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EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN : A STUDY OF WESTERN ODISHA

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Abstract :

In the history of mankind celebrated women were not only affectionate mother and good housewives they not only served their husbands as devoted wives and were worshiped as ideal women. The concept of the women's empowerment is the outcome of several important critiques and debates generated by the women's movement throughout the world particularly by the third world feminists. The empowerment approach was first clearly articulated in 1985 by Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) this term received prominence in early nineties in western countries.

In the primitive society a time was there when men and women used to live mostly like animals without the institution of marriage. The Indian literature further high-light the fact that primitive men even Indo-Aryans, wanted to marry not out of sexual urge, but to assert their property right on women. As long as a women lived with a man and worked for him. She was considered his property.

Keywords : Empowerment, Liberation, Primitive, Satyagraha, Tantric.

1. Introduction :

Man and Women are the two integral part of a single entity that is society inseparable from one another. We cannot think of the creation in absence of one of them. Since 1910 all over the world has been observing the International Women's Day on the 8th march of every year, Yet to day when the women are neglected, illtreated, humiliated, insulted and burned . But if we go through the pages of the history of civilization we find the talents of women show continuously in the fields of culture, literature, politics, administrations, religions, services to mankind, science and social reforms.

In the history of mankind celebrated women were not only affectionate mother, and good housewives they not only served their husbands as devoted wives and were worshipped as ideal women. They also looked after the administration of the country efficiently. They fight on the battle-field, went out to the outer space and showed their achievement in the field of science, literature, art, architecture, music, dance, acting and

the like. As such in all the ages women had an extra-ordinary role to play in the development of civilization. Western Odisha was no exception to this general run of things.

The concept of the women's empowerment is the outcome of several important critiques and debate generated by the women's movement through the world particularly by the third world feminists. Its source can be traced from the interaction between feminism and the concept of 'population education' develop in Latin America in the 1970.¹ The concept of women's empowerment has its roots through out the world in men's movement.

The empowerment approach was first clearly articulated in 1985 by Development Alternative with Women for a New Era(DAWN) this term received prominence in early nineties in western countries. In India the Central Government in its welfare programmes shifted the concept of development to empowerment only in the nineth plan (1997-2002) and observed the year 2001 as 'Women Empowerment'.²

2. Need of the Study :

Empowerment of women is to empower women to undertake initiative to play an effective role in the decision making bodied and development programmes in a democratic political system. The every concept of empowerment of women which is based on equality between sex as in a conscious and continues process comprising enhancement of skills, capacity building, going self-confidence and meaningful participation in decision making women empowerment may be considered as a challenging task as we need to acknowledge the fact that gender based discrimination is a deep rooted social malice practice in many forms since thousands of years'. The malice is not going to go away in a few year's by attempts.³

There are remarkable changes in the role of women in family and politics. The emergence of this new trend changed the perspective of participation of women in polities and laid foundation for the empowerment of women in democratic political system. Empowerment is a process of awareness and capacity building decision making power, control and transformative action. Empowerment of women signifies harnessing women power by conscientizing their tremendous potential and encouraging them to work to words attaining a dignified and satisfying way of life through confidence and competence as person with self-respect, rights and responsibilities. Empowerment is a concept was introduce at the International Women's Conference at Nairobi in 1985.⁴ The conference defined empowerment as "A redistribution of social power and control of resources in favour of women. Empowerment is a multi-faceted process which encompasses many aspects i.e enchancing awaransess, increasing, access to resources of economics, social and political etc".

3. Position of Women in Indian Society :

Empowerment of women as essential to emancipate women from the social evils called traditional and cultural, customs, women are marginalized over the years together at various stages and they are branded as weaker section and are kept aside from reaching the forefront. At this juncture the empowerment of women is required to increase awareness and capacity building for their grater participatation in the decision making and transformation.⁵

In the primitive society a time was there when men and women used to live mostly like animals without the institution of marriage. The Indian literatures further high-light the fact that primitive men, even Indo-Aryans, wanted to marry, not out of sexual urge, but to assert their property rights on women. As long as a women lived with a man and worked for him. She was considered his property.

