

Adruti Laxmibai: A Women Freedom Fighter of Ganjam District

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Abstract- The contribution of women to India's freedom struggle has long been acknowledged as a vital yet often undervalued component of the national movement. Odisha, as an integral part of the anti-colonial resistance, witnessed remarkable participation of women who challenged both foreign rule and indigenous social barriers. Among them, Adruti Laxmibai of Ganjam district occupies a distinctive position. Educated, politically conscious, and deeply inspired by the ideology of Mahatma Gandhi, she emerged as one of the foremost women freedom fighters from southern Odisha. Her participation in the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, Salt Satyagraha, and Quit India Movement, along with her later contributions as a political leader and social worker, reinforced her legacy as a catalyst for change. This paper highlights the role, leadership, sacrifice, and public service of Laxmibai within the broader framework of Odisha's freedom struggle. Drawing from secondary sources, the article re-examines her life as a representative figure of women's empowerment, nationalist awakening, and socio-political transformation in Ganjam district.

Keywords-Adruti Laxmibai; Ganjam district; Odisha freedom movement; women freedom fighters; Civil Disobedience Movement; Non-Cooperation Movement; Quit India Movement; Indian National Congress; women's empowerment.

I. INTRODUCTION

The history of India's struggle for independence is incomplete without acknowledging the strong and meaningful role played by women. Their participation in various movements manifested both political consciousness and the gradual transformation of Indian society. Odisha, though geographically peripheral, was central to the nationalistic aspirations emerging in the eastern part of India. The twentieth century marked two major developments that shaped its political landscape: the Odia movement for linguistic and administrative unification and the rise of the Indian National

Congress as a platform for mass political mobilization. These forces not only influenced the general population but also stimulated the emergence of women as active agents of change.

Earl leaders like Sailabala Das, Reba Roy, and other pioneering Odia women laid the foundation for constitutional agitation, nationalist education, and social reforms. The momentum inspired many young women from educated families to join political organizations such as the Utkal Sabha and National Association. Through participation in meetings, submission of memoranda, picketing, and mobilization of public opinion, they became crucial contributors to the rising nationalist consciousness.

Within this setting, Adruti Laxmibai emerged as an exceptional figure from Berhampur city of Ganjam district. Her story reflects the intertwined narrative of personal tragedy, political awakening, Gandhian influence, and dedicated public service. As an educated woman who aspired to study medicine, she returned to Odisha as a young widow and redirected her life toward the cause of India's independence. Her transformation from a student to a political activist and later a legislator represents a significant chapter in the socio-political history of Odisha.

The present study examines her life and contributions with a focus on her participation in freedom movements, leadership in Ganjam district, role in the Odisha Legislative Assembly, and commitment to women's empowerment.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To explore the extent of women's participation in the freedom struggle of India with special reference to Odisha.
2. To highlight the contributions of eminent female freedom fighters to nation-building.

3. To examine the leadership qualities generated by women during the freedom struggle in Odisha.
4. To analyze the contributions of Adruti Laxmibai of Ganjam district in the Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience Movements, and her overall role in India's freedom struggle.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article is based entirely on secondary sources including books, journal articles, archival documents, and historical reviews relevant to Odisha's freedom movement and Adruti Laxmibai's contributions. Secondary data provide useful insights into reconstructing her role within the broader context of the nationalist movement. The methodology involves descriptive and analytical approaches to present a coherent historical narrative.

Early Life and Education



Adruti Laxmibai was born on 12 October 1899 into a well-known family of Berhampur. Her upbringing in an intellectually active household played a significant role in shaping her worldview. She was the younger sister of V. V. Giri, who later became the President of India. The political vibrancy of her family, combined with exposure to social reform ideas, gave her a strong foundation for future activism.

After her initial schooling in Berhampur, Laxmibai pursued higher education in Calcutta, where she completed her bachelor's degree. She later joined the Christian Medical College, Vellore, intending to build a career in medicine. Her enrollment in a prestigious institution reflected both her academic capability and the progressive environment that encouraged women's advancement. However,

family responsibilities and later personal circumstances compelled her to discontinue her medical studies.

Her brief association with the Theosophical Society in Kashi further deepened her interest in philosophical and socio-political thought. Theosophy emphasized universal brotherhood, social equality, and moral upliftment ideals that resonated with her emerging nationalist sentiments.

Marriage, Widowhood, and Turn Toward Nationalism

Laxmibai married Adruti Venkateswara Rao of Rajahmundry, but the marriage was short-lived as her husband passed away within a year. Returning to Berhampur as a young widow, she faced the social constraints often imposed on widowed women. Yet, instead of succumbing to restrictive expectations, she chose an active path of public engagement.

