

Unknown Sacrifices : Contribution of Women in Indian Freedom Struggle

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Abstract

History of Indian freedom struggle would be incomplete without mentioning the contribution of women. Participation of women at large scale legitimized Indian freedom struggle. Women from liberal homes and conservative families, urban centres and rural districts, single and married, young and old, came forward and joined the struggle against British rule. They participated in demonstrated in the streets, went jails, suffered indignity there but they never step behind from the movement. They had to undergo innumerable difficulties and atrocities as political prisoners. Participation of women in freedom struggle validated Indian unity and re-shaped it. It legitimates their claim to a place in the governance of India.

The history of the Indian freedom struggle is a story of historic deeds and sacrifice of men and women. Participation of women legitimized Indian freedom struggle. The sacrifice made by women will occupy the foremost place in Indian History. Anti British feelings had emboldened the Indian women to such extent that they prepared to offer any sacrifice for the country. Women from liberal homes and conservative families, urban centres and rural districts, single and married, young and old, came forward and joined the struggle against British rule. Thus, history of Indian freedom struggle would be incomplete without mentioning the contribution of women. In this study, **an attempt has been made to discuss in details participation and contribution of women in different freedom movements and their life in jails.**

I

Participation of women in freedom struggle began over a century before the country became independent. During the uprising of 1857, Rani Lashmoi Bai of Jhansi, gave courageous resistance of British. Begum Hazrat Mahal (died in 1879), refused British offered Rs. 12 Lakh pension and courageously participated in the revolt of 1857. Another woman Jhalkari Bai fought and laid her life during the uprising of 1857. By the early twentieth century, the awakening of women was complete. Women of Bengal and Punjab played an important role promoting the cause of freedom. A number of Bengali women wrote to the Viceroy in support of the Ilbert Bill that would allow the Indian judges to try cases involving Europeans. In 1889, four years after the Indian National Congress was founded, ten women attended its annual meetings¹. In 1905, the British partitioned the province of Bengal. Women along with men protested against this division. Indeed, in Swadeshi Movement, women boycotted British goods and popularize *swadeshi*, crushed their glass bangles and observed non-cooking days as a ritual of protest². In Delhi, Agyavati was a freedom fighter who took interest in the Swadeshi Movement³. Sushila Devi of Sialkot addressed a series of lectures in 1910 in which she attacked the

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British government and appealed the women to join the hands. In 1919, British government passes Rowlett Acts, which prohibited public protest and suspended civil liberties. Many women along with men participated against this act. Unfortunately, these protestors were massacred at Jallianwala Bagh (walled garden) Amritsar⁴.

During the non-cooperation movement in 1921, Mahatma Ghandi initially prescribed a limited role for the women i.e., that of boycott and propagate *swadehi*. However, women themselves played a great active role. Maganti Annapoorna Devi, a brave woman of Andhra Pradesh, burnt her all rupees 1200 worth foreign cloths, gave away her all gold ornaments to Gandhiji, cancelled her American journey and participated in freedom fight. When the suffering and humiliations of the Punjab came to light, the Punjabi women did not lag behind in this movement they adopted *khadi* as symbol of this movement. Sarla Devi Ghosal of Bengal turning into Sarla Devi Chaudharani after her marriage to Pandit Ram Bhaj Dutt Chaudhary of Lahore in 1905, became the trendsetter, whenever she attended parties, marriages and Purdah Club Meetings she wore *khadi sari* that popularized the use of the *khadi* among Punjabi women⁵. Urmila Devi, the widowed sister of the Bengali leader C.R. Das, urged women to be ready to leave their homes to serve the country⁶. During this movement, in November 1921, a demonstration of a thousand women greeted the Prince of Wales in Bombay. In December, Basanti Devi, C.R. Das's wife, Urmila Devi and Suniti Devi, his niece, stunned the nation by participating in open demonstration on the streets of Calcutta. They were arrested and torched by British Government while selling *khaddar* (Homespun cloth). Similar movements took place in other parts of the country, and this involved not just women from respectable middle class families but prostitutes and *devadasis* also⁶. In Punjab, the women workers of Arya Samaj were also responsible for arousing national spirit among the people. Smt. Purni was a prominent worker of Arya Samaj, she toured the various districts of the Punjab and advocated the cause of *swadeshi*⁸.