The position of women is Indian during the Prevedic, Rig-vedic, later-vedic and Puranic Ages needs a discussion so as to give as idea of the status and position of women in Odisha during this period. Right from very ancient times Indian in her long social, political and cultural, history has produce great women,ranging from rishis to states women, from great warior queen to ideal housewives. The majority of women,however, suffered from ignorance and poverty.

The sacred literature like the vedas of the ancient Aryan reveal the political, social, religious and economic conditions of the women. The Rig-Vedas the earliest of the four, contains a full account of some of the Indo-Aryan who settled in the Punjab between 1200 B.C to 1000 B.C.⁶

It was during the age of the Ramayan and the Mahabharat that the position in Indian underwent a great change. They were esteemed highly. The paragons of feminism perfection of this age were Ahalya, Kunti, Dropadi, Tara and Mandodari. In a Sanskrit sloka it is said that if a person recite everyday the names of those five women celebrities, all his sins will be wasted away. Ofcourse, circumstances forces them to have marital relationship with more than one person. Yet it was not considered illegal then as various women of a high order. A brief resume of each one of them is given below to give an idea of their status in the society.

4. Position of Women in Vedic Period :

In the Rig Vedic Age one important feature was the participation of women in the intellectual honour bath in the vedas and the Upanisads. Mention may be made of some talented ladies like Visvavara, Apala, Lopamudra, Sikara, Nivavari, Shashiyasi, Ghosha, Sachi, Soma of the hymns of the Rig Veda were composed by them. Some of them rose to the rank of Rishi, Apala and Vishvavara were poetess. Both of them belong to the Atri family. While Vishvavara has praised Agni to regulated domestic relations between husband and wife, Apala in her poems has praised India.⁷

Lopamudra and Shashiyasi were two other poetes of the time . Ghosha was another, She happened to be the daughter of the king Kashivan, who was also a Rishi, Ghosha was said to have suffered from leprosy. So she could not marry. But when in her beautiful poetry she praised Asvini, the godly physician of the heavens, he was pleased and cured her and provided her with a husband.⁸

Education in this period aimed at the attained of the highest knowledge that of the Atman, the absolute or self realization Gargi and Maitriyi represented the enlightened women of the time.

The girl was given freedom of selecting her wife's partner. The Greek writer Nearchus has also referred to women being brought forward by their fathers for selection of the partners. Girls were usually married after attaining the age of puberty . Instances of child marriage were few. The essential rites in a marriage ceremony during that period were solemn handing over of the maiden by the father (Kanyadan), the joining of the right hand of the bride with that of the bridegroom (Panigrahan) , the offering of libation to the sacrificial fire and the three fold circumambulation of the fire, the seven steps taken together by the wedding pair (Saptapadi) and finally the taking away of the bridegroom. All this rites have continued even to this day.⁹

The women of vedic Indian in general well educated, enlightened and cultured. They used to receive systematic education. A father used to send his daughters to Gurukula Ashrams where they studied along with boys. They were termed as Bramhacharinis. The Atharva Veda insists on a women marrying only after the completion of her education. Women were at times referred to as Acharyani and Upadhyani as they were competent to perform sacrifices and read the Vedas. The ancient forest universities educated girls along with the boys. "It was in these universities ." writes Dr. Radhakrishna as "that there evolved the beginning of the sublime idealism of Indian."¹⁰ The girls used to study the vedic texts after the sacred thread initiation which was performed at the age of eight just as in the case of the girls was not performed as the marriage ceremony was considered equivalent to the Upanayana for women.

5. Empowerment of Women in Odisha :

It was during the Bhaumakara rule (736 A.D to 945 A.D) in Odisha that women played a distinguished role like the women of all other tribes, those of the Bhauyans enjoys greater freedom than the caste Hindu women.¹¹ It is found that seven queens of the Bhaumakaras dynasty rules over Odisha. This dynasty was fortunate to have six widowed queens and one unmarried princess during monarchs. They were Tribhuvanamahadevi-1, Prihimahadevi alias Tribhuvanamahadevi-ii, Tribhuvanamahadevi-iii (widow queen of

Sivakara, iii) Gaurimahadevi, Dandimahadevi of Shivakaradeva and Gourimahadevi), Vakulaniadevi and Dharmamahadevi. All of them ruled with full regal status. The accession of seven female rulers belonging to a single dynasty is indeed an unprecedented event in the history of India.¹²

6. Empowerment of Women in Western Odisha :

Western Odisha is a territory in western part of Odisha consist of the distict of Bargarh, Boudh, Deogarh, Jharsuguda, Kalahandi, Nuapada, Sambalpur, Sonepur, Sundargarh and Athammik of Anugul distict. It is a vast geographical area exhibiting a great degree of cultural uniformity in term of demograohy and life-style . 1st August is observing as “Sambalpuri Din” or “Sambalpuri Day “. This geographical area is also recognised by the state government of Odisha as the area under Western Odisha Development Council (WODC).

