



SITADEVI KHADANGA; A SELF-MADE WOMAN

Review of her autobiography “Mo Jeevanara Smruti”(Remembrance of my life)

Abstract

This article, “Sita Devi Khadanga; A self-made woman; Review of her autobiography mo jeevanara smurti”, is centred around the autobiography of Sitadevi Khadanga. She was a famous women writer. She showed her artistic skill in various genres like poetry, novel, drama, translation, and autobiography & Her contribution to Odia literature is marked as an era of immense growth and prosperity. Her autobiography is the first published women’s autobiography in Odisha. The article would deal with the various dominant sphere of the then society referring to her autobiography.

Introduction

“If you can imagine it, you can achieve it. If you can dream it, you can become it.”

--William Arthur Ward

Sitadevi Khadanga (1902 – 1983) was a women writer in Odisha, India. She wrote many poetries, dramas, and novels and translated Rabindranath Tagore’s poems into the Odia language. Her contribution to Odia literature is immense. Her works depicted the socio-economic and cultural milieu of Odia society. Her autobiography “Mo Jeevanara Smuti” (Remembrance of my life) carries her life narrative centred around “I” with little presence of the “Other”. Yet the report recorded the narrator's social, familial, political, and literary events and faithfully extrapolated the tensions within. So that narrator was both within and outside the text. To give a crystal-clear picture, the article would focus on various discourses like social, political, literary, and family.

Social Discourse

“There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing”

-- Swami Vivekananda

In India, we have inherited the cultural legacy of having a strong son–preference among all communities and religious groups of varied socioeconomic backgrounds. Patrilocality, patrilineage and patriarchal attitudes manifest in women and girls having subordinate positions in the family, discrimination in property rights, and women’s work being limited to household duties. During that period, Superstitious beliefs like purdah, untouchability, and child marriage dominated the era. Going outside and doing the job was a male prerogative.

Sitadevi khadanga gave a detailed description of her family, society of the then time, status of women, educational values etc. She started her autobiography by talking about her father. Her father was Harihar Panda, who belonged to Mandara village (near Bhanjanagar). He was an educated person as well as a renowned lawyer. He completed his BA and did Law at Madras (Chennai). He was well versed in the English language. He also established an Anglo Sanskrit School.

At that time, there was child marriage; usually, people arranged marriages Between 8 / 9-years old girls with 14 / 15 years boys. If the girl couldn’t marry till her tenth year, people considered it a great insult to her parents. Sitadevi was also a victim of that age-old tradition. When Sitadevi’s marriage couldn’t be fixed till nine years, her mother worried about it, and her only concern was to fix her daughter’s wedlock somehow. At that time, marriages were fixed, considering the Family Status, and no one cared about the bride and groom’s wishes.

Another fact Sita Devi described was that when a girl got married, she lost her property rights from her parents. When her aunt (Father's sister) came to stay with them after her husband's death, she led a precarious life at Sitadevi's house. Her brother (Sitadevi's father) didn't care about her and didn't even support her financially or morally. She doesn't have any respect there. Though she was very well behaved, everyone cursed her like it was her fault for which her husband died. Though Sitadevi's father was an educated person, he didn't take any steps to educate her daughter. His only concern was to earn a lot of money. Though his son (Sitadevi's brother) was in Satyavadi Vana Vidyalaya, he never bothered about his daughter's education. Still, Sitadevi was very keen to Study, so she read whatever books she got. Though she loved to read plays, she was also interested in other genres like prose, poetry, novel, etc., including the work of Gangadhara Meher, Upendra Bhanj and many more. But quite in contrast to her father was Sribachha's uncle (cousin of her father). He was very much concerned about his family and friends. He took steps for various social causes like women's education, the prohibition of child marriage etc. Even he organised a widow remarriage, for which many noble people were against him, and they thought it was against our culture and religion, but he also did his daughter's wedding at the age of 10. It shows how society was rigid at that time. Sitadevi also described the value of money that 1 kg of rice costs (4 aana), 1kg ghee (1 rupee), oil 1 Litre (4aana). All these were the monetary units used at that time. Sitadevi described her father as a wealthy and educated person. But he doesn't discuss anything with his daughter. Sitadevi always thought if her father had taught her, she would have become an educated and English-speaking girl. Even at the school, her father established, "Make Michel Anglo-Sanskrit School", There also Sitadevi wasn't allowed. Her mother was a God believer. She used to observe all rituals and traditional festivals. From her, Sitadevi got inspired and involved with various fasts and worship.