During the movement, in Punjab, the first ladies meeting held on 6th and 7th December 1922 which was presided over by Kasturba Gandhi. Radha Devi, wife of Lala Lajpat Rai was the chairperson of the Reception Committees. She motivated the Punjabi women to support the movement⁹. Bai Amman (Abadi Bano Begum), mother of Shaukat and Muhammad Ali, was one of the important personalities during 1919-1922. After a whole life behind the *pardah*, she went about addressing meetings all over India. At a mass meeting in Punjab, she lifted her veil and addressed the crowd that 'a mother did not acquire a veil in front of her children'.¹⁰ In a meeting at Shimla in September 1922, she made a special appeal to women to wear *khadi*. She urged women to enlist as Congress volunteers and if their men folk were arrested to join the pickets lines and keep 'The Flag Flying'.¹¹ Amar Kaur, wife of Mohan Lal Ahulwalia, used to go into the districts advocating the cause of the Congress. She organised several processions of women and offered herself for arrest at Lyallpur. She addressed many public gatherings of men and women and said them the economic advantages of boycott of foreign clothes¹².

During civil disobedience movement (1930-32), throughout the country, women again showed their courage. Thousands of women came out on the streets, broke the seclusion, and publically participated in movement. In Punjab, 5000 women of Lahore took active part in the movement. Processions, picketing meetings and *prabhat pheris* became their daily routine. The life and soul of the movement were Lado Rani Zutshi, and three of her daughters Manmohini, Sgyama and Janak, Parvati Devi, daughter of Lala Lajpat Rai, Kartar Kaur, Atma Devi and many others¹³. These women provided local and even national leadership at a time when it was much

needed, when all the formal leaders were in jail¹⁴.

During the Dandi March, Gandhi appealed the women to participate in the Salt Satyagraha. He named Sarojini Naidu as his second successor after Abbas Tyabji and she carried out her mission with rare distinction.¹⁵ Sarojini Naidu led the raid on the Dharasana Salt Works. Many of her Indian supporters feared for her safety, but she replied that **'I am here not as a woman but as a General'**. Besides her, thousands of women participated in the illegal manufacture of salt, picket in foreign cloth and liquor shops and took part in processions in Bombay, Bengal and Madras. In north India, women from respectable homes came forward to participate in the movement.¹⁶

Rukmani Lakshmi pathy of Madras, accompanying C. Rajagopalcharial in the march to Vedaranyam to break the salt law in 1931, she was arrested and became the first female political prisoner in Vellore women's jail.¹⁷ Paladugu Varalakshamma, a brave Andhra woman, participated in *Videshi Vastra Dhan* in 1931, police threw mud, colour water on her, and was arrested. Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur actively participated in the Dandi March along with Gandhi. She took an active part in salt campaign and was arrested in Bombay. She also organized a Spinners Association in Punjab and extensively promoted the use of *khadi*¹⁸. In Bombay, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (she joined the struggle after leaving at her home her child in Poona) was to lead a batch of about 2000 volunteers for the raid on Wadala Salt Pan (Bombay), unfortunately, she was arrested. She requested the women to join movement in large numbers¹⁹. Many men, women and children on her call took part in the raid, rushed through the police cordon, and snatched away the salt. Again, on the raid on Wadala Salt Pan, 500 volunteers were sent. These volunteers were included, Parsi, Muslim, Sikhs and the others. A few women proceeded to Wadala under the leadership of Lilawati Munshi. Lilawati accompanied by Sikh women and other volunteers insisted on going through the cordon. The women were placed under arrest and the volunteers were driven away²⁰. During this movement, women proved their importance in the agitational politics. Many merchants, from the fear of picketing by women, signed pledge not to sell foreign cloth and liquor. Thus, women from all parts of India participated in **Civil Disobedience Movement**.

During Quit India Movement, 1942, when most of the men-folk were in prison, women came forward to take charge of the struggle. During the Quit India movement (1942), Punjab responded to the call very energetically. During the movement, Amar Kaur was detained in women's cell at Lahore. However, she successfully hoisted the tri-color flag on the jail gate in 1942. Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur was arrested at Kalka on 6th October 1942²¹. On November 1942, one hundred and four students were arrested including 22 girls. During this movement, Pushpa Gujral, a political activists played an important role²². Like Punjab, in other parts of country, women played very significant role in the movement. Women were ready to do anything for the country. Unfortunately, we have very little information about the participation of women in other parts of the country. Inspired by the courage of Indian women, Mahatama Gandhi remarked, '*when the history of India's fight for independence comes to be written, the sacrifice made by the women of India will occupy the foremost place*'.

