

Participation of Women in the Indian Freedom Struggle

Dr. Nazrul Hoque

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Alamganj Rangamati College, Alamganj

ABSTRACT

There was a substantial amount of contribution from the women in India's Freedom Struggle. Very often, we pretentiously avoid appreciating and acknowledging their roles but we must not forget that the history of independence will always remain incomplete without addressing the chapter on women. It is indeed disgraceful to call women the weaker section because throughout history women have participated extensively in the revolutionary movements for social changes. The consciousness of women took a unique shape during the War of Independence. Women portrayed an image of undaunted spirit, courage, bravery and political sagacity, they were both morally and physically active during this entire period. However, even after having significant presence in the freedom struggle, woman's role has not received due place and recognition in the construction of history and their sacrifices are merely considered as an extension of their domesticity. It would have been quite impossible for men alone to achieve independence if the women of the society not joined them in this massive struggle. This article attempts to throw a bit of light on the woman figures who with their ventures proved that they are not only capable to manage households but are equally efficient in battlefields and can certainly be an asset for the nation. Hence, we cannot ignore the role of women in the War of Independence.

Keywords: Women, Freedom, Society, Struggle, Role, Independence

INTRODUCTION

"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 got greater intuition, is she not more self sacrificing ...has she not got greater powers of endurance, has she not 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)

The status of women within the country was in a deprived state and this was because of the male dominance prevalent in the society. Women were confined to the households and the rigid social customs like Sati, Purdah system, polygamy, child marriages, restraints on widow remarriage, female foeticide, etc. adversely affected women. Reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Rai, Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar and Jyotiba Phule had to face numerous challenges to raise the status of women within the society. The participation of woman in the Indian Freedom Struggle began in 1817, when Bhima Bai Holkar fought against the British Colonel Malcolm and defeated him in guerilla warfare.

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.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of the study is to evaluate the role of the women of Assam in the freedom struggle of India which reshaped their own lives due to nationalist needs.

METHODOLOGY

The data on this study is mainly concentrated on textual approach, books written by eminent scholars and articles. Papers written on various National and International Journals has been considered to do the framework of this paper. Thus, secondary data has been used to write this.

DISCUSSION

The freedom movement provided a splendid opportunity for women to show their interest and capability in public affairs and brought to prominence some women political leaders. Women's Association with public activity passed through four phases such as Swadeshi Movement (1905-1911), Non-Cooperation (1918-1920), Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-1934) and Quit India Movement (1942). There is no doubt that women participated in the Indian anti-imperialist struggle in large numbers. If we were to recall the names of women leaders in our national movement, we will find that the list is a very long one. Starting with Sarojini Naidu, Rani Laxmi Bai, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Mridula Sarabhai at the national level, we may go on to provincial level leaders like Annie Mascarene and A.V. Kuttimaluamma in Kerala, Durgabai Deshmukh in Madras Presidency, Rameshwari Nehru and Bi Amman in U.P., Satyawati Devi and Subhadra Joshi in Delhi, Hansa Mehta and Usha Mehta in Bombay and several others. Besides all these Indian women, there were also Irish women like Annie Besant and Margaret Cousins, who brought their own knowledge of the Irish experience of British exploitation to bear on India.

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

'Swaraj and Swadeshi' became the slogans of the nationalists. 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. Kumudini Mitter, daughter of Kristo Mitter, a renowned nationalist, was very active during this period. She preached the cause of the extremists through *Suprabhat*; a Bengali Magazine. Sarala Devi was the niece of the great poet, Rabindranath Tagore.

She formed the link between Punjab and Bengal revolutionaries. Madam Cama was the daughter of Sorabji Francina Patel. Cama was in contact with Shyamji Krishna Verma who inspired her to join the revolutionary movement wholeheartedly. Bhikaji Cama was the first Indian who unfolded the Indian

National Flag in a foreign country before an international gathering at International Socialist Conference in Stuttgart (Germany) in 1907.

The entry of Annie Besant into Indian politics in 1914, accelerated the process of women's association with the freedom struggle. Annie Besant organized movement for the emancipation of women and had put forward the demand for political rights for women. Her leadership gave strength, encouragement and inspired the women of the land to participate in the national life of the country and to join the national movement in increased numbers.

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 February 1918, Anusuyaben Sarabhai fought a brave battle on behalf of the workers even against her own brother.

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. 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. In the Central Provinces in Gujarat, 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 Central provinces and Gujarat, 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.