Sitadevi described another instance of how her mother and Sitadevi wanted to go to Puri to see Lord Jagannath. At that time, there was no communication facility. They had to take a bullock cart, and it took them two days to reach Puri. Sitadevi described how she was very excited to see the outside world because women at that time were only limited to the four walls of the house.

Sitadevi also described her friend Annapurna who was credulous and believed in a woman who told herself to be a devotee of Shreema and Aurobindo. Later, she turned out as a fraud. Sitadevi described herself as a mere creature limited to the household like most women at that time.

When Sitadevi came out of the house and discussed literature, Organized and directed plays at that time, people couldn't accept that. Being a woman and doing such things was rare. Sitadevi and a few literary intellectuals decided to build "Krishna Singh Sahitya Parishad". For that reason, Sita Devi went to King Padmanabha Singh Deo for donation. He was generous, but the other three members (male) were dissatisfied with it because, as a woman, she didn't seek Permission from anyone and went alone. Though Sitadevi got married at the age of ten, she was always in the opinion that girls and boys should know each other before marriage and be married when they were adults. It shows her modern outlook on life.

Sitadevi revolted against the social norms that "women should limit themselves in the household activities" She always wanted to go out and feel the outside world, even when they visited their neighbour's house. She felt so happy.

Literary Discourse:

Sitadevi's autobiography was full of literary discourses. Sitadevi didn't get any formal education like most girls at that time, but she was a voracious reader. Her inclination to educate herself made her a literary genius. Sitadevi's father was an educated person; he established a school. His son was also a student at Satyavadi Vana Vidyalaya, Puri. But still, his daughter could not get an education. As it is said,

"Things turn out best for the people who make the best out of the way things turn out."

However, Sitadevi learnt a lot from their home tutor, who was meant for her brother. She used to read whatever books She came across. She read the works of Vyasa Kabi Fakir Mohan Senapati, who was Sita Devi's father's Friend. He gifted books which he wrote on *Mahabharat*. Sitadevi read those books with much interest.

Sitadevi also read Bhakta Kabi Madhusudan's writing and Radhanath Roy's works like *Kedara Gouri*, *Parbati*, *Darbar* etc. All these significantly impacted her and shaped her literary bend of mind. When Bhagirathi (Sitadevi's cousin) stayed at her house and prepared for his 10th examination, SitaDevi read his books secretly when he was out, and Sitadevi used to listen to her cousin while he read. She had an inquisitive tendency and was always curious to know more, which boosted her knowledge accumulation.

Her husband was very supportive in each field; he sent a tri language book that included the Bengali language. And immediately, Sitadevi started learning that language which was completely alien to her, and that is how her Foundation of Bengali Language was established. One Fine Day, she accidentally came across Kabiraj Sengupta's "*Paachana & Musti yoga*" about the various diseases and their leading treatment. Sitadevi started reading that book, and she developed knowledge to deal with various diseases. It helped her a lot to treat her brother when he was ill. Sitadevi's husband acquainted her with Bengali literature; the first book he gave her was "*Bankim Granthabali*".

She was very close to her daughter Kamala when she pursued higher studies; Sitadevi wrote poems in isolation. Mr Ananta Prasad panda noticed that and encouraged her to write more Sitadevi described Ananta Prasad Panda (Tahsildar of Aashika and a friend of her husband) as her literary Guru.

