



WOMEN IN INDIA'S FREEDOM STRUGGLE

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Abstract

Women in Ancient India occupied a dignified place. They participated in the outdoor life as circumstances and situations demanded and there were hardly any prescribed positions exclusively earmarked for men. Women continued enjoying the same position more or less until the Muslim invasions from the North West. Due to the invaders and foreign conquerors the easiest means to safeguard Indian woman was child marriage, purdah system, sati, Infanticide and prejudices against women's education etc. All these measures adopted by the Hindu society to save the honour of their women, actually hampered the progress of women. Yet there appeared throughout the ages some women who excelled as administrators, warriors, reformers and religious teachers. There are women like Padamini, Razia begam, Durgawati who fought against male dominance like Akbar and Chandbibi who defeated the Ahmednagar fort represents the warriors and administrators amongst the women.

Key word: Child marriage, Medieval India, Purdah system, Sati, Infanticide and Prejudices against women's education.

In the medieval India Mughal princess like Nurjahan Ara and Zebunnissa were prominent names, during the first revolt of Independence in 1857-58 the part played by Rani of Jhansi, Rani of Ramgarh and Begam hazrat Mahal invited admiration for these brave hearts even from the English. The birth of the Indian National congress in 1885 furnished a political platform to women then it was no looking back for the brave hearts of India whether it is the revolutionary activities or home rule movement or it was Non co-operation or civil disobedience. The Indian women took up the cause, stepped forward to carry on the movement for independence. This paper is an attempt to recollect the contributions of Indian women during freedom struggle.



“When the history of India’s fight for Independence would be written, the sacrifices made by the women of India will occupy the foremost place”. Mahatma Gandhi.

The assumption of power by the crown in 1858 helped in the political and administrative unification of the country. India came to be governed by one unified system of law. The unification of the country further promoted and strengthened the modern means of communication, western education was an established feature and it afforded an opportunity to the people to study the contemporary events of Europe and works of political philosophers, of western world. Infact western education and philosophies of Rousseau Voltair and Mazzini influenced the mind of the educated Indians and produced a class of western educated intelligentsia. This was the period of social and political reforms in India through Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, Theosophical society etc. The women Social reformers also made their contributions to the cause of India’s freedom and the spirit of violent opposition which was suppressed due to the British success in 1857 just required a spark of fire as it had not died out. The birth of Indian National congress also contributed in organizing the women power by providing them a platform women who had begun to participate in the deliberations of The Indian National congress now further took up the responsibility to share the National efforts through the press, though there was no mass awakening amongst the women at this time but there was some sort of movement spreading slowly in them, Swaraj Swadeshi and national education became the slogans of nationalist some five hundred women met at Jenokand village in the district of Murshidabad to protest against governments decision and to urge the need of using the country made goods.¹ Women arranged meetings in the streets and they introduced the spinning wheels in the Zenana, not only this they also contributed in raising the national funds in their own way like Sarojini Bose wife of Tara Prasanna Bose, pledged that she would not wear gold bangles till the “Bande Matram” circular prohibiting the use of this slogan was cancelled.

Mrs J.K Ganguli gave her bracelet as a contribution towards paying off the fine of Shri Durga Mohan Sen who was convicted for seditious activities. While the women in Bengal were busy promoting the cause of freedom women in Punjab also couldn’t stopped themselves entering into the political arena. The women workers of the Arya Samaj were also responsible for arousing national spirit among the people. Smt Purni was working for the Arya Samaj at Hissar, was a prominent worker of the time,

¹ Theosophical publishing House, Adyar the Besant spirit, vol.4 (madras),,p74.