Many women of Nehru family joined the freedom movement. The mother of Jawaharlal Nehru, Swarup Rani Nehru cheerfully gave her husband and children to the country's cause and she herself, old and frail, entered the fray at its thickest. Kamala Nehru, married to Jawaharlal Nehru in 1916, participated in various movements, led the Civil Disobedience Movement. She played a prominent part in organizing the No Tax Campaign in the United Provinces (Now Uttar Pradesh). Jawaharlal Nehru's sister Vijay Laxmi Pandit entered the Non- Cooperation Movement. She was imprisoned thrice in connection with the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1932, 1941 and 1942. In 1937, she was elected to the provincial legislature of the United Provinces and was designated minister of local self government and public health. She played an important role as India's representative in San Francisco during the first meeting of the UN where she challenged the might of the British. She was the first woman to become the President of the United Nations General Assembly. When just 13 years old, Indira Gandhi organized a 'Monkey Army' (Vanar Sena) comprising of young teenagers which proved her intention to fight for the independence of her country. She joined Congress in 1938 and was imprisoned for 13 months in 1942 by the British. She was India's first and only female Prime Minister. Four generations of dedication to public causes by the Nehru family stands out as unique in the annals of history.

The Salt Satyagraha launched by Gandhiji in March 1930, was extended to a mass campaign at the beginning of April 1930. At first, women had not been allowed to participate in this campaign as Gandhi thought they would only complicate matters. But the women of the land, coveting place of equality with

men, could not stay away from the battle. They protested that men and women should not be separated during such critical times. Margaret Cousins sent a spirited reply on behalf of the Women's Indian Association protesting the division of work by sex. Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya met Gandhi and expressed her desire to be involved in the Satyagraha. Durgabai Deshmukh met the local leaders of Madras and suggested that they be included in the movement. On 6 April, 1930, the salt laws were ceremoniously broken by Gandhi. Sarojini Naidu and Methuen Patel were with him.

Sarojini Naidu holds pride of place among women freedom fighters of India. She was responsible for awakening the women of India. She was first woman President of the Indian National Congress in 1925 at the Kanpur Session. In 1928, she went to the USA with the message of the non-violence movement from Gandhiji. When in 1930, Gandhi was arrested for a protest, Sarojini took the helms of his movement. In 1931, she participated in the Round Table Summit, along with Gandhiji and Pundit Malavyaji. She was also the acting President of the Congress in 1932. In 1942, she was arrested during the 'Quit India' protest and stayed in jail for 21 months. She was a gifted poet of the English language and was popularly known as the 'Nightingale of India'. After independence, she became the first ever woman Governor of an Indian State (Uttar Pradesh).

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay was elected President of the Youth Congress in December 1929 and appealed to the National Congress leaders to declare Poorna Swaraj as their goal. On January 26, 1930, Kamaladevi captured the imagination of the entire nation when in a scuffle, she clung to the Tricolor in order to protect it. Blows rained on her as she stood like a rock to protect the flag, bleeding profusely. She galvanized the All India Women's Conference into a dynamic movement.

Rani Gaidinliu was a prominent Naga nationalist woman leader from Manipur who took over the movement of Naga nationalists against the British. Her movement was active during the Civil Disobedience Movement to oust the foreigners from Manipur. For her remarkable patriotism, she received praise from the nationalist leaders. She was arrested in 1932 and released after Indian Independence. 'Rani of the Nagas' the popular title was bestowed upon her by Jawaharlal Nehru for her influence and work for the Nagas.

During Quit India Movement, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur played a leading role in organizing processions and protest meetings. Rajkumari came from the royal family of Kapurthala state. Amrit Kaur was most active, during the Quit India Movement in 1942; she led processions day after day. One such procession was subjected to ruthless lathi charge in Shimla, the processions led by her from 9th to 16th August, 1942, were subjected to lathi charge as many as fifteen times.

Sucheta Kriplani was another ardent nationalist with socialistic orientation. She was a close associate of Jai Prakash Narayan who actively participated in Quit India Movement. This St. Stephen's educated politician sang Vande Mataram in the independence session of the Constituent Assembly on August 15, 1947.

Aruna Asaf Ali was a soldier of the army of freedom fighters. She became prominent during the days of Salt Satyagraha, when she went around addressing meetings, preparing salt and leading processions. Aruna Asaf Ali's courage and resourcefulness during the time was greatly admired by Mahatma Gandhi. Jawaharlal Nehru and Maulana Azad testified the important role played by her in the 1942 Quit India Movement. Aruna Asaf Ali was one of the most important figures of the Quit India Movement. The British Government desperately wanted to arrest her and the then princely sum of five thousand rupees was announced as a reward for her capture. She published bulletins and edited with Ram Manohar Lohia

the 'Inquilab'. Yusuf Mehraly was to write in later years that "the heroine of 1857 was the Rani of Jhansi that of the 1942 revolution was undoubtedly Aruna Asaf Ali."