7. Pre and Post Independence Era :

Toward the end of the ancient period the Hindu system of education developed two main types of learning centres. The Tol or Pathshala was the Hindhu school of higher learning. It imported instruction though Sanskrit and Provided a curriculum which covered all sectors of traditional classical learning.¹³

A study of contempary literature, religious or otherwise, tell us much about the inner life and thoughts of the people and also of the state of learning, acquired by women who flourishing in religious circles and courts of king.

Some scholars are of the opinion that Tantric Buddhism originated in Odisha and so popular in Western Odisha. In the 8th century A.D.¹⁴ Indrabhuti was the king of Uddiyayanas and a disciple of one Kambalpada and Anang Vajra. , Acharya Indrabhuti who succeded Ananga Vajra was the king of Sambalpur, Identified with Sambalpur of Odisha, one of the two dominions into which Uddiyana was divided. The other division of Uddiyana was modern Sonepur. At that time it was ruled by Jalandra. While he ruled over this kingdom, Indrabhuti organised the Mantrayaana Buddhisim which was also a known as Vajrayana.¹⁵

8. Laxmikara :

Princess Laxmikara married the son of Jalandara, the ruler of Lankapuri. She was a disciple of Acharya Indrabhuti and a famous luminary of Tantric Buddhism. She was also regarded as one of the 84 sidhas. In the spiritual leadership, Acharya Indrabhuti, the great Vajrayanist was succeeded by his sister-cum-disciple Laxmikara. She was also the author of several works. She showed remarkable boldness in preaching her own peculiar theories in a small but interesting work entitled Advayasidhi written in Sanskrit.¹⁶ In it she advocated a religious principle which was a reaction against the principle advocated by Indrabhuti in Vajrayana. She is believed to have been connected with the initial development and the preaching Sahajayana. Laxmikara debarred yogic practices and the necessity of deeper knowledge of the five Dhayani Buddhas or worshipping the Tathagatas in her Sahajayanas. Her ideology went against all sorts of traditional and moral injunctions which constituted the then social system. Thus in the evolution of Buddhism, mysticism Laxmikara stands out as a finger past cowards Sahajayana.¹⁷ Laxmikara was a great scholar of Buddhism. She has to prominent in Vajrayana Buddhist as well as she was to create a new sect like Sahajayana. Sahajayana was so popular in Western Odisha. Laxmikara has seven popular maiden disciple from Sambalpur, Balangir, Sonepur, Binka like Nitei Dhobeni, Kinadei Maluni, Lahukuti Luhurani, Sukuti Chamaruni, Shua Teluni, Ganga Gauduni, Patarpindha Sahuruni.¹⁸ The Sahajayana sect of Buddhism was so popular in Western Odisha only. It was spread among the eastern part of Asia like Tibet, Nepal, Mongolia, Sikkim. She was an eminent scholar and she wrote 27 tantric texts. Historians suggest that she was born in 729 AD.¹⁹

9. Rani Ratna Kumari :

Though a part of the Medieval Odisha empire of the Gangas and Suryvansis, Gajapatis, Sambalpur had actually flourished as a powerful kingdom under the Chauhan rule in the 16th and 17th century.

Resistant movement was so popular all over the country. In the beginning of the 19th century, when RaniRatna Kumari came into limelight of Sambalpur kingdom. She was the wife of last independent king Jayant Singh of Sambalpur.