she toured the various districts of Punjab and advocated the cause of swadeshi, she exhorted the women of Punjab to bring up their sons not with a view to joining government service but to an independent participation in trade especially the manufacture and sale of swadeshi.² Sister Nivedita contributed to the national movement in her own way. She took strenuous tours of the North West region along with swami Vivekananda and three other western women. The famine and Flood in East Bengal in 1906 was disastrous, sister Nivedita helped the poor peasants who were the main sufferers, and she went from one farm to another helping, healing and consoling the weak the miserable. She addressed women's meetings and preached the use of Swadeshi goods. Nivedita also emphasized the need to take to charka and other useful crafts.³ While referring to the peasants Nivedita observed that they had enough common sense to take the affairs of their country in their own hands. She was of the view that those who paid the revenue also had the right to control the expenditure. Besides being a revolutionary of a high order, Nivedita took up the pen to arouse the zeal for the cultivation of National Art, architecture, literature and history, education and culture. Though she did not join the political movement or any political party she advocated the revolution.⁴ Another prominent personage of this period was Sarla Devi, she formed the link between Punjab and Bengal revolutionaries. She took steps to organize women's movement; Sarla Devi worked very hard to bring together the women of all castes and creeds on the basis of their common interest in the moral and material progress in India.⁵ She was one of the few women in Punjab who raised their voice against tyranny of General Dyer and stood in support of franchise movement and voting right for women. Indian women also did their best to make this cause a success even outside India, they supported the revolutionary activities. Bhikaji Cama is among those few, she had made up her mind to dedicate her life to the cause of her motherland and started the work in a systematic manner. She took steps to establish contacts with nationalists of Ireland, Russia, Egypt and Germany. She used to supply to extremists revolvers concealed in toys. She was the first Indian who unfolded the Indian National Flag in a foreign country before an international gathering.

² Home political secret no 48, March 1908.

³ Modern Review, vol 1 June, 1907, pp232-34.

⁴ Modern review, June 1953 p470 (article written by J C Bagal).

⁵ Home political proceedings no 166-168, Nov 1915.



While Indian women in India and Europe were fighting for the freedom the women in south Africa were setting examples by exhibiting the strength of the passive resistance movement they went through all the hardships along with young babies in their arms, the period between 1914 to 1918 is of great significance in the history of the national struggle as it was for the first time that women, Annie Beasant, led the national movement, she wrenched Indian politics out of its automatic and placid theorizing, made it a living and vital issue before the country and the whole Empire”⁶.

She organized a movement for the emancipation of women and raised the demand for the political rights, her leadership gave strength, encouragement and inspired the women of the land to participate in the national life of the country, ‘C.M Reddi stated that Dr. A Besant prepared the ground for the Gandhian freedom Movement in which women have played a prominent part”⁷. Mrs Besant organized within the theosophical society the “sons of India” and the “Daughters of India” to work for social reforms .she also formed the “The order of Rising star”. The organization for the protection of the good and for the destruction of the evildoers and for the sake of firmly establishing righteousness. She had become very popular both in India and Europe for her social, educational and the theosophical work. In 1915 when the country was leaderless, she felt the need of the time and jumped from theosophy to politics brining along with her new Zeal, a vigorous demand and unyielding determination. Mrs Besant brought new ideas, new talents new resources and altogether a new method of organization and new outlook into the field of congress⁸. It was under her president ship of Mrs Besant that congress expressed the opinion that same tests be applied to woman as to men in regard to franchise and the eligibility to all elective bodied concerned with local government and education. It is worth mentioning here that she was the first women to occupy the congress president’s char. Her work did not end with the presiding over the congress, but the beginning of a whole year of strenuous work. Her presidential address was a charter of national liberty. She touched almost all subjects of national importance. She infact exposed the policy of the government in regard to the training of army officers, it was an unwanted financial burden on Indians.

The road to freedom was not easy rather full of hardship she was arrested and put behind bars, it was not all as the madras government suggested that Mrs Besant should be ordered to leave India under

⁶ The Theosophical publishing house, the Besant Spirit, vol.3, Indian Problems,1939, p11.

⁷ Home Political Confidential Proceedings No 247 and K W, March 1912.

⁸ Pattabhai Sitaramayya, The History Of Indian National Congress,1946 Vol.1 P119.



the defense of Indian rules because, warnings are closely wasted on Mrs Besant and time has come to put an end to her mischievous writings and public utterances.⁹ She was the epitome of Women's liberty, by this time now Indian women had started taking interest in socio political affairs, the women's Indian association which came into existence in 1917 the pivot around which women gathered to discuss and demand their rights. After a decade an All Indian women's conference was founded and its political goal was self-government, the question of suffrage for women brought them to a common platform and then it was no looking back Margaret Cousins on behalf of association reiterated "is this handful of men better able to judge of these conditions than were the thousands of Indian delegates to the Bombay and Delhi Congress¹⁰. When the south borough committee had expressed their unwillingness to grant evidence before Joint parliamentary committee, to took up the case for women's franchise, Mrs Hira Bai Tata and Mrs Mithi Bai Tata were sent to England by the women's committee to express franchise to woman on the ground that the prevailing social conditions in the country did not warrant franchise for women. Mrs Besant and Mrs Naidu were members on deputation to give strong feelings of the Indian women on the issue. It was only because of strong stand taken by the Indian women and their consciousness about their rights and responsibilities that in 1921 Madras province removed the disqualification of sex for the legislative franchise. Whether it had been the noncooperation movement or civil disobedience or demonstrations against Rowalt Act, Jalliwala Bagh or Bengal Partition Indian women sacrifice and hard work cannot be denied. Bengal which had been in the vanguard of the freedom movement, the women of the freedom movement, the women of this province did not lose anytime and came out in the field. They organized "Mahila Karma Samaj" to carry out propaganda and constructive work amongst the women of Bengal.