Many of her short stories were published in *Nabina* magazine. Sitadevi's first novel was *Bimata* (She wrote many plays like *Sahodar*, which states her own story. After that, she wrote *Nari*(woman), *Posyaputra*(adopted son), *Naistika*(conformist), *Nispati*(decision), *Matruhina*(An orphan) and many more. She was a versatile talent; she formed a troupe and performed her plays in different places. She directed and performed it in Ashika, Bhanjanagar, and Sorada. She knew that age could never be an obstacle when someone wants to learn something new. So, she started learning Sanskrit from Debaraj Pathy, a twenty-year-old boy and a Sanskrit teacher. Even she learnt English from Satyabadi Gantayat (a high school teacher) in her mid-age.

Though Sita Devi wasn't fortunate enough to get a formal education, she always wanted to surround herself with literature. She wanted to build "Krusna Singha Sahitya Parishad" so that there could be no problem in organising literary conferences. But people at that time couldn't understand her good deed. Sitadevi always took steps for her Children's education; her daughter Kamala was M.R.COG and married a Formicologist in Bihar. Her son Madhusudan studied in London and became Principal of Sri Ram Chandra Bhanja medical college, Cuttack. Sitadevi described that despite financial crises, she and her husband always made it possible for their children to study more.

Political discourse

In 1920, Gandhiji started the non-cooperation movement, and the political discourse took a new turn as hundred and thousands joined the movement. When our fellow citizens struggled and fought to attain freedom, women too didn't lag; they also fought wholeheartedly and supported the struggle. During the struggle for freedom, the position of women took a favourable turn. It was realised by most of the national leaders like Gandhiji, Nehru, and Dr Rajendra prasad that the emancipation of women was necessary and realised so long as the condition of women was not improved and granted equal status with men, India couldn't progress. The role of women in the freedom struggle can't be undermined. Sarojini Naidu, Sucheta Krupalini, Vijay Laxmi Pandit etc., contributed a lot.

In her autobiography, Sitadevi described various political events. In 1921, there was a grand public meeting near her house. Many people came to see Gandhiji, though Sitadevi and her mother wanted to go but couldn't because their family didn't allow them to go out. After that incident, Sitadevi got upset that she couldn't see Gandhiji, but she was helpless. But later, she wrote many poems and plays that depicted patriotic feelings and encouraged the mass to participate in the freedom struggle. Like Kuntala Kumari Sabat, her writing was very appealing and inspiring. When Sitadevi's husband persuaded his education at Cuttack, he met Harekrushna Mahatab and Nityananda Kanungo. Sitadevi also came in contact with Harekrushna Mahatab. Even when Harekrushna Mahatab came to Ashika and watched Sita Devi's play, *Nari*, he praised her in his speech. After becoming prime minister, Sitadevi asked him for help to complete Krushna Singh Sahitya Parishad. Then also, Mahatab helped her financially.

Biswanath Das was a great personality and well acquainted with Sitadevi, Latter He became the governor of utter Pradesh. When Mr Das went to Bihar, he invited Sitadevi and her family to come to Lucknow. Sitadevi also accepted his invitation and went to Lucknow with her son in law (Dr Achari). Sitadevi also had a short political career. She participated in the election and became a member of the Ganjam dist. Board. Sitadevi contested on behalf of Congress, and at that time, there was tremendous popularity among people on congress, but Sitadevi had to leave the post due to her husband's illness. Sitadevi also described that politics had become only a medium of money-making; people are participating in the election only for money and have no concern for people. Sitadevi had a very close relationship with Nandini Satpathy (the former chief minister of Odisha). All these acquaintances made her vision very clear about politics in those days.