Ratna Kumari was not a nationalist in the modern sense of the term. The word had not come into vogue at that time. Moreover she allied with the British and even collaborated with them in fighting the Marathas. Her place in history of Sambalpur is important because she resisted the occupation of Marathas and nurtured the tradition of resistance that developed afterwards. The anti-resistance movement against alien occupation began. A climate of struggle against the foreigners was created whether it was the Marathas in the beginning or the British later on.²⁰

10. Mohan Kumari :

From 1817 to 1849, Sambalpur remained under the suzerainty of the British East India Company although the Chauhan ruler Jayant Singh was immediately to the 'Gaddi' or throne. During the next ruler Maharaj Sai, the overlordship of the adjoining independent Garjat states was taken away by the British. Maharaj Sai died in 1827 without a male successor. The British nominated to the throne Mohan Kumari, the widow of the deceased ruler. She was the first women ruler of the Chauhan dynasty of Sambalpur.²¹ In 1833 she was deposed on grounds of serious complaints against her and continuous disturbances in the states. She was sent to cuttack and Narayan Singh was seated on the throne , who was neither popular nor an able admistrator.

11. Anjana Sai :

Anjana Sai , the one and only maiden sister of Surendra Sai had an important role in the freedom struggle of Sambalpur. She played a key role in the revolution of Surendra Sai. She had also distributed foods and other necessary goods and most probably the secret news to Surendra Sai and his associates launched resistance movements against British over the throne of Sambalpur. She was also dedicated her life for the nation.

12. Krishna Devi :

Women of Western Odisha have played a significant role during the freedom movement. In Sambalpur the Satyagraha movement was started in 1921, a large number of people were participated. But prior to the first visit of Mahatma Gandhi with Kasturba in 1928 to Sambalpur.²² Gandhiji's visited Krishna Devi, a Punjabi women, came to Sambalpur with her husband who was a businessman. She had played a leading role to inspire the people of this area. Earlier she had taken part in Satyagraha at Raipur. Under the leadership of Krishna Devi the women of Sambalpur assembled at a special meeting held in the honour of Mahatma Gandhi and Kasturba. This was the first ever women gathering in the history of freedom movement of Sambalpur. When she was addressing to a Mammoth Peasant Conference at Budharaja in March 1931. She was arrested and sent to jail.²³

After releasing from jail, she visited Bargarh. The women of Bargarh organised a grand meeting in honour of Krishna Devi. She stayed there sometime and created political consciousness among the Congress workers. At that time, Fakira Behera donated his Bargarh residence for Congress office and it was denominated as "Krishna Bhawan". She inaugurated the first Congress office in Bargarh. By that time, this bhawan was the only training centre for Congress worker in Western Odisha.

Many women were inspired by Krishna Devi to join in the congress movement. Mention may be made of Jambuvati Pattnaik, wife of famous freedom fighter Bhagirathi Pattnaik of Barpali, Gandhavi Devi, Daughter-in-law of Fakira Behera of Baltikira, Ila Meher, the wife of Kunja Bihari of Tukurla, Shreeyabati Devi, wife of freedom fighter, Ghanashyam Panigrahi of Manpur and so on as many women leaders. She even presided over the Dandi Diwas at Gandhi Ghat in Sambalpur on March 1931.²⁴

13. Jambuvati Devi :

This courageous woman freedom fighter from Western Odisha was born on 9th November, 1886 at Binka.²⁵ Though she had little schooling but was highly intelligent and took a prominent role in arousing the women in Western Odisha to participate in the freedom struggle. Her husband, Bhagirathi Pattnaik, was also a freedom fighter, was the motivational force that inspired Jambuvati Devi to join the freedom struggle movement.

Her first phase of freedom struggle started in 1930 when she along with ten women satyagrahis of Sambalpur participated in the Salt Satyagraha in Baleswar. In 1931, she courageously hoisted the national flag on January 26 in Barpali against the opposition of British forces. Along with her husband, she moved from door to door to spread the message of Gandhi and stimulated the people's sentiment against the British government by asking them to use Indian goods and boycott foreign goods. On 2 March, 1931, she with the local farmers organised a huge farmer's rally which, the government resulting in her arrest along with many workers.

