

Sarala Devi

The Biplababi of Orissa

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During the early decades of the 20th century, several factors—including the movement for the preservation of the Oriya language, the rise of Oriya regional consciousness, the advent of the Brahma Samaj, the campaign for widow remarriage, the legal abolition of untouchability and the struggle for national independence—brought women writers in Orissa into the hitherto closed public domain. Though the literary histories of Orissa have ignored them, prominent Oriya women writers such as Kokila Devi, Reba Ray, Narmada Kar, Pratibha Devi, Kuntala Kumari Sabat, Sita Devi Khadanga, Sarala Devi and Bidyut Prabha carved out an alternative literary tradition in Orissa.¹ Their writings interface with many progressive events in the state, such as the rise of female education, trade union movements and women's participation in various aspects of civic and political life.

Documenting the life and works of Sarala Devi is one way of acknowledging other women authors. The achievements of Sarala Devi are amazing considering her modest educational background. Few women in modern Orissa can rival her as a writer, feminist and social activist. Sarala had humble schooling in a village *pathasala* (primary school) and made her mark in public life against great odds. By the time she died,

she had carved out a place for herself in all the major literary and social movements in the Orissa of her time.

Early Years

Born into a conservative “Karan” (Kayastha) family on August 9, 1904, Sarala was raised by her father's elder brother, Balamukunda Kanungo, who was a deputy collector. From she evinced the beginning a keen interest in education. Right from her childhood, she rebelled against restrictions. The womenfolk in her *zamindar* (landed) family were conservative and predictably regarded Sarala's defiant nature as a social aberration. She refused to cover her head with her sari and reacted vehemently against many of the prevailing social taboos. Though spiritual by

temperament, she developed strong reservations against religion when she came across this scriptural indictment: “Woman is the veritable gateway to hell.”² In an autobiographical essay entitled *The Story of My Revolutionary Life*, she recorded some of the memories of her early childhood. “The God who doesn't belong to woman,” she wrote, “and is only a property of man, the sin in whose committing only woman becomes fallen and a man remains untouched, that religion and that custom gradually became bereft of meaning for me.”³

With the help of a tutor, Sarala studied up to class VI. Through her own effort, she read many Bengali books and became acquainted with the works of Bankim Chandra, Rabindranath Tagore and Sarat Chandra. She was also inspired by the writings of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Kesav Chandra Sen, Dayananda Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Gopal Krishna Gokhale. An early marriage, however, put a stop to her formal education. She was married to Bhagirathi Mahapatra, the son of a *zamindar* at Jagatsingpur in Cuttack district. The marriage proved to be a blessing as Bhagirathi, patriotic and liberal-minded, stood by Sarala in all her pursuits.

Political Activism

The 35th session of the Indian National Congress at Nagpur,



Sarala Devi

which the couple attended along with 14,000 delegates marked a turning point in her life. Sarala returned from the session filled with zeal for the liberation of the country. One of the immediate consequences of their participation at the Nagpur session was the formation of the Utkal Pradesh Congress Committee. Soon after this, during Gandhiji's visit to Orissa, Sarala attended a special meeting organised at Binod Bihari, Cuttack, exclusively for about 40 women. She then went on to take a leading part in the non-cooperation movement in Orissa. Sarala travelled extensively, collecting contributions for the Tilak Swaraj Fund. In this mission, she found worthy companions in several Oriya women writer-activists such as Sailabala Das, Kuntala Kumari Sabat and Rama Devi.

Through campaigns and meetings, an effort was made in Orissa to mobilise women into the national movement. At the initiative of Lavanyavati Devi, daughter of the distinguished writer Gopal Chandra Praharaj, a women's association was formed. It came to be known as Mahila Bandhu Samiti.

Sarala's participation in the struggle for independence⁴ was marked by a rare sense of commitment. She took part in the Salt Satyagraha at a place called Inchudi in Balasore.⁵ Later, she toured many districts of Orissa. It was an unusual sight to observe a woman from what was then considered an aristocratic background, fending for herself on all her journeys. At Ganjam, she was imprisoned by the British at the Chhatrapur jail. She was subsequently transferred to the Vellore jail and released after six months. On December 8, 1930, she

returned to Cuttack and was given a triumphant public reception organised by fellow activist Binapani Devi.

