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Gender, Nationalism, and Regional Identity: Parbati Giri in the Freedom Struggle of Western Odisha

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Abstract

This article examines the role of Parbati Giri as a significant yet underrepresented figure in the Indian freedom struggle, with a particular focus on the intersection of gender, nationalism, and regional identity in Western Odisha. While mainstream nationalist historiography has largely emphasized urban leadership and male-centric political narratives, the contribution of women from peripheral regions remains insufficiently explored. Parbati Giri emerged as a prominent grassroots leader who mobilized women, peasants, and marginalized communities, thereby expanding the social base of the nationalist movement in Western Odisha. Her political activism reflected a distinctive blend of Gandhian ideology, regional consciousness, and gendered resistance, rooted in local socio-cultural realities. The study situates Parbati Giri's participation within the broader framework of women's engagement in anti-colonial struggles, highlighting how regional contexts shaped forms of nationalist expression. Through constructive work, participation in civil disobedience movements, and social reform initiatives, she challenged both colonial authority and entrenched patriarchal norms. Her efforts in

organizing women's collectives, promoting self-reliance, and advocating social equality contributed to the transformation of nationalist politics at the local level. The article argues that Parvati Giri's leadership exemplifies how regional actors played a crucial role in translating nationalist ideals into everyday practices among rural populations. By foregrounding Parvati Giri's experiences, this research underscores the importance of integrating gender-sensitive and region-specific perspectives into the study of India's freedom movement.

Keywords: *Parvati Giri; Women's Freedom Struggle, Nationalism, Gender and History, Regional Identity, Western Odisha*

Introduction:

Parvati Giri was born in 19th January, 1926 in a Gauntia family of Samleipadar,¹ a small village of Sambalpur. Parvati Giri emerged as a freedom fighter, social worker and a worthy woman of Western Orissa. Sri Dhanjaya Giri was her father and Srimati Giri was her mother. Dhanjaya Giri and Srimati Giri had two sons and two daughters (Janki ram Giri, Parvati Giri, Lal Bihari Giri and Yosabanti Giri) and Parvati Giri was the second among them. Parvati Giri had studied up to class - III in the village primary school and thereafter she was not allowed to continue her study. For her stubborn attitude she was popularly called as 'Jokhei' or 'Bauri' during her childhood.

At that time the great Freedom Movement against the British dominance was going on in India under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi with great vigour. Under the banner of Indian National Congress millions of people all over the country were staging hartals, strikes, picketing, dharanas etc. to liberate their mother land from the hands of the Britishers. In these days the freedom struggle and its ideals and philosophy had created a great spirit of nationalism and remarkable enthusiasm among the millions of Indians, who without considering the right and wrong plunged in to the movement as satyagrahis.

The prevailing circumstances around her also contributed much in inculcating such patriotic fervour in her mind and attracting her towards the freedom struggle of India. During that period the freedom struggle was going on in full swing in and around Sambalpur under the leadership of prominent Congress leaders like Laxminarayan Mishra, Bhagirathi Patnaik, Ghanashyam Panigrahi, Nrusingha Guru, Durgaprasad Guru, Dayananda Satapathy, Fakira Behera etc.²

Parvati Giri from her very childhood got an opportunity to come into close contact with the above-mentioned Congress leaders with the help of her peternal uncle Ramchandra Puri who was an eminent Congress worker of that area. Besides, her home was then an important center of Congress activities where the Congress workers used to assemble for important discussion time and again.³



[Figure-1]

Remembering The Mother Teresa of Western Odisha: Parvati Giri

(Source- Odisha State Archive, Bhubaneswar)

The Bari Ashram:

In 1937, Malti Chaudhury and Nabakrushna Chaudhury , the two freedom fighters of Orissa during their visit to Sambalpur, visited the village Samaleipadar to discuss the Gandhian programme of village reconstruction and trend of politics.⁴ When Malti Chaudhury and Nabakrushna Chaudhury were about to return from that village after the meeting was over, Parvati Giri met Malti Chaudhury and expressed her desire to go with her and serve the nation as a Congress worker. Moved by the desire and will of the small girl, Malti Devi said her “just wait for few years and then Rama Devi will take you to her Bari Ashram

for training”.⁵ Soon after the visit of Malti Chaudhury to Samaleipadar , there was a meeting of the Congress workers in the same village under the presidentship of Bhagirathi Pattnaik , an eminent freedom fighter of Western Orissa . There Bhagirathi