After this, she went to Jharsuguda where she organised other freedom fighters to stage picketing against the sale of Foreign liquor. This had the desired effect which motivated the picketing. Later she was given the responsibility to collect funds for the 'Seva Dal' and train its volunteers whose objective was to arouse the spirit of freedom struggle among the women in Bargarh. Then she along with other they organised a massive Satyagraha. On 22 September 1933, she was arrested along with her husband Bhagirathi Pattanaik and son Prafulla Pattanaik while picketing before the foreign liquor shop at Marwari Pada in Samablpur. She was sent to Bhagalpur jail for 5 months. After her release, she along with her husband and son joined a group of volunteers in distributing relief to the victims of the earthquake in Munger in Bihar. There she had the opportunity to meet Gandhi and Nehru. On 4 May 1934, she mobilised a group of Harijans in Jharsuguda to welcome Gandhi to Jharsuguda railway station on his visit there. Then in 1940, she set up a tribal ashram in Amadapada in Santalpagana in Bihar to educate the tribal and arouse national consciousness among them for the proposed Congress session in Puri, she trained the volunteers in Bargarh where she was known as 'Ashram Mata' for her role in monitoring the Ashram. In 1938, when she joined the Satyagraha in Sambalpur she was arrested along with her husband and son.

In 1942, during the Quit India Movement, she in spite of her ill health surrounded the District court of Dumkar in Bihar along with her husband and son. But she was released on account of her ill health. She died on 15 July, 1943 in Bihar.²⁶

14. Prabhavati Devi :

Among the great leader of modern Sambalpur, Pravabati Devi occupied an important place. She was a prominent leader of the Freedom Movement and a famous Social Worker. Pravabati Devi was the daughter of Dhanapati Das and Manika Devi of Nayakpara of Bargarh on a full moon day i.e. Kumar Purnima of the Hindu month of Aswin corresponding to 18th October 1910.²⁷ She studied up to class five. She became a widow at the aged the of 10. The whole world seemed to have changed for her when her child husband died.²⁸ The conservative Brahminical tradition could not keep her in the four walls of her home. Being inspired by Fakira Behera the then congress leader, She was noticed by Malati Devi in 1937, Who visited Bargarh to address a meeting on the river bank of Jira to whom she join the organisation Malati Devi took her to Bari Ashram and participated in the Satyagraha spinning and weaving, cottage industry, adult education and Khadi.²⁹

After her return to her home, she was isolated by society as her life in Bari was viewed with suspicion by her conservative family. But with a few liberal minded Social Worker and Freedom Fighter such as Fakir Behera, Narasingh Guru, Dayananda Sathapathy, and Ghanashyam Panigrahi Of Western Odisha she joined the freedom struggle. She worked for 15 days with Gandhi at Wardha Ashram.³⁰ Pravabati Devi participated in Quit India Movement at the age of 26. She was arrested by police on 23 August, 1943 due to circulation of congress propaganda and pamphlets and sent to Sambalpur jail for six months.³¹ Within three days of her end of the jail term, she was arrested and kept in Sambalpur jail for one year, where she met other freedom fighters of Sambalpur like Ghanashyam Panigrahi, Laxminarayan Mishra, Nrusingh Mishra, Dayananda Sathapathy and also Parvabati Giri. She was then transferred to Cuttack Jail, where she found Rama Devi, Malati Choudhury and other freedom fighters for her company. After returning from jail, she opened a Matrumangal Center at Bargarh in 1945.³² She joined Bhoodan Movement and had active participation in foot marching of Binova Bhawe.

After independence, she devoted her self completely for service of the people. In 1992 she also started an orphan that rehabilitated fifty to sixty children. This welfare center received financial assistance from the government and Kasturba Trust. Pravabati Devi, however, had devoted the last fifty years of her life to the cause of the poor and the needy. Many organisations in course of time, came forward to recognise her contribution to the welfare of the society and honoured her at various places. After being honoured by Indra Gandhi the then, prime minister of India with a *tamrapatra* for her contributions to the Freedom Fighters in 1972, the all India freedom fighter Smriti at Cuttack with Ratra Gaurav Upadhi in 1984, the Sambalpur University awarded her an honorary Doctor of Laws degree in 1998, where she received the degree from the then the Governor of Odisha, Dr. C. Rangarajan. Pravabati Devi passed away on the 13th of November 1998 at the Chachanpali Balaniketan.³³

