

Manmohan Choudhuri's family background

Parents of Manmohan Choudhuri were great freedom fighters. They devoted their lives in pursuit of independence movement, and later, Sarvodaya movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, and Vinobajee.

Manmohan Choudhuri can trace his lineage to famous 'Sudra Muni', or 'Adi Kabi' Sarala Das, who wrote the Mahabharata in Odia language during the 15th century. Manmohan's father Gopabandhu Choudhuri belonged to a rich zamindar family of Kherasa, Jagatsinghpur in Odisha. Gopabandhu Choudhuri studied at Presidency College, Law College in Calcutta (now Kolkata). He was a bright and popular student, a gold medalist from Calcutta University. He joined as a deputy magistrate under British administration. Soon, he resigned from this post, after seeing the indifference and negligence of British government for the distressed people of the flood affected area of Bari in Jajpur. Later, Gopabandhu Choudhuri joined the independence movement under Gandhijee, and organized several activities in the state of Odisha, as well as in the country. This was not liked by the British, and he was jailed a number of times.

After India's independence, Gopabandhu Choudhuri joined the Sarvodaya movement for the uplift of rural India. A grateful nation offered several prestigious recognitions and awards to him which he refused with all humility, because, he believed that one need not be rewarded for serving people and the country. He was a scholarly and saintly person, who lived a simple life. He spent the later part of his life, following the ideals of Sarvodaya movement, in a village working on improving techniques for agriculture.

Manmohan Choudhuri's mother, Rama Devi, came from a very cultured and aristocratic family of Odisha. Her father Gopala Ballava Das was the brother of Utakala Gauraba Madhusudan Das. Gopala Ballava Das was a magistrate under the British government, and was also a well known writer of his time. His novel 'Bhima Bhuyan', was first published in 1908 and is considered to be the first Odia novel based on the lives of tribal. Gopal Ballav wrote it, while working as a guardian to the then minor king of Keonjhar. Rama Devi was inspired by Madhusudan Das to serve the nation. She joined the freedom movement along with the whole

Choudhuri family, and was often jailed for her activities. After the independence of India, she worked for the Sarvodaya movement. For her service to down trodden, she was popularly called Maa Ramadevi (Ramadevi the 'mother').

Gopabandhu Choudhuri's father was Gokulananda Choudhuri, an eminent lawyer. He was a true patriot, who fought for the creation of a separate state of Orissa, and recognition of Oriya as a separate language. The British government honoured him with a title 'Rai Bahadur', but Gokulananda Choudhuri rarely acknowledged this honor in public. Gopabandhu's mother Padmavati Devi belonged to an aristocratic established family of Odisha. She was influenced by the freedom movement and gave up her luxurious lifestyle to live simply.

She was proud of her sons Gopabandhu and Nabakrushna, and their wives Rama Devi, and Malati Devi. Manmohan Choudhuri's younger sister, Annapurna (Maharana), and cousin Uttara (Desai) were also intimately associated with the freedom movement and were jailed several times by the British as teenagers. When the entire Choudhuri family would be in jail, Padmavati Devi took care of the household and young children. Often there will be raids by British police at her house and she would bravely defend herself and the children. During these periods, her youngest granddaughter Krishna (Mohanty) stayed back with Padmavati Devi. Gandhijee -who was a family friend- asked her during one of his 'pada yatra' in Odisha, what she would give for the country. Her reply was "you have taken my whole family, what more can I give?"

Gopabandhu's younger brother, Nabakrushna was one of the first students to leave college and join the freedom movement. Later he went through non-formal teaching in Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram, and Rabindranath's Shantiniketan. After independence, he became Chief Minister of Odisha for six years. He was a reformist leader, who introduced land reform to protect the rights of sharecroppers. He also initiated industrialisation of Odisha. Nabakrushna met his wife, Malati Sen, in Shantiniketan. She was a direct student of Rabindranath Tagore, who taught her dance, music, and culture. Nabakrushna Choudhuri and Malati Choudhuri were legends in their lifetime. They played a major role in transforming post-independent Odisha to a modern state.

Manmohan Choudhuri met his would be wife Sumitra Bandopadhyay at Gandhijee's Sevagram Ashram where she was an inmate after having completed her B. Sc in Chemistry from Calcutta University. After marriage, she assimilated with the extended Choudhuri family, and looked after it. Sumitra was Manmohan's comrade-in-arm throughout her life and continues to work for Gandhi Smarak Nidhi, Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust, and 'Sarvodaya' magazine even at an age of 92.

Manmohan's sister Annapurna Maharana followed the family tradition. She worked among the socially deprived people of Odisha. She was a great writer and orator. Her contribution was acknowledged with numerous honours, and awards. Annapurna's husband Sharat Chandra Maharana was an educationist and writer. He was deeply involved in the Gandhian method of educating children.

Manmohan's cousin Uttara married Narayan Desai, son of Gandhiji's associate Mahadev Desai. He was a well known expert on Gandhian thoughts and philosophy. In the later part of his life, Narayan globally popularized Gandhian thoughts through 'Gandhi Katha' – story of Gandhi.

Manmohan's youngest cousin Krishna is a social activist in her own rights. She carries on the family's Gandhian tradition and promotes prohibition of liquor. Her husband, Bibhuti Bhusan Mohanty was an educationist who was internationally known for promoting adult education.

Renowned writer Gopinath Mohanty wrote two books on Gopabandhu Choudhuri- 'Dipamjyoti' and 'Dhuli Matira Santha', highlighting different facets of his life and time. Several other books describe in detail the life and time of Manmohan Choudhuri and his family, and their role in the freedom movement of India and Odisha. These are, (i) Rama Devi's Jibana Pathe, (ii) his autobiography 'Kasturi Mruga Sama', (iii) Annapurna Maharana's autobiography 'Amruta Anubhava', (iv) Jnanadev Maharana's 'Mo Mamu'.