

Role of Women in Indian Freedom Struggle (1905 – 1927)

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To call women the weaker sex is a libel, it is men's injustice to women. If by strength is meant moral power, then women is immeasurably man's superior. Has she not greater intuition, is she not more self sacrificing ...has she not greater powers of endurance, has she got greater courage? Without her man could not be. If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with woman. I have nursed this thought now for years." (Mahatma Gandhi)

Whenever the history of India's freedom struggle is written, the sacrifices made by Indian Women will surely find the most prominent place in it. It was disgraceful to call women a weaker section, it was an injustice committed to them by men. If they meant moral courage, women had it many times more than men. If she had not had more inner strength, self sacrifice and tolerance than men and mankind would not have survived. If man was governed by non-violence, the future belongs to women.¹

When most of the men folk were in prison, a wonderful thing happened. Our women jumped into the arena of freedom struggle. They had always been contributing in the freedom struggle, but the wave of their unprecedented enthusiasm had surprised the British Government. The Home Secretary of the British govt. had to confess that nothing had disturbed him more than the great awakening among the Indian Women and the part played by them in Indian politics.

The consciousness of the women in the whole of India took a unique shape and the women of Bengal did not lag behind. The participation of the Bengali women in resistance movement had its origins and background in the social reforms of the 19th century. It may be recalled that during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries protestant missionaries with the support of allies in India and England took the initiative in advocating a number of social reforms in Hindu Society. They drew attention to practices such as infanticide, child marriage, the deplorable conditions of widows, the exposure of the sick and dying on the banks of holy rivers, Hook-

swinging at the Hindu festivals, the practice of sati, the prevalence of caste system that dehumanized a great part of the society, bonded labour etc.

In 1820, Raja Ram Mohan Roy emerged as the first modern Hindu exponent of social reform. The first step in the direction of Women's liberation in modern India was taken by Raja Ram Mohan Roy by way of opposition to sati and its abolition through legal sanctions (Dec. 1829) has left a lasting legacy for the women's movement in India.

The issues that dominated the 19th century were sati abolition, widow remarriage, education, rising the age of marriage. It was with the efforts of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, KeshabChandra Sen, and a host of others came forward for the betterment of the women and her lot in society started improving.

Under pressure from social reformers, the Govt. of India Act of 1856 legalised the marriage of Hindu widows, child Marriage Act of 1872 banned child marriage and fixed minimum age of marriage at 14 for the girl and 18 for the boy, permitted widow remarriage and inter caste marriage and penalized polygamy among the Brahmo Samaj.

It is these reforms mainly in the provinces of Bengal that helped the women to participate actively, even as early as 1885, in the emerging nationalist movement, by freeing them from the shackles of the traditional practices and values.

From the inception of Indian National Congress (1885) its membership was open to women also. Allan Octavian Hume even went ahead asking for all shades of opinion never to forget that unless the evaluation of the female element of the nation proceeded pari passu (with an equal place) with their work, all their labour of the political enfranchisement of the country would prove vain.²

The women attended the fourth session of the Congress at Bombay in 1889. Like the males, females participated from Calcutta including Swarnakumari Devi, sister of Rabindranath Taore. She had abandoned purdah and together with her husband, edited the Bengali journal, Bharati, having thus achieved the name of being the first Indian Woman editor.

Swarnakumari began 'Sakhi Samiti' (Ladies Association) to infuse among Indian Women an active and enlightened interest in country's welfare. From Bengal also came Kadamboni Ganguli, a graduate of Kolkata University and the first woman doctor from Bengal. Swarnakumari Devi and Kadambori Ganguli attended the Congress Session as delegates in 1890. The later

had the honour of being the first woman to speak from the congress platform when she proposed a vote of thanks to the President Pheroze Shah Mehta.

Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, daughter of Swarna Kumari, who was to take an active part in the nationalist movement in the years to come, composed a song urging the people different provinces of the country to join the freedom struggle. Interestingly the same song was sung in chorus at congress session in 1901.³

The decision for the partition of Bengal, announced by the Govt. on 20th July 1905, first time galvanized the common people including women into political action. In Sept. 1905, Rabindranath Tagore announced his plan for observing Rakhi Bandhan on the partition Day i.e. 16 October. Women also took 'non-cooking day' as suggested by Ramendra Sunder Trivedi. Protest meetings were convened by women and about five hundred of them witnessed the laying of the foundation stone of the Federation Hall at Calcutta on 16 Oct. 1905. Women organized Swadeshi fairs and Saraladevi Chaudhurani opened 'Lakshmir Bhandar' selling only indigenous articles, gave up use of foreign articles and use of foreign cloth and smashed their foreign bangles.

Another eminent lady was Kumudini Mitra (daughter of Krishna Kumar Mitra, a renowned nationalist) also organised a group of educated ladies in order to make a liaison among different revolutionaries. It also propagated and preached the cause of the revolutionaries through Suprabhat, a Bengali magazine.⁴

Women helped in distributing revolutionary pamphlets and literature and in maintaining connections between different revolutionary leaders. Mrs. Ramsay McDonald, who accompanied her husband in his tour of India, visualized that the Swadeshi movement could not have succeeded without the female assistances.⁵

Swadeshi movement arose from Bengal and spread throughout the country-stormy tours of leaders, women's dharnas at foreign goods stores and bonfires of foreign goods and students giving up schools and colleges in the face of expulsions for violating Government orders became a routine matter. Women too played an important role in organizing processions, rallies and dharnas and in spreading the boycott movement and raising funds for it. Women of Bengal, Maharashtra, Punjab and the central provinces were more active.

Sushila Devi of Sialkot was spreading new awareness by delivering lectures at various

places. Hardevi, wife of a barrister of Lahore Mr. Roshan Lal was editing Hindi magazine Bharat Bhagini Pooran Devi of Hisar, a leading member of Arya Samaj, was visiting every district to spread the message of Swadeshi Agyawati and Ved Kumari of Delhi were delivering lectures to men folk more than to women. Sarla Devi of Bengal visited Punjab and served as a bridge between the two provinces.⁶

Among the freedom fighters of the Central Provinces, the most active women were Satyabhama Tilak, Yamunabai Savarkar, Avantika Bai Gokhale, Lakhmibai Khare, Janakibai Gore, Lakshmibai Datar, Lakshmibai Rahalkar, Godabai Khare etc. They set up a women's wing of Abhinav Bharat and named it Atma Night Yuvati Sabha whose members secretly assisted the revolutionaries through this institution. The women of Maharashtra organized Hindu Sahbhajam⁷ and Haldi Kumkum etc. to eradicate untouchability. Mrs. McDonald, wife of Ramsay McDonald, who visited India during those days, wrote : A storm like movement is running through the women.⁸

The year 1917 was considered a milestone in the history of women's progress in India. Mrs. Annie Besant became the first woman President of the Congress. Under Annie Besant's Presidentship a resolution was passed demanding equal voting rights for women. A women's deputation led by Smt. Sarojini Naidu met Mr. Montague, Secretary of State for India and Viceroy Lord Chelmsford. Although in the name of the social incapability of women, the British Government did not give voting right to women in the Parliament under the Mount – Ford Reforms Scheme, but the Provincial Legislature Council was given the right to think over the matter of it so desired. Women Indian Association, Mahila Sewa Sabha, Women's Home Rule League and Indian Women's University joined together to register a strong protest against it and intensified their activities. Consequently the British Government was compelled to pass on the issue to the State Legislative Councils.⁹

The entire history of the freedom movement, as we know underwent a change with the advent of Mahatma Gandhi on the political scene in 1917. With his experience of South Africa behind him, Gandhi was conscious of the female potentialities as passive resisters. As he experimented with his weapon of Satyagraha in India he felt that women could take part in it together with men. Women were drawn to Gandhi by his magnetic personality, his distinctive naturalness and transparent sincerity.