15. Parbatigiri :

Parbati Giri, the Mother Teresa of Western Odisha also known as Banhi-Kanya (daughter of fire). She was a well known Odisha-born freedom fighter. She strove for India's independence and after it was attained, she devoted the rest of her life to humanitarian service. On January 19, 1926, Parbati Giri was born in Samlaipadar village in the Bijepur block of the Bargarh district, Odisha. In the village, she was referred to as "Jakhei" by the locals. Parbati's family provided her with the desire and will to join the war for independence, as her uncle Ramchandra Giri was a fellow freedom fighter. She frequently met freedom fighters like Laxmi Narayan Mishra, Durga Prasad Guru, Bhagirathi Pattanaik, Jambobati Pattnaik and Fakira Behera.³⁴

Parbati left her home on January 14, 1938 to join the Bari Ashram. Parbati met Rama Devi and Gopabandhu Choudhury in person at Bari Ashram. Over the course of two years, she received the necessary Satyagrahi training in the Ashram. After being trained in weaving Parbati Giri moved from village to village, like Samlaipadar, Sarandapali, Dalaipara of Sambalpur town to impart training on weaving, spinning and knitting. She actively participated in Khadi Andolana of Mahatma Gandhi. The people like Ramchandra Giri, Ujjal Giri, Kubera Giri and Dwitya Giri were sent to Bengal jail as prisoners while taking part in the freedom movement. Parbati Giri was arrested for her anti-government activities. She stayed one year with Prabhavati Devi. Later on Prabhavati Devi was shifted to Cuttack jail. The Quit India Movement was started in the year 1942. Once young Parbati Giri accompanied by a group of boys anti-British slogans. But due to her minor age, the police personnel could not be able to arrest her and sent to Bargarh jail.

She was also identified as a social reformer, inspired by the high ideas of Mahatma Gandhi. After India's independence she dedicated her life for the upliftment of poor and destitute. She established Kasturba Matruniketan at Nrusinghnath, Paikmal in Bargarh district. Although she had come from a small village of Western Odisha, her unflinching dedication to the cause of humanity would make her remembered by the people of the land. She has occupied a unique place in the history of India. For the young service she got Rashtragaurav and honorary "D.Litt" from the Sambalpur University. She died in the year 1998.³⁵

16. Gurubari Meher :

Gurubari Meher of Sonepur, a valiant women freedom fighter had played an important role in the freedom struggle like other women Satyagrahis of Western Odisha. The movement spearheaded by Gurubari Meher was an offshoot of the Praja Mandal movement inaugurated in Cuttack in 1938. This branch was launched for the first time at Sonepur under the leadership of Laxman Satpathy. It was on January 28, 1947, a few days preceding independence the government of princely state of Sonepur let loose a reign of terror at Binka town. People got engaged against the king of Sonepur state for his pro-British stance. Nearly 20,000 freedom fighters led by Gurubari Meher organised a mass movement against the king. Gurubari marched forward to protest against the extra cess charged on various goods. She was shot by the police following which her anti-royal followers destroyed the royal regime. The story of Gurubari Meher is a little known story. Her valiant and bravery only came to light when her story was unveiled by historians like Prof. Sadhu Charan Panda and Prof. Siba Prasad Nanda following the news clip in Dainika Asha, a local newspaper published from Sambalpur.³⁶

17. Rukmini Devi Lath :

Rukmini Devi, the wife of freedom fighter Prahallad Rajnath of Kansaripada, Sambalpur was extending all types of help to the congress leader. During the year 1930 her husband was working for Congress. People avoided the Congress party for fear of punishment, when Government banned the congress. However, Rukmini Devi for the interest of her husband prepared food for them and gave shelter to them in the critical moment.

8. Conclusion :

Many Freedom fighters of this region have been neglected and the study tends to enlighten their dedication and selfless work for motherland during British rule. After independent the same traters managed to hold the administrative and electoral bodies and behave them as in pre and post independence period only a few freedom fighters that were elected by people or got higher post command some mix respect and feeling but other were derogated and disqusted. Therefore it is high time we woke to the reality it will throw new light on the violence and valour of freedom fighters and behind the vauguard that made the movement successful and remained obscured and forgotten. History will resound with singing the song of glory and devotion of these eminent women freedom fighters who have dedicated their life to Motherland.

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