After participating in the Salt Satyagraha, Sarala joined hands with Kuntala Kumari, Basanta Kumari Devi, Sarojini Choudhury, Kokila Devi and Jahnavi Devi to form the Nikhil Utkal Nari Parishad, which consisted of 30 active members and included representatives from Puri, Ganjam, Cuttack and Balasore. Sarala wrote plays, exhorting women to come out into the public domain. The *Utkal Deepika*, a local daily reported on November 7, 1931. "She desires to involve Oriya women in her plays. She believes that Oriya women are remaining in the background. They feel shy to come out. If they can be involved in acting in plays, they will no longer feel different. That is why Sarala is going to many Oriya houses on her mission."⁶

Similarly, Sarala also involved herself in the activities of the Utkal Congress Samyavadi Karmi Sangha⁷, a Marxist organisation committed to the welfare of the peasantry. It was led by activists such as Bhagabati Charan Panigrahy, Nabakrishna Choudhury Bhubananda Das, Manmohan Choudhury, Surendranath Dwivedy and Malati Choudhury. Sarala took part in many meetings. Despite hailing from a *zamindari* background, she raised her voice against the tyranny of the *zamindars*. Similarly, she played a leading part in the prohibition and *swadeshi* movements, and also in the campaign against untouchability. Overjoyed by the success of the Mahila Bandhu Samiti, Sarala said: "I feel gratified that my cherished dream of the past has been finally realised. It was truly beyond my expectation that the women of Utkal would

one day find recognition. This is a new chapter in the history of Orissa. Which lover of the nation would not be filled with joy in seeing the rise of the woman's voice? There was a ray of hope in the depressed heart, it is worth knowing that the effort might be negligible but that the soul of an institution always remains alive."⁸

When the separate province of Orissa was formed on April 1, 1936, Sarala Devi was elected to the Assembly as the first woman member from Orissa. As a member of the legislature, she took an active part in piloting bills related to women's education⁹ and welfare. She also fought against practices such as child marriage. As a result, the bill amending the Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed. To combat the menace of dowry, she introduced a bill against this evil in 1939. She remained an activist till the very end.

Sarala the Writer

Though many women produced significant writing in Orissa prior to her, Sarala Devi was one of the first women authors to show political awareness. Most of her predecessors wrote religious and spiritual poetry which eschewed political and women's concerns. For instance, Sulakshana Devi of Tigriria (born in 1829) composed a collection of poems entitled, *Parijatamala*. Similarly, Suchitra Devi (born in 1881) of Puri district published an anthology called *Kavita Lahiri* in 1901 and Annapurna Devi (born in 1883) of Chikiti, Ganjam district, wrote devotional songs. There were also women authors like Pitambari Devi, a companion of Gopal Chandra Praharaj—the first lexicographer of Orissa—who illustrated the status of contemporary women in her autobiographical writings.

Sarala thus inherited a female literary tradition. She tried her hand at many genres including poetry, drama and fiction. However, it is mostly as an essayist and letter writer that she excelled and put to effective use her fiery spirit as a rebel, social activist and reformer. Some of her articles were published in such Bengali journals as *Debjani*. Among her published works in Oriya¹⁰ are *Utkalaa Nari Samasya* (The Problems of the Women of Orissa) 1934, *Narira Dabi* (The Rights of Women) 1934, *Bharatiya Mahila Prasanga*, (About the women of India) 1935, *Rabindra Puja* (A Homage to Rabindranath), *Beera Ramani* (The Women of Valour) 1949 and *Bishwa Biplabani* (The Great Female Revolutionaries of the World) 1930. As a close associate of Annanda Shankar Ray, who wrote both in Oriya and Bengali, Sarala was a leading member of the Oriya romantic movement. She was one of the six authors who jointly wrote the novel *Basanti*.

In all her varied writings, Sarala displayed maturity of vision, sharp perception and an extraordinary range of interests. A constantly questioning mind led to a defiance of the accepted forms of received wisdom, especially with regard to the position of women in society. At Vellore jail in 1936, Sarala lived with fellow—prisoners like Durgabai Deshmukh, whom she describes admiringly as a “clever, pretty, active, young Andhra lady, a dictator of the Satyagraha movement in Madras”.¹¹

In a letter to “Dear Bhagu babu”, her husband, Sarala suggests how her life behind bars was a productive period in her political schooling. Prison life provided useful time for music, spinning

and instruction in languages—all of which she would put to effective use in her career as a leader and an activist. From far away Vellore, she urges her husband to honour the pact they had made before they plunged together into the freedom struggle, that their little son Tikun should be well taken care of, and that both father and son ought to stay in Alaknanda Ashram until she returned from jail. For, she maintained, “It would be better if you could also reside in the Ashram along with the child so that he might not feel lonely.”

Sarala’s profile of women of valour and distinction, presented in *Beera Ramani*, compares favourably with the best of this genre anywhere and reminds us of Ellen Moers’ critical work *Literary Women*. Prescribed at one time as a high-school textbook in Orissa, Sarala’s 90 page book has inspiring biographies of Lakshmi Bai, Bundi Mahishi, Karma Devi, Krishna Kumari and Panna Devi. Through such narratives, Sarala wished Oriya women to emulate the examples of contemporary women leaders like Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya, Sarala Devi Choudhurani, Mridu Lakshmi Reddy and others active on the national scene.