Her family home became a centre of political activity, frequently visited by national leaders including Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Rajendra Prasad during their travels in Ganjam district. These contacts strengthened her conviction in the nationalist agenda and motivated her formal entry into the freedom struggle.

IV. ROLE IN THE FREEDOM MOVEMENT

Participation in the Non-Cooperation Movement

The arrival of Mahatma Gandhi in Odisha in 1921 served as a catalyst for local mobilization. On 29 June 1921, Gandhi addressed a large gathering at the Barracks Ground in Berhampur. Inspired by his call for nonviolent resistance, Laxmibai joined other activists in picketing foreign cloth and liquor shops. Her leadership encouraged many other women to step out of domestic boundaries and engage in public protest.

Her participation symbolized the growing visibility of women in anti-colonial activities, breaking traditional norms of seclusion and domesticity.

Civil Disobedience Movement and Salt Satyagraha

The Civil Disobedience Movement, launched in 1930, transformed Odisha into a vibrant centre of resistance. In Ganjam district, the salt satyagraha became a significant mass movement. Laxmibai played a central role in mobilizing women,

addressing public gatherings, and organizing protests against colonial restrictions on salt production.

In 1932, she joined leaders like Biswanath Das and Dibakar Pattnaik in the Individual Satyagraha campaign. Her activities earned the attention of colonial authorities, leading to her arrest on 18 January 1932. The Chhatarpur Court sentenced her to one year of imprisonment and a fine of 700 rupees. She was later transferred to Vellore Central Jail, where she served one and a half years of rigorous imprisonment.

Her incarceration strengthened her resolve and symbolized her dedication to the national cause.

Participation in the Quit India Movement

The Quit India Movement of 1942 saw an unprecedented surge of public resistance in Odisha. Laxmibai remained actively involved, urging people to reject colonial authority. When India achieved independence in 1947, she was serving a sentence in Cuttack Jail, which later became a memorial to freedom fighters.

Her repeated imprisonments highlight the risks she willingly accepted for the cause of independence.

Political Career and Public Service

Following her release, Adruti Laxmibai continued her service through political leadership. From 1930 to 1940, she remained an active member of the Indian National Congress in Odisha. She served as:

1. Vice President of the Ganjam District Congress Committee
2. President of the Berhampur Town Congress

In the first general elections of 1937, she was elected unopposed to the Odisha Legislative Assembly from the Brahmapur constituency. Her election signified both public recognition and the growing role of women in regional politics.

Between 29 May 1946 and 20 February 1952, she served first as Deputy Speaker and later as Speaker of the Odisha Legislative Assembly. As the first woman to hold these positions, she demonstrated remarkable administrative acumen and parliamentary leadership.

Contribution to Women's Empowerment

Adruti Laxmibai's commitment to social development extended beyond politics. Her advocacy for women's education was one of her most significant contributions. At the Deputy Speakers' National Conference in Kerala, she critically examined existing education policies and argued for free education for girls in Odisha. Her efforts contributed to greater enrollment and academic performance among girl students.

She was associated with several organizations including:

1. President of the Kasturba Memorial Fund (local branch)
2. Advisor to the Government Girls' High School Committee
3. Member of the State Social Welfare Board

She travelled extensively across Ganjam, Boudh, and Phulbani districts to support underprivileged students, especially girls. Her assistance to Jayamangal Ashram reflected her lifelong dedication to social welfare.

Legacy and Commemoration

Adruti Laxmibai passed away on 27 January 1986. Her life represents the journey of a woman who transformed personal adversity into public leadership. Though her contributions remain lesser known compared to prominent national figures, she occupies a vital place in Odisha's history.

The memorial inaugurated at the site of the Cuttack Jail stands as a symbolic reminder of the sacrifices made by her and other leaders. However, the lack of sustained development at the site indicates the need for renewed efforts to preserve her memory.

Her legacy continues through studies, commemorations, and the inspiration she provides to future generations.

V. CONCLUSION

The life and work of Adruti Laxmibai illustrate the multifaceted role women played in India's freedom struggle. As a political activist, social reformer, legislator, and advocate for women's education, she made significant contributions to Ganjam district and Odisha at large. Her experiences reflect the broader narrative of women stepping beyond traditional boundaries to participate in national movements.

Her education, early exposure to nationalist thought, and direct association with leaders like Mahatma Gandhi shaped her ideological framework. Through participation in the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, Salt Satyagraha, and Quit India Movement, she exemplified courage and determination. Her imprisonment, leadership roles in the Indian National Congress, and service in the Odisha Legislative Assembly underscore her commitment to public life.

Her efforts toward empowering women through education and welfare initiatives extend her significance beyond political history into the realm of social reform.

Recognizing Adruti Laxmibai's contributions enriches the understanding of Odisha's role in the national movement and acknowledges the critical role women played in shaping modern India.

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