Pattnaik became very much astonished by seeing the extraordinary zeal and strong determination of Parvati Giri to join the national movement at an early age. Then the Congress Committee , unanimously decided to allow her to join the Congress as a worker.⁶ Bhagirathi Pattnaik clearly mentioned in his personal diary about the little girl Parvati Giri whose patriotism touched his heart. Thus by the year 1937 Parvati Giri joined the Congress as one of its active workers. Next year in 1938 Parvati Giri and another young lady named Prabhavati Devi who had also the desire to fight against the Britishers for the cause of the nation were taken to Bari Ashram by Jambuvati Devi and Bhagirathi Pattnaik for initial training.⁷ During that time Bari Ashram was a training center for newly enrolled Congress workers in Orissa . It was after the great historic Harijan Padayatra of Gandhiji in Orissa that Gopabandhu Chaudhury ,

Surendranath Pattnaik , Rama Devi , Sushila Devi , Tulsi Devi , Mangal Sengupta , Amapurna Devi and Shova Panda established an Ashram at Bari just on the model of Sabarmati Ashram in Gujrat.⁸ The main aims and objectives of this institution were to impart training on basic education , adult education , women upliftment , spinning khadi, animal husbandry , constructive works of Congress , National language etc. Both Parvati Giri and Prabhavati Devi joined as trainees in the Bari Ashram which was then managed by Rama Devi and her husband Gopabandhu Chaudhury. Parvati remained their as a trainee for two years from 1938-1940. In 1940 when there was shortage of Congress workers in Sambalpur district to carry out the Congress activities, Parvati Giri was sent back to Sambalpur .



[Figure 2]
Parvati Giri in Baliniketan Ashram, Bolangir
(Source- Odisha State Archive, Bhubaneswar)

The Trail by Fire: Her Indomitable Spirit of Freedom

After returning from Bari Ashram in 1940, Parvati Giri expressed her intense desire to be a member of the District Congress Committee. But at that time she was not allowed as she has not attended the age of eighteen. However she devoted herself to play the role of a coordinator in the District Congress Committee. At the same time she also used to propagate constructive programme of the Gandhian ideology among the people of the district with a view to arouse nationalist feelings in the minds of the people. Gandhian constructive programmes like the promotion of khadi, spinning and village industries, national education, Hindu- Muslim unity, struggle against untouchability , social upliftment of the Harijans and boycott of foreign cloth and liquor were undertaken by Parvati Giri throughout the district . She also undertook extensive tour round the villages like Baragarh , Borasambar , Panimura , Sarandapalli , Padampur , Fatmunda , Samaleipadar etc. to preach Gandhian principles and ideology among the people . Parvati Giri with the help of Prabhavati Devi started the spinning in Sarandapalli village with fifty Charakha.⁹

The district of Sambalpur did not remain aloof from this national revolution of 1942. The Congress leaders and the people of the district actively participated in the said movement leaving footprints in the history of Freedom struggle of India. There was wide spread unrest against the British rule not only in big towns like Sambalpur , Baragarh , Jharsuguda but also

in remote villages like Barpali , Borasambar , Remunda , Panimura , and Samaleipadar.¹⁰ Pandit Laxminarayan Mishra who had gone to Bombay to attend the meeting of the Indian National Congress was immediately arrested on his way back to Sambalpur.¹¹ The people organized hartals at Sambalpur and Jharsuguda in protest against the arrest of Congress leaders in Bombay. In order to suppress the movement, the Government arrested a large number of prominent Congress leaders in different parts of the district. At this critical juncture, the remaining Congress workers who were outside the jail played a very crucial role during the Quit India movement in Sambalpur region. Parvati Giri and others actively worked day and night in Sambalpur region to keep the movement alive. When the Congress leaders of Bargarh area like Ramchandra Puri , Yosabanta Bhoi , Chamaru Parida , Dutia Giri , Ujal Puri , Mangal Giri etc. were arrested by the British Government , at that time Parvati Giri came to Bargarh to continue the movement in that area.¹² Parvati Giri , with the help of Dayalal Joshi , another Congress leader of Bargarh region organized a public meeting in front of the Marwari Dharmasala at Bargarh in which a large number of students of George High School and the local inhabitants took part. After the meeting she along with other Congress leaders led the procession by intoning the slogan ' do or die ' , '

