly appreciated.

She was an ardent supporter of women awakening which was reflected in her essays like 'Nari Samasya O Siksha', 'Desaseba', 'Nari Sikshara Aaba Syakata', 'Narira Acharana O Karttavya' etc. It is evident from her writings that she was an undaunted crusader of women's liberation.

Besides these few women litterateurs, several other women writers contributed to the enrichment of the Odia society. One of them was Narmada Kar who translated Tolstoy's writings like 'Bandi', 'Bibadabhanjana', 'Parinam', 'Dandabidhana', 'Trushna', 'Kuhuka' and 'Shanti' etc. Her sister Pratibha Devi translated Ivan Turgenev's 'A dream' and named 'Dream'. She also translated 'Bidesi Kavyagatha' from 'Peter Bell'. Apart from, Golapa's 'Purnima Rajani', 'Sarama' of Nagendrabala Saraswati, the story 'Apa' of Suprabha Devi and 'Devadarsana' of Narmada Devi etc immensely contributed to the intellectual progress of Odia society and stirring among women.

13. Conclusion :

The women litterateur attempted to enlighten the conservative Odia society to open the windows for new ideas and to deliver them from social bondage so that they could participate in the changing social ambience. They not only focused on the condition of women in their secluded household but also inspired them to come forward to face the challenges of modernity. They also educated the womenfolk and the nation through their writings. Through their writings, they could project various problems engrossing the society in general and the womenfolk in particular.

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