Assam the eastern most state of India was noticeably drawn to the national mainstream in 1921 with the formation of the Assam Provincial Congress Committee (APCC). Gandhiji's leadership of the National Congress in 1920 and call for the Non-cooperation movement drew a large number of men and women throughout the country to the national struggle for freedom. In 1921, Gandhiji visited Assam. It had an electrifying effect on the people of Assam. His good impression of the women of Assam greatly increased the latter's self-confidence and strength of mind. During this period the Assamese women participated in the movement through the Assam Chatra Sanmilan (Assam Student Association) and the Assam Sahitya Sabha (Assam Literary Society) till the formation of the Assam Mahila Samiti (Assam Women Association) in 1926, which was a provincial women association. Large number of women joined the movement by participating in meetings, organizing processions and boycotting schools, courts and offices. Mongri, who was a labour in the tea garden and an alcoholic was so influenced by Gandhiji that she not only gave up drinking but also actively participated in the anti-liquor drive. She died in a clash during the picketing of liquor shops and became the first woman from Assam to be martyred in the Non-Cooperation Movement. Bhanumati Talukdar, a mother of three children from Kamrup engaged herself so much with the Congress that the locals called her 'Volunteerani Bai' and Gandhiji called her the 'Sarojini of Assam'. The woman wing of Assam Pradesh Congress Committee was set up in September 1940, with Pushpalata Das and Amritprabha Das as Joint Secretaries. Chandraprabha Saikiani was one of the main guiding forces among them. In 1942, the Mrityu Bahini was formed that showed female militancy for the first time. Kanaklata, Ratnabala Phukan, Buddeswari Hazarika, Khahuli Nath and Damayanti Bora were all active members of Mrityu Bahini.

Besides the hundreds and thousands of Indian women who dedicated their lives for India's freedom, there were also foreign women who saw in India a hope for the redemption of the world. The story of women's participation in India freedom struggle is the story of making bold choices, finding themselves on streets, inside jail and in legislature. After so many efforts, India achieved Independence on August 15, 1947. Thousands of Indian women dedicated their lives for obtaining freedom of their motherland. The non-violent movement that gained India her freedom not only took women along but was dependent for its success on the active participation of women. Perhaps for the first and the only time in world history, the power of a mighty global empire on which the sun never set had been challenged and overcome by the moral might of people armed only with peace, ideas and courage. In the end, we can say that in the last fifty-year, women movement has matured and has progressively deepened its relationship with other movement like trader unions, environmental movements and other progressive movements which fight against all forms of oppression, injustice and degradation. 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 and played a very significant role in it. They were second to none in the respect of making contribution and taking interests in the ongoing freedom struggle of the country. With a limited participation in the 1921 phase, the involvement of women in the subsequent phases of the movement became massive in scale and similar in nature to that of the male participants. Countless women also contributed to the cause of freedom by bearing patiently the hardships. This struggle of the women headed

by women's organization was also the struggle for emancipation. Providing them a public space, it gave woman a scope to define a self-image, in terms of an individual and separate identity rather than the traditional identity of being a daughter, wife and mother. It was for this reason that the British Prime Minister declared in 1930 that who, they were afraid of was not Gandhiji but the innumerable women of India who became the mouthpiece of the message of revolt in every household. No military force could suppress such an awakening.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Chand, Tara; History of freedom Movement in India, Vol IV, Publication Division, Govt. of India, Delhi
2. Thaper, Suruchi; Women in the Indian National movement: Unseen Faces and Unheard Voices (1930-32), Publication Pvt. Ltd., 2006
3. Taneja, Anoop; Gandhi, Women and National Movement: 1920-1947, Delhi, 1962
4. Mazumdar, B.B. and Mazumdar, B.P.; Congress and Congressmen in the Pre-Gandhian Era (1885-1917), Calcutta, 1968
5. Kaur, Monmohan; Role of Women in Freedom Movement, Sterling Publishers, Delhi 1968
6. Basu, Aparna; The role of women in the Indian Struggle for Freedom
7. Panda, Snehalata (1990); Determinants of Political Participation: Women and Public Activity, Ajanta Publication, New Delhi
8. Kumar, Radha (1995); From Chipko to Sati: "The Contemporary Indian Movement
9. International Journal of Current Advanced Research, Vol. 5, Issue 6, pp. 976-979, June 2016
10. Dash, Siddhartha. Role of Women in India's Struggle For Freedom, Orissa Review, 2010