*Bharat Chhodo ' , ' British Sarkar Hatao ' etc. holding tricolour flags in their hands.*¹³

On the other hand like other parts of India, in Sambalpur region the police adopted repressive measures against the Satyagrahis. Near the court the Police pounced on the demonstrations and snatched away the flags from their hands and finally dispersed the crowd by lathi charge. The Police could not arrest Parvati Giri as she was a minor.¹⁴ Parvati Giri , Abhimanyu Bhoi , Biranchi Pradhan , Purna Chandra Giri and some others entered the court of Bargarh where they asked the advocates to boycott the court . However, the advocates laughed at her and showed indifferent attitude to the request of Parvati Giri and others which greatly infuriated her. She offered bangles to them for their cowardice and shamelessness. The advocates finding no other alternative finally left the court. Then Parvati Giri along with his followers entered the chamber of Sub- Divisional Magistrate and she herself occupied the chair of S.D.M. where she played the game of mockery with her friends. She appointed her colleague Biranchi Pradhan and Abhimanyu Bhoi as peon and lawyer respectively. When the S.D.O. entered the chamber she started prosecuting him as an antinational and murderer. She was immediately arrested and sent to jail for such anti – Govt.

activities. However later on she was released from the jail as she was unfit for confinement due to her minor age.¹⁵

On another occasion Parvati Giri was arrested and a case was filed against her for distributing placards among the people which bear the message of sabotage against the British Government. The court finally sentenced her two years of imprisonment.¹⁶ In 1944 when Gandhiji was released from the jail, the Quit India Resolution was withdrawn; consequently the Quit India Movement or August Revolution of 1942 came to an end. The British Government released the Congress leaders from the jail all over the country. In Sambalpur also the British Government released the political prisoners of the district in phases from the first half of July 1944. Leaders like Nrusingha Guru, Durga Prasad Guru, Ghanashyam Panigrahi, Laxminarayan Mishra, Bhagirathi Pattnaik and Parvati Giri were released from jail in 1944.¹⁷

Parvati Giri , after her release from the jail in 1944 went to Bari Ashram. It was at the advice and recommendation of Rama Devi that she joined the Kasturba Memorial Trust establish in 1945 under the chairmanship of Mahatma Gandhi in memory of Kasturba Gandhi. The branches of the Kasturba Memorial Trust were setup all over the country and Rama Devi was incharge of the supervision of Orissa branch at Bari.¹⁸ The main aims and objectives of this organization were to work for the upliftment of rural women and children in India . Parvati Giri remained in the Kasturba Memorial Trust at Bari upto 1946 when she was sent to Wardha for further training by Rama Devi. There she remained up to 1949 and after that she went to Allahabad for higher education. However these higher studies and training in important social training centers could not give mental peace and satisfaction to Parvati Giri, whose restless soul always wished to work for the welfare of mankind. Therefore, she totally engaged herself in many All-India Organizations for social work as well as for relief work at different places in India. Parvati Giri returned to Orissa in 1953 and work in a project conducted by American friend society at Barpali in Bargarh district up to 1955.¹⁹

As a True Patriot of Gandhian Spirit:

In 1944 she was released from jail. She returned to Samleipadar, but her heart lay elsewhere. Her experiences so far, she thought, were not enough. She wanted to meet and come into contact with those who were in the vanguard of the freedom struggle. Consequently, she decided to visit Wardha and know more about Gandhiji and his way of

life. In the company of her uncle Rama Chandra Puri she, therefore, proceeded towards Wardha. When they reached there, it was a Friday and Gandhiji observed silence every Friday. When she met him and fell at his feet he simply patted her on her back. Gandhiji had an aura around him and she seemed to have been overpowered by him. The next day a meeting was held at Wardha where Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Ballabh Bhai Patel and Chakravarty Rajgopalachari addressed the audience. Before the start of the meeting all who had gathered there participated in the satyagrah i.e. spinning of thread from cotton for half an hour. Thus, she had the darshan of most of the top leaders of the freedom struggle at Wardha. During this period, she trained herself as a nurse and a Gramasevika under the project as she had great desire to serve the destitutes. In 1955 Parvati Giri left the project and again at the request of Rama Devi she joined the Kasturba Memorial Trust and worked for the same till 1959.²⁰ While working in the Kasturba Memorial Trust some short of differences took place between Parvati Giri and local leaders of the Trust regarding their mode of working and consequently Parvati Giri left the Kasturba Trust in 1959 and from that period she started working independently. In 1964 when communal riots broke out in Rourkela, Parvati Giri along with Rama Devi and others visited many places in and around Rourkela and tried to maintain communal harmony and peace among the people of the locality. In 1966 she also worked in drought effected areas of Kalahandi district. Parvati Giri did not confine her work within Orissa only. She also serves the destitutes in Samastipur, Bihar and in Allahabad in U.P. as a social worker.²¹

