

Smt. Rama Devi Gopabandhu Cho

Recipient of Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Uplift and Welfare of Women and Children-1981udhuri

Shrimati Rama Devi's life is a moving saga of service in the cause of women and children. Daughter of Gopal Vallabh Das and Basant Kumari Devi of Cuttack, she was born on December 3, 1899 and was married at the age of 15 to Gopabandhu Choudhuri. Like her father, her husband was also a Deputy Magistrate, an office which he resigned in 1921 to join the freedom movement. Rama Devi decided to join him. Ardent believers in the Gandhian philosophy of rural development, they moved in 1928 to an Ashram in a village 28 miles from Cuttack where Smt. Rama Devi devoted herself to the promotion of Khadi and the welfare of women and children.

Politics had claimed the attention of Shrimati Rama Devi earlier when she joined the Indian National Congress in 1922. She suffered three prison terms between 1930 and 1932 for participating in the Salt Satyagraha movement and picketing foreign cloth and liquor shops in Cuttack. In 1930 she was elected President of the Utkal Provincial Congress Committee. She was also a member of the AICC. One of her achievements during this period was to persuade women belonging to the higher castes to abandon purdah and to give up the practice of untouchability.

Smt. Rama Devi's life-long service in rural upliftment has been many-sided. As Secretary of the Provincial Harijan Sevak Sangh in 1932 she set out with her team of women workers to train the inhabitants of the Harijan colonies, particularly the women, to handle their own sanitation problems and learn nursing. A hostel for Harijan students was started in Cuttack. Young and old women were induced to learn Hindi and campaign for the admission of Harijan children in schools. In 1934 she helped organize Mahatma Gandhi's padyatra from Puri to Bhadrak to eradicate untouchability. Gandhiji observed later :

“I have had the privilege of mixing with tens of thousands of India's women. I have seen them at work. But nowhere have I seen anything quite like what Smt. Rama Devi and her little band have been found to do so gracefully and so naturally. They have never needed or claimed any special privileges.”

Over 15 years of experience in many fields of constructive activity, buttressed by prison terms during the Non-co-operation and Civil Disobedience movements, prepared Smt. Rama Devi and her husband for bigger tasks. In 1934, they moved to Bari, a forlorn flood-prone village 75kms from Cuttack. Slowly and steadily she brought home to the people of Bari and its neighbourhood Gandhiji's message of self-reliance through khadi, cattle care, bee-keeping, village sanitation, adult education and health-care. She learnt homeopathy to provide simple and cheap medical aid to the sick. She trained several batches of women workers and let them start work centres in other villages so that in a matter of about three years the people in and around Bari woke up to the potentialities of self-effort and self-reliance.

Smt. Rama Devi had an abiding faith in the system of Basic Education. Starting on a modest scale in 1938 she built up 15 such schools in a short time and also organized a programme for teachers' training. When State help was stopped for this programme in 1939 on the Congress Party giving up office, undaunted, she managed to keep nine of them functioning with people's support. She was also a member of the Gandhi Seva Sangh during those years.

The Quit India Movement of 1942 again drew Smt. Rama Devi into politics and into prison. She returned from her two year jail term only to find her Sevagram Ashram razed to the ground by the police. Her aching heart felt the need to organize a home for the children of Congress workers who were still languishing in prisons as also for Harijan children. This was the origin of the hostel for children at Ramachandrapur near Bari.

In 1946 she revived the Basic Education schools with Government support. Soon after, when she was placed in charge of the Kasturba Trust's activities in Orissa, she, along with her women workers, set out to work in inaccessible Adivasi areas of Koraput District to eradicate yaws and leprosy among the people.

In 1952 the Bhoodan and Gramdan movement claimed the services of both Smt. Rama Devi and her husband. Accompanied by the women workers of Kasturba Trust and the Utkal Navjeevan Mandal she walked from village to village and obtained thousands of land gifts for the landless and organized constructive work in these areas. She played a leading role in organizing Vinobaji's padyatra in Orissa in 1955 and 1963. In 1958 she presided over the All India Sarvodaya Conference held at Pandharpur.

Wherever succour was needed in order to mitigate the sufferings caused by epidemics, cyclones, floods, drought, communal riots or refugee influx as during the Bangladesh War, Smt. Rama Devi and her band of devoted workers were ever ready to help. The home that she started for orphaned and abandoned children in the Kalahandi District is a living monument to her sense of compassion and service. During the cyclones of 1967 and 1971 and the drought of 1968 in many parts of Orissa, she organized relief work on the salutary principle of 'food-for-work'. She started feeding centres which took care of a large number of children and invalids.

Among other notable achievements of Smt. Rama Devi are the Balwadis which she started first in Bari and later in Cuttack with Oriya as the medium of instruction. As recently as 1978, she took the lead in founding a Cancer Detection Centre in Cuttack by the Acharya Harihar Memorial Trust. Hundreds of healthy children born to leprosy patients owe their well-being to the home which she founded for them. She was also for some time the Vice-President of the Orissa Branch of the Red Cross Society. Women abandoned or separated from their husbands have found in Smt. Rama Devi a god-mother. Scores of them are active today as trained workers in several fields of Constructive activity.

Though old in years and frail in body, Smt. Rama Devi at 81 is stout of heart and an ardent advocate of Gandhian ideals in politics and social service. She still actively guides all the Sarvodaya work in Orissa from her simple home in Cuttack, the 'Gunanidhi Ashram'.