Similarly, in *Bishwa Biplabani*, Sarala brings to bear her wide reading and offers the narratives of several women of world stature, such as Kalpana Dutta of former East Bengal, an associate of Surya Sen of the famous Chittagong Armoury Case. There are other accounts, like that of Sophia Bardina who fought the oppressive Russian Tsar, and that of Hazalipij of Romania. She also chronicles the legacy of the Oriya princess, Suka Devi of Banki, and other women such as Lakshmi Bai, Ahilyabai and Janabai at the national level. As Sarala explains

in the preface to the book: “It is to provide worthy role models for the revolutionary-minded young women in Orissa that I have published this book.”

Similarly, in the foreword to her book, *The Problems of Women in Orissa*, Sarala’s views are marked by a deep sympathy and concern for women’s plight: “As I throw my gaze everywhere about the progress of women in Orissa, my vision gets blocked again and again by a dense darkness from the new moon. Nowhere can I see a faint ray of soothing moonlight. Compared to the status of women in India and the world, where lies that of Orissa? And how far has it expanded? The right answer to such questions surely belongs to those who share an intimate knowledge of the world of women.”¹²

In her book, *Narira Dabi*, Sarala outlines a manifesto for women’s empowerment. Comparable to Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, what impresses us is the breadth of her extraordinary knowledge of contemporary history, law and social life both in India and abroad. In voicing her anger against the subordination of women and marital rape, Sarala distinctly emerges as a revolutionary woman. Far ahead of her times, her life and career deserve the attention of an all-India audience.

Sarala begins her essay in a matter-of-fact manner: “There is much agitation in today’s world over the question of women’s independence. Both in the West as well as in the East, one hears, in one voice, the demand that women should become free. The campaign has made headway in the western countries. In the East, however, it is still at the stage of inception. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the agitation would fructify in the near future.”¹³

After outlining the status of women from historical times, she asks indignantly: “Who is it that doesn’t know the plight of women? A woman’s place, after all, is in the recesses of her house, in the darkness of the *Antahapur*. She has no relationship with the outside world. This world evokes little interest in her. She has no way of knowing the ongoing conflicts in the world and the struggle for existence everywhere. Virtually blind, her sole business is to serve and nurse the menfolk in the family. Of course, no one is saying that nursing and service have no value. Isn’t it, however, unbecoming of civilised society to turn out coolie-like females, made to work under duress? To learn and acquire knowledge, to have pleasure in the place of work, all these are unfortunately beyond the scope of women today. Her whole world is confined within the four walls of her household. Her life revolves around food and toil. Women today are presiding deities of their kitchens. Little wonder, therefore, that whenever we are reminded of women, our attention is naturally drawn into the dark corners of houses.”

She quotes favourably some extracts from a judgement given by a court in Britain, to “satisfy” she says, “the curiosity of readers”. Justice Meccard’s judgement seems to represent Sarala’s avant-garde thinking on matters like marital rape and the right of a woman over her own body and reproductive self: “I maintain that the wife’s body can never be owned by her husband. It’s her own property and not her husband’s. She can leave her husband at her will; she can select her business or join the political party of her choice. She has full rights to decide whether or not she



Sarala Devi with her son

is going to have a child and at what point of time. No man can keep a woman under control on the basis of the fact that he is married to her. The woman of this country has won independence, she is a citizen and not a slave. She can turn her wish into action. One doesn’t get the pleasures of married life from the codes of rules and regulations. The success of marriage depends on mutual compassion, mutual consideration, mutual forgiveness, mutual sacrifice, and above all, a mutually shared morality.”

Quoting favourably from the writings of women like Annie Besant and others, Sarala exposes the pernicious hold of patriarchy, the duplicity prevailing in society, and concludes: “The main cause of the downfall of India is the attitude of disrespect shown towards women by our countrymen. Because of this regressive attitude, women of our country are deprived of education today. An illiterate woman can never give birth to a developed child. How can the nation hope to grow with children who are undeveloped, weak and ill? Even till today, the condition of women has not improved adequately: their life is

still a burden. As long as this doesn’t undergo a suitable change, and women do not receive enough time and scope to contribute to their physical and mental strength, so long would the rise and growth of India be a dream. What more could we say beyond this?”