Empowering Journey: Her Pursuit of Freedom & Love towards Motherland

This period in her life was a very crucial period, as crucial as when she had left her home for the Ashram at Bari. She had spent all her time, after Independence, in rendering service of various kinds to the society in various places unlike many other freedom fighters who sought and were given various offices of profit. For a major part of the time she had worked for the Kasturba Trust at Satyabhamapur but she found that though she had all along been working for the needy and the starved, her life had no definite direction. She had for a long time been working on behalf of others and she found she was not satisfied with it. She was inwardly dismayed at the plight of the people in the villages, and she found that she was unable to do anything substantial for them. She had already crossed the age of forty-five and she sometimes felt that time was running out for her. She felt deeply dismayed and relentlessly but silently prayed to the Almighty to show her the way

and provide her with the wherewithal so that she got an opportunity to serve the poor, the neglected and the helpless. Even as she was playing with this idea, an opportunity came to her very doorsteps. In 1974 Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India and Smt. Nandini Satpathy, then Chief Minister of Orissa were due for a visit to Paikmal to survey the draught situation in the western part of Orissa including Kalahandi. She immediately made up and after the end of the drought the Government stopped the relief work and closed some of the foster homes like Paikmal. However, the short term relief provided by the Government during the time of drought had not been able to remove the miseries and agonies of the people fully and yet many children remained homeless. Parvati Giri who, at that time had earned a great reputation as a social worker decided to serve the poor, orphans and the destitutes of the Padampur area.

Role of Bargarh District in the National Movement:

The historical significance of Bargarh in the nationalist movement is underscored by the pivotal role it played in fostering a spirit of resistance against colonial rule. Notable figures like Surendra Sai, emblematic of the larger struggle for independence, epitomized the dedication and sacrifice of those who fought for the motherland. Moreover, the grassroots mobilization efforts in Bargarh and neighboring areas, led by individuals such as Chaturbhuja Sharma, Deptari Nayak, Dasarathi Mishra, Ghanashyam Panigrahi, and Hazari Patel, underscored the widespread support for the nationalist cause within rural communities. These individuals, through their unwavering commitment, served as catalysts for the propagation of nationalist sentiments across the region. During Furthermore, Bargarh's contribution to the non-cooperation movement exemplifies its active participation in the broader struggle against colonial oppression. The decision of Gopabandhu Choudhury, then serving as the deputy Magistrate of Bargarh, to relinquish his official position in favor of assuming leadership within the movement symbolizes the depth of commitment among the local populace. This act of defiance not only highlights the fervent desire for self-rule but also underscores the pivotal role played by Bargarh in galvanizing support for the non-cooperation movement, thereby propelling the broader trajectory towards India's independence.

Conclusion:

Parvati Giri during her life had received many laurels and felicitations for her selfless and dedicated service to the mankind. Awards like Sarala Puraskar, National

Award from the Ministry of Social Welfare of India etc. were conferred on her. She was also honoured by Indian Red Cross, Orissa Branch and by All India Freedom Fighters Association. Parvati Giri was also the life member of many Societies and Committees like Red Cross Society, Hind Kustha Nivarana Sangha, Sambalpur Jail Visitor Committee, Sisu Vikas Yojana, Swadhinata Sangrami Committee, Nari Seva Sangha, Sambalpur, Ayurvedic College, Narasinghanath etc.

Thus, Parvati Giri was not only a great freedom fighter but also a great social worker who dedicated her entire life to the cause of the nation as well as for the service of the is for this she has been rightly called by Shree Biju Pattanaik, the then Chief Minister destitutes . It of Orissa as The Mother Teresa ' of Orissa.

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