Family discourse

In our Hindu culture, the family is considered a temple and used to teach moral and social values to children. The family was viewed as the foundation of the holistic development of a child. The way a child is cared loved and nurtured provides an opportunity for the child to be better in Life. Family plays a vital role in everyone's life. We used to influence -by our family; Sitadevi also described a lot about her family, their bonding, their belief, and their way of thinking. Sitadevi was born into a wealthy family because her father was a lawyer, and he earned millions of rupees as he was the only English-speaking lawyer at that time. But he never cared about the education of his daughter. For a daughter, there can be no great miser than to know that her father doesn't support her, but Sitadevi couldn't let her spirit go down. Her mother was religious and a strong God believer woman. Her only concern was Sitadevi's marriage. She fixed Sitadevi's wedding at the age of ten. Sitadevi's father was only concerned about earning money. He wasn't interested in making friends and entertaining their relatives. Though Sitadevi's cousin came to study for some time, her father didn't talk to him. When Sitadevi got married to Banchhanidhi khadanga, her father Sponsored his son in law's education and wanted him to become a lawyer like him. But he had a severe illness, so he had to discontinue his education, for which her father was distraught.

When Sitadevi was in Berhampur with her husband and daughter, her husband got a job at Soroda high school. Everyone was happy, but Sitadevi wanted to stay at Berhampur. But she couldn't say it to anyone and moved to Soroda with her family because for her, the family came fast and their happiness as well. She was very close to her daughter, and when her daughter (Kamala) went to Cuttack to pursue her ISC, Sita Devi became very sad and started writing a poem, which led to the Foundation of her literary career. She talks about her brother and sister-in-law. Sitadevi had a good bonding with them; when Sita Devi, her husband and her 1.5years old daughter Suffered from malaria, her brother arranged a motor car with great difficulty (as at that time motor cars weren't available), and he took them to Ashika. Sitadevi also described how her sister-in-law took care of her. And she used to give her very delicious food, which helped her recover from malaria.

Sitadevi talked about her husband, Banchhanidhi Khadanga. Her husband was like her backbone; when Sitadevi Started writing plays and arranged a troupe to perform, there was a financial crisis. Sometimes she also felt disheartened and wanted to leave everything, but her husband encouraged her a lot, and from his encouragement, Sitadevi got new inspiration to move on. When Sitadevi informed her husband that She wanted to construct Krushna Singha Sahitya Parishad, her husband became happy and wanted to contribute. Though they had Financial Strain. But still, he gave her hope and supported her throughout.

Conclusion

It was rightly said that.

“The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world.”

Sitadevi was a woman who overcame all odds. At that time, women were treated as second class citizens; instead of getting an education, they were subjected to sufferings under the purdah system and forced child marriage. Different codes of conduct with various norms and behaviour traits were implemented for women. Sitadevi’s father also didn’t support her education, but Sitadevi didn’t care about the social norms and stereotypes and started reading books. She derived immense pleasure from reading. Her most adorable quality was that she didn’t care about any specific subject or genre. Sitadevi wanted to explore more, so she wanted to learn different languages. Her husband sent her a book, and from that book, she learned the Bengali letters. In the later stage of her life, she learnt Sanskrit and the English language. She didn’t care about what society thought about her.

“To accomplish great things, we mustn’t act, but also dream; not only plan but also believe”.

--Anatole France

Sitadevi’s dream was to build “Krushna Singha Sahitya Parishad”, and for that, she did everything. Even people misinterpreted her intentions, but she put her constant effort. In those days, the exclusion of women from rendering influential contributions in the social, economic, religious, and political spheres, but Sitadevi was an exception. Women were limited to family and children, but Sitadevi came out and organised literary meetings and performed plays. Even in her last days, she wrote her autobiography, which became the first printed women’s autobiography of Odisha.

Sitadevi felt patriarchy, stereotype, and societal pressure in every step of her life, but it couldn’t undermine her spirit. She rose out of all odds and established herself as a women writer. She did what she liked and gave her best for what she wanted to become, and her dedication, hard work, and will to deal with every odd made her a great woman. She proved that a person isn’t known for her gender or educational qualification, or social status but instead is known for their deeds. She was a self-made person in an absolute sense.