Kasturba Gandhi who had taken her lessons and had practice Satyagrah in south Africa, toured the various states propagating Swadeshi and Khadi she appealed to the women to take to spinning and weaving of Khadi. If we want to earn Swaraj she said "we shall have to fill the bowl of goddess of freedom"¹¹ when she was informed about her son's arrest Devdas Gandhi, she replied "only two sons

⁹ Home Political A Confidential Proceedings No 166-168, Nov 1915.

¹⁰ Modern Review, Jan To June 1919, P 652 (Proceedings Of The Thirty Third Sessions Of The Indian National Congress Held At Delhi In Dec 1918.)

¹¹ Amrit Bazar Patrika May 30, 1922.



of mine have gone to jail, but twenty thousand sons of mother hind are in Jail". Kasturba Gandhi continued to address women to support the cause of Swadeshi with zeal and courage.

Bai Amman also known as Abadi Bano Begum Belonged to an aristocratic Family of Muslims but threw off her veil when her sons were deprived of their liberty. She made efforts to arouse the Muslim women, once she wrote "we had been sacrificing ourselves for our fathers and husbands and sons, but so long as this spirit of Indian woman hood is not lost, I for one, feel that nothing really matters is lost"¹².

She ardently advocated the use of khaddar and the Hindu Muslim unity she also advised the establishment of panchayat throughout India, fighting for Swaraj and freedom trying to unite all communities specially Hindu Muslim as according to her "we can't liberate our country or live peaceful and honorable life"¹³.

It was only with the efforts of women that in the year 1926 women got the restricted franchise amongst the Indian states, Travancore was the first to give representation to women Dr Poonam Ducose was the first women health minister in India in 1925, Smt Madhavi Ammal was nominated to the Cochin legislative council. Madras nominated Muthulaxmi Reddi to the legislative council; she was elected as the deputy president of the Madras legislative council. She was the first woman medical graduate of the Madras University. A staunch advocate of women's welfare, she saw to the enactment of the abolition of the Devdasi System, to close brothals and protect minor girls. She brought amendments to the children's Act and worked for the creation of health schools and children's wards. Reddi was also an active campaigner for the Sharda Act which was passed by the central legislature, she devoted her life for the child education and welfare. In 1928, Muthulakshmi Reddi went to England as a member of the Hartog committee appointed by the secretary of state to study women's educational growth and problems in India. When she was returning back to India she represented the country at Paris congress of the women's International alliance as a delegate from India, she also visited America and attended the International women's council in Chicago in 1933. The same year she went to England to give evidence before the joint select committee in connection to women's franchise, besides actively participating for upliftment and education of women and eradication of social ills. Mrs redid was instrumental in bringing about the establishment of cancer

¹² Amrit Bazar Patrika, Jan 9, 1920.

¹³ Amrit Bazar Patrika Jan 5 1922.



hospital in Madras, it was only because of her never saw die attitude she was awarded Padma Bhusan in 1956 for her work.

This article would be incomplete if the contribution of Nightangle of India Sarojini Naidu is not talked about, very well known poetess and politician but very few of us know that she was a peacemaker also, she appeared for the first time on the political platform as the ambassador of Hindu Muslim unity in 1913. She saw the salvation and joy of life in the service to the country, she fought for self- government on the one hand and women's right on the other.