During the days of the Champaran Satyagraha in India in 1917, women had lent a helping hand to him by organizing literacy classes and doing other constructive work. Also in the Ahmadabad labour movement of Feb 1918, Anusuyaben Sarabhai fought a brave battle on behalf of the workers even against her own brother.

Mahatma Gandhi was deeply influenced by Ghokhale's views. Like him, he was a moderate, as such he favoured social reforms and cooperation with the Government for this purpose. In the issue of young India (31st Dec. 1919) he wrote " "The Reform Law and the declaration accompanying it indicate the British Government's intention to do justice to the Indians. Indians should, therefore, shed all doubts. It is not our duty to criticize the proposed reforms, we must make efforts for their success. "Gandhi, thus, co-operated with the British Government from the very beginning. But the issues of the Rowlatt Act, Jallianwala Bagh massacre and Khilafat compelled him to follow the policy of non-co-operation.

Defense of India law was to lapse six months after the end of war. Therefore, the government tried to bring in the oppressive Rowlatt Act to acquire preventive and punitive powers. Gandhi declared a country wide strike on 6th April 1919. The Hindu – Muslim unity made the strike a great success.¹⁰

A massive public meeting was organised at Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar, on 13 April 1919. When people had assembled there, General Dyer reached Jallianwala Bagh with 100 Indian and 50 English Soldiers. Without warning the people, General Dyer fired 1650 rounds. According to the government reports, 500 persons were killed and one to two thousand persons got injured.¹¹

At General Dyer's Cruel orders, the injured were left there in pain for the night without any water or medical aid. Women were caught and molested. The wailing women had to undergo this humiliation when they came there to look for their dear ones. Some of the women, who managed to enter or were already inside, did commendable work. Most prominent of them were Mata Attar Kaur and Rattan Devi. Wailing for their dead husbands, they ran to and for throughout the night driving away dogs gnawing at the dead bodies. They looked after the injured and consoled and encouraged them till morning. A wave of resentment ran throughout the country against this massacre. Women's organizations till now working through national organizations, for women's education, social reform and the social, economic and political

rights of women had now started preparing themselves for the coming national Boycott movement. In July 1919, Sarojini Naidu went to England as a representative of the Home Rule League. At Kingsley Hall in London, she delivered a fearless speech based on facts about Jallianwala Bagh which opened the eyes of the whole world and Naidu's oratory was universally acknowledged.¹²

After the First World War, Indians expected something from the British, but they met with disappointment. And during this period of excitement and frustration, the Jallianwala Bagh incident took place. The incident lent great strength to the freedom struggle which brought the Indian struggle closer to freedom. It was an unprecedented incident. Due to the British policy against Khilafat in Turkey, Indian Muslims had turned against the English. Therefore, in 1920, Hindus and Muslims joined hands to fight against Britain on the Punjab and Khilafat issues. On 4th September 1920 at a Special Session of the Congress at Calcutta, it was decided that a non-violent Non-Co operation movement be launched.¹³

The national level programme of this movement was to boycott foreign institutions, government institutes and foreign goods and to adapt Swadeshi goods and organizations. The resolution got approval in the annual session at Nagpur in the Central province in Dec. 1920. Gandhi issued an appeal saying that non-violent Non-co-operation Movement for Swarajya could not succeed without the participation of women. He called upon women to join the Indian National Congress and to participate in this movement for Swarajya.¹⁴

He wrote in 1921, "I have great expectations from women. I want that they should make an equal contribution for the attainment of Swarajya. Their job would become much easier if women did so willingly."¹⁵ "At Gandhi's call, women joined the congress and played an important role in taking it forward and making it successful."¹⁶

In the non-cooperation movement, women in the several parts of the country joined the processions and propagated use of khadi and charkha. Some of them deserted government schools and colleges.