Sarala’s interest in the gender question continues in her novel as well. In her portion of this jointly written novel, *Basanti*, she continues to regard literature primarily as a means to female emancipation and social transformation.¹⁴ Apart from Sarala, the other five authors of the novel were Harihar Mahapatra, Kalindi Charan Panigrahi, Annanda Shankar Ray, Baikunthanath Patnaik and Sarat Chandra Mukherjee, all men. These men had formed a literary association called *The Nonsense Club*, that paved the way for the formation of the *Sabua Sahitya Samiti*, which heralded the advent of romanticism in Oriya literature. In *Basanti*, the chapter written by Sarala employs the mode of dialogue between Braja and his sister-in-law, Basanti. Much of the discussion here is polemical in nature and centres on the question of the role of women within and outside the institution of marriage, the need for female education and her participation in civic and political life. The following conversation between Braja and Basanti is representative:¹⁵

Braja: To accomplish all this, surely we need to change female education everywhere!

Basanti: Of course, without education, a woman can never enjoy complete independence!

Braja: Well, when you are advocating total independence for women, you might say that she ought to abjure motherhood because that goes counter to her desire for freedom!

Basanti: You have brought in a difficult issue, Braja. Who says motherhood is contradictory to independence? A woman has never spurned motherhood! On the contrary, she has been gloried in this experience! But wherever motherhood is not a voluntary act, there the woman treats it as a burden and a prison house. And, therefore, it becomes a source of aberration. If motherhood leads to the growth of the female self, how can it be a bondage? Society has downgraded individuality for the sake of procreation. That is why there is no greatness in motherhood today. Otherwise, there is no opposition between motherhood and independence.

Braja: It seems to me that whatever you wish womankind to achieve, basically seems to be a product of your own aspirations and longings.

Basanti: Let it be! I don't wish to quarrel with your judgement.

Braja: Then do you say that to attain full emancipation is the aim of your life?

Basanti said in a firm voice: Yes!

In Search of Emancipation

Like Basanti, Sarala's life as a writer, reformer and activist was a pioneering search for emancipation for herself and for the women of Orissa.¹⁶ In 1936, she was the sole woman member in the senate of Utkal University. She was the only woman representative from Orissa in Dr Radhakrishnan's Education Commission. She was the first Oriya member in the All India Congress Committee, and she served as secretary of the Utkal Sahitya Samaj. She was elected twice to the All India Women's Conference's standing committee. She was twice awarded a literary prize by the Orissa Sahitya Academy. Nevertheless, Sarala never received her full due,

either at the state or the national level. Even today in Orissa, her works are hard to come by and many of her books are out of print. She died on October 4, 1986.

Despite the relative lack of public recognition for her many accomplishments, Sarala Devi remains one of the most inspiring examples of early literary feminism in Orissa. In her strength of character, her understanding of women's position in a patriarchal order, and her deployment of literature as the primary means to female emancipation and social change, she stands next to Kuntala Kumari Sabat. Though Kuntala excelled over her in creative literature, Sarala had a more active involvement in the society and polity of contemporary Orissa. Like Basanti, the female protagonist in the novel, Sarala remained committed till the end to both literature and women's emancipation. □

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Notes

1. Most literary histories mention the names of women writers in passing. Quite clearly, they suffer from negligence within Orissa and elsewhere. Susie Tharu's book marks a beginning but more needs to be done.

2. Quoted in Rajendra Raju, *Mahiyasi Mahila Sarala* (Oriya), Berhampur, 1995 p.14. Op.Cit. All translations are by the author.
3. Ibid pp.14-15.
4. Sarala was the Oriya woman leader who took part in the Satyagraha movement in Orissa. At times, this distinction is incorrectly accorded to Rama Devi who herself was an eminent female activist.
5. Gandhiji's visit to Balasore and Bhadrak had made a substantial impact. Its effect is felt even today in the form of a surviving Gandhi Ashram there.
6. Quoted in Raju, *Mahiyasi: Mahila Sarala* p.31.
7. Ibid
8. Raju, p.22.
9. See "Education Uplift of Women in the 19th Century Orissa" in *Our Documentary Heritage*, Vol.I. Orissa State Archives, Bhubaneswar, 1988. Also see Vikram Das, "Adi Biplabini Sarala Devi" (in Oriya), *The Samaj*, Annual Issue, 1997, pp.67-70.
10. Most of these books by Sarala Devi are not readily available now.
11. From the original manuscript of the letter. All subsequent references are from this source.
12. Raju, p.76.
13. From *Narira Dabi*, Cuttack, Hindustan Publishers, and "Narira Arthika Swadhinata" (The Economic Independence of Women) in *Sahakara*, 1934. pp.16-28; "Naritwara Pratistha" (The Establishment of Womanhood) in *Utkala Sahitya*, No.25/8.1329, pp.268-280. All references to *Narira Dabi* are from this source.
14. See Rabindra Prasad Panda. "Ushara Udaya Samia Anabagthita", *Sambada*, July 9, 1997.
15. Quoted in Panda Op.Cit.
16. There were others such as Bidyut Prabha Devi, who excelled in lending a powerful woman's voice in poetry and followed in Sarala's footsteps.

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