When in 1919 Gandhiji inaugurated the Satyagraha movement, Sarojini was one of the first to take the pledge. After this she went to Bombay, Madras and Ahemdabad and worked incessantly to propagate the cause. She made special appeals to women of the land against the Rowlatt Act and sold literature and took part in Satyagraha demonstrations in Bombay. She worked day and night unmindful of her shattered health for the unity of Indians especially Hindu Muslim. While answering for a question in the Geneva conference she said "I think it is inevitable that one should become interested in politics if one is a true Indian, the Importance of Hindu Muslim unity appealed to me. I lived in a Mohammedan city and you see, I had so many Mohammedan friends very Few Hindus have Had such Intimate relations with Mohammedans as I, for I have Taken part in all their Political and educational movements. I have presided over their meetings and spoken at mosques. That is the thing which counts most among men and women, especially men; the first political speech I made was at a meeting of the Muslim league¹⁴.

Unity was the most important thing for her, whether she spoke to politicians, women, students or people at large, her keyword was unity among races. She felt that freedom could be attained only through unity, it was only because optimistic attitude and her contribution in non cooperation movement, participation in congress sessions and strongly raising voice against the Anti-historic bill (1924) which was calculated to exterminate the Indian community in south Africa. She also presided over the East African congress, in her presidential address she urged the audience "you must with one united voice give an answer to the government and say though in natural history rivers don't flow backward, we shall make the river of your decision flow backward."¹⁵ She had the ability to motivate people and clear the view point of all concerned before the government also. Her services to the

¹⁴ Modern Review, July to Dec 1920, vol 28, P 342.

¹⁵ Report on the Indian National Congress, 1923-24.



nation were amply rewarded and she was elected president of the Indian Nation Congress, infact she holds the title of being the first Indian women president of congress. Appointment to such an exalted office was an honor to the woman hood and recognition of their rights. Her contribution in the freedom movement was commendable; she was a vigilant fighter, who would never give up even in the most difficult times. Another woman of this time was Smt Kamla Devi Chattopadhaya who was a child widow but she challenged the social norms of that time and set an example of inter caste, inter provincial and widow remarriage by re marrying to Harindranath Chattopadhaya, she joined active politics in 1922 ,this courageous lady infact was the first woman to contest election for the legislative assembly of Madras in 1926, she got associated with woman organization and actively participated in civil movement ,guarded the salt pans when the police raided and publicly prepared salt and sold it in the open market one of the most Interesting Incident about her is once she was taken to court for trail instead of worrying about her trail this fearless lady started selling salt in the court room, invited the Magistrate to buy salt and resign and join Satyagrah for her act she was imprisoned for 6 months¹⁶. After her release she joined Hindustani Sena Dal and headed the women organization working under it, and provided literary education, training in domestic hygiene child rearing, sewing and spinning etc the aim behind organizing training programme was to make women fit for working for the cause of country.

Besides these there were a large number of women in Bombay who participated in the movement like Hansa Mehta, Jaishri Raiji, Perin Captain, Sofia Somjee, Lilawati Munshi, Maniben Patel and Khurshed Ben. The story of women participation would be incomplete if the women revolutionaries are not discussed in the article. The Bengal where the cult of violence had never came to an end got anew spark through civil disobedience movement, the organization of the revolutionaries was very active in Dhaka, Comilla and Chittagong and famous young revolutionaries were Samiti and Suniti Bina Das, Kalpana Dutta and Preetilata waddedar, Kamla Chatterjee, Bimla Pratibha Devi, Shobharana Dutta, Ujjala Devi, Parul Mukherji, Jyoti Kanta Dutta, Banala Das. These young brave ladies threatened the governmental authorities through various anti government activities, Preetilata was the first woman who died in action Kalpana who use to dressed up in male attire was involved in various revolutionary activities and many times was arrested, put on trail, sent to jail but she did not

¹⁶ Stri Dharma vol. 12, Nov 1928 to Nov 1929.



give up and continued till she was sentenced to transportation for life¹⁷ Suniti and Samiti shot the Magistrate of Comilla in 1931 for which they were awarded a life sentence. Miss Bina Dass an exceptionally brave girl who at the university convocation ceremony fired five shots at the Bengal governor to kill him, unfortunately she failed in her attempt, she was arrested and sentenced to nine years rigorous imprisonment.¹⁸ The courageous daughters of Punjab contributed in their own way specially Mrs Lado Rani Zutshi, Parvati, Smt Kartar Kaur, Atma Devi and many more they took out processions organized meetings address and encouraged people picketed shops ,law courts educational institutions etc.