Bengal had come to occupy an important place in the freedom movement. Bengal had come to occupy an important place in the freedom movement. Under the leadership of Basanti Devi (wife of Chitraranjan Das), her sister Urmila Devi and the organizer of Nari Karmo Mandir Suniti Devi and several other women for the first time courted arrests by selling Khadi

and indulging in other illegal activities. They went from home to home persuading people to purchase and use Khadi. They appealed to the people to observe a complete strike on the day of prince of Wales' arrival in Calcutta. The government arrested them for showing disrespect to a VIP and for selling Khadi. It surprised even Gandhi and he remarked that along with men, women also made a great contribution in the attainment of Swarajya.

In the Central Provinces in Gujrat, Kasturba Gandhi led the movement. She toured various places and inspired the people to follow Gandhi's advice for the attainment of freedom.

In the Nagpur area of the Central provinces, Anusuya Bai Kale was in the forefront both in Congress work and in spreading awareness among women. In the Jabalpur area, well known poetess Subhadra Kumari Chauhan was busy in organizing volunteers raising funds and at the same time writing inspiring poems.¹⁹

In the Central provinces and Gujrat, Dandi Behan, Dahi Behan, Bhakti Bai, Mithu Ben, Maniben, Shiva Bai Patil, Nandu Ben, Narmoda Ben Bhatt etc. were organizing Satyagraha under Kasturba's leadership. Sarala Devi Tarabhai was busy in organizing volunteers. Her daughter Mridula Tarabhai also lent a helping hand. Women helped Gandhi in raising Tilak Swaraj Fund. They helped with cash and ornaments. Annapurna Devi was the first women in Andhra Pradesh to set an example of sacrifice by donating all her ornaments. Among the Muslim women, there was Abida Banu Begum who was known as Bai Amman was the mother of Ali brothers. She went from place to place in the Central Provinces to popularize Khadi and to promote Hindu Muslim unity.

Women members of the Nehru family were also active. Despite weak health, Kamala Nehru took part in the movement. In Delhi, the movement was going strong under the leadership of Ved Kumari, daughter of Swami Shradhanand and in Punjab under Lala Lajpat Rai's wife Radha Devi. In Orissa, Rama Devi Chaudhuri and Savitri Devi of Nepal were going from place to place to create public opinion in favour of the non-cooperation movements.

In Southern India, women like Lilabai Sangram, Muttu Lakshmi Reddy who had been till then active in the social field alone, then jumped into the freedom struggle through the boycott movement.

In Bombay, women organized several public meetings to protest against Prince of Wales' arrival and the civil reception to be given to him. Kasturba Gandhi presided over them and

visited many states to make the movement successful.²⁰

On 8 Nov., 1927 British Govt. appointed a Commission of British only, called Simon Commission. The Congress passed a resolution that it should be opposed everywhere. Women too did not lag behind. Hansa Mehta played leading role among the demonstrators. Annie Besant played an important role in opposing Simon Commission. Under her leadership a public meeting was organized at Malabar in which a large number of women participated. They held that the appointment of the Simon Commission was a negation of India's right to self determination.²²

In Punjab, Radha Devi, Pravati Devi, Lado Rani Zutshi, Atma Devi, Kartar Kaur, Rajkumari, Amrit Kaur etc. participated in the boycott of the Simon Commission. In Uttarpradesh, Swarup Rani Nehru, Begum Abdul Qadir, Suniti Devi and in the Central Provinces Anusuya Bai were in the forefront. In 1928, Amina Ghulam Rasul Qureshi, Kusum Ben, Ganga Ben, Danda Ben, Shivabhai Patel, Mani Ben Vallabhbai Patel, Madhumati etc. cooperated in the no-tax movement in Gujrat and the Central Provinces. The movement succeeded only because of the efforts of women.²³

To conclude :

Women of all the provinces and Presidencies were fully active during the Freedom struggle. Due to lack of education, initially the movement was not so strong but gradually women got enlightened about the movement and at Gandhiji's call, not only the urban but women from rural areas also came forward played a very significant role in it. They were not second to none in the respect of making contribution and taking interests in the on going freedom struggle of the country.

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