In Madras Smt Rukmani Lakshmi pati had the honour of being the first lady to be arrested in connection to salt Satyagrah. The woman of Madras played a prominent role in organizing youngsters into the “Vanar sena” as it was called in the memory of the monkeys who according to the Hindu mythology they had joined and assisted Rama in the war against the king of Lanka Ravan. Another name whose contribution and dedication towards the country cannot be denied is Mrs Durgabai Deshmukh, who became widow at an early age but she was the daughter of Liberty and the Master of her own thoughts, she participated in non-cooperation movement by moving around in the town and selling khaddar. During civil disobedience movement she participated in procession and prepared salt openly, her activities were not liked by government and fetched her punishment. In spite of all odds in life and problems she took up her Master’s degree in Political Science and a bachelor’s in law being the first woman to appear and argue in a murder case, she has to her credit of becoming a member of the constituent Assembly and later a member of the provincial parliament.

The great city of Delhi witnessed the bravery of purdah woman to the great astonishment the woman who would have never taken up the task came out and picketed the shops in Delhi, they stood there and politely urging people not to use foreign goods and appealing to use Khaddar, these delicate sheltered woman were arrested also, but they did not give up, altogether about sixteen Hundred woman were imprisoned.

In Allahabad Swaroop rani, wife of Motilal Nehru, inaugurated the campaign by preparing salt in front of the police station. It was in this place that the police lathi charged a procession led by her in

¹⁷ Annual Report of the Administration of Bengal 1932-33.

¹⁸ Modern Review, Vol. 51 Jan –June.



which she got a blow on her head¹⁹. Kamla Nehru went about like a whirl wind organizing No tax Campaign in the province, Infact Kamla became the dictator of the war council and the acting president of the congress working committee, Another woman who was active in this period was Mrs Mukand Malviya, daughter in law of Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya, she came forward to defy the authorities Chandrawati Lakhanpal, Uma Nehru also supported the cause. Any account of this perion would remain incomplete without mentioning Margaret Cousins. She played a significant role in the general awakening of the masses, Cousins and her husband were the progenitors of the Idea of “vote for woman” in 1917. Mrs Vijay Laxmi Pandit not only participated in the struggle for freedom but in administration also, she was elected to the Allahabad Municipal committee and chairman of the education committee, she served as a vice president of women’s League for peace and freedom, later she contested elections from Kanpur she was elected and appointed minister for local self-government in Uttar Pradesh cabinet, during the quit India movement. She went about kindling the fire of freedom in the hearts of thousands of people she condemned fascism and upheld the ideals of Democracy. The dedication and contribution of Indian women is unbeatable the list of women participants is also endless there are many more names like Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Amar Kaur, Pushpa Gujral in Punjab, Anasuyabai Kale who saved the life of twenty five young men who were associated with Ashti Chimur Chapter of the annals of the freedom struggle of 1942 were saved.²⁰

Khurshed Bhen who organized the volunteer Army in 1930, Usha Mehta who kept up the struggle through Radio, she was one of the prominent workers of the congress Radio. Mrs Aruna Asaf Ali was an ardent soldier of the army of freedom fighter besides actively participating in salt Satyagrah, she was one of the most important figures of the Quit India Movement, she carried her activities underground, she published, bulletins and also edited “Inquilab”, a monthly journal of the Indian National congress. She continued to work inspite of her bad health moving from place to place to awaken the people. At a public meeting at Calcutta she explained that I remained underground and avoided arrest because “I had to go to several places in order to preserve and promote the spirit of national organization.” It’s interesting to know that Prize of five thousand rupees was announced by the authorities to capture her. It was Aruna who suggested the creation of a New Azad Hind Army in India under the Banner of congress. Yusuf Mehrally while writing about her in the tribune observed,

¹⁹ Amrit Bazar Patrika, April 10.

²⁰ Women on March-Sep 1957.



“The heroine of 1857 was the Rani of Jhansi, that of the 1942 revolution is undoubtedly Aruna Asaf Ali”.²¹

Conclusion:

The participation of Women in the freedom movement forms an important and interesting aspect of the history of India. It is of great significance in the history of India in the sense that this participation brought political independence as well as socio cultural regeneration for the country.

In the political history of India, women had occupied an important place through the ages. They were lovers of freedom and had participated in the wars and battles for the sake, their participation proves that they were capable and responsible members of society, they could make decision and hold responsible positions and could also organize and lead movements, such demonstration on the part of women dispelled the doubts about the ability and capacity of women to cope with situations outside the home.

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²¹ The Tribune, Feb 18, 1946.