II

Not only in peaceful processions, hundreds of women in Bengal and Punjab got involved in violent revolutionary movement and they were now actually shooting at magistrates and governors. Sarla Devi Chaudharani was instrument in establish link between the revolutionaries of Bengal and Punjab. She got involved in a physical culture movement for the Bengali youth or

for a few women who participated in the revolutionary movement²³. Another daring woman Satywati Talwar, wife of Ram Saran Das Talwar of Kapurthala, set an example of faith and loyalty in the name of friendship for the sake of missionary mission. Persuaded by her husband to stay with Rash Bihari Bose (eminent revolutionary of Bengal) as his wife in a rented house at Lahore for some days and she abided by the required emergency. Nanibala, a widow, joined the New Jugantar Party, a revolutionary party and acted as the house keeper of the revolutionary leaders, occasionally posing as the wife of one of the revolutionary. In 20 July 1929, a procession of nine women under the leadership of Smt. Parvati Devi, daughter of Lala Lajpat Rai, was a Congress worker was taken out in Lahore. The procession shouted the slogans 'Long Live Revolution; and 'Down with Imperialism'. Besides these women, many young girls showed great bravery and they themselves involved in the revolutionary activities. Bina Das, the young college student fired a pistol at Governor Jackson, is the most famous of the revolutionary women. On 14 December 1931, Santi and Suniti, two school girls from Kamalia (West Bengal) shot Magistrate Stevens to death. They wanted to sacrifice themselves for the country and were angry on the decision of judge that they would be not hanged but would instead go to prison.²⁴

It is noteworthy that many revolutionary activities were done with the help of women supporters. In 1929, before Delhi Assembly bomb explosion, in Delhi factory, Sushila Mohan, a devout Arya Samajist, poetess and singer who being known as *Bulbul-e-Punjab*, who had taken bomb-making training, made bomb shells and took the gunny bag from Rawalpindi to Lahore and handed over the bag to Dr. Leelawati in order to evade the police detection. Similarly, Durga Devi or Bhabi, wife of Bhagwati Charan Vohra was a revolutionary woman. She supported Naujawan Bharat Sabha (party) with her financial help when, its members were in distress after murdering J.P. Saunders in 1928 by the team of Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Chander Shekar Azad. Durga Devi gave an amount of rupees 500 to Sukhdev to meet their needs. She successfully, escorted Bhagat Singh and Rajguru along with her small children in making their escape from Lahore to Calcutta. She had impersonated herself as wife of Bhagat Singh and Rajguru as their domestic servant. In Calcutta, Bhagat Singh was given shelter by Sushila Mohan, who had already happened to be there in town. Similarly, Smt. Rali Devi, mother of Sukhdev and her adopted daughter escorted Chander Shekar Azad and Kishori Lal out of Lahore to Delhi. Nikko Devi of Peshwar was trained supplier of arms to them.²⁵

III

Besides individual efforts, women organised themselves into many organizations. The women's political Organizations, *Rastriya Stree Sang*, *Desh Sevika Sang*, and *Nari Satyagraha Smiti*, played an important role. At the All India level, the first formal women organization to appear in Madras in 1917 was the Women's Indian Association. In 1925, the National Council of Women in India was formed as a branch of the International Council of Women, the lady Mehribai Tata remained its main spirit during the early years. In 1927, the most important of these organizations, the All India Women's Conference came into existence, initially a non-political body for women's emancipation.²⁶ Smt. S. Ambujammal of Madras in 1928 formed the Women's Swadeshi League.²⁷ The *Mahila Rastriya Sangha* (MRS) begun in 1928, was the first formal organization to mobilize women for political work.

Women were also sympathetic for the revolutionary freedom fighters and time to time they helped the revolutionary with great zeal and bravery. After the news of death sentence passed

on Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev, the student union organised picketing under the leadership of Manmohini Zutshi. Around seventeen women were arrested. Some women in Lyallpur held a meeting on 11 March 1931 under the presidentship of Smt. Vidyawati for the mercy appeal of death sentence. After the execution of the three revolutionaries on 23 March 1931, over 80,000 people including 5000 women, gathered at Minto Park to offer prayer for the departed souls. Women sobbed and fainted in grief and a funeral processions was taken out in Lahore attended by 40,000 bareheaded men and 5000 women wearing black *saries*.²⁸ Thus, women lent their valuable support in the revolutionary activities in many ways without caring their life.

In 1928, Subhas Chandra Bose, organized congress women's volunteer corps under the leadership of 'Colonel' Latika Ghosh. She enlisted 300 women, that had marched on the streets of Calcutta in full uniforms consisted of dark green saris with red borders worn over white blouses the colour of the Congress flag. Again, in 1943, he raised an expatriate Indian National Army, he decided to add a women's regiment, which he called The Rani Jhansi Regiment, which was joined by about 1500 women.²⁹ Some important Punjabi women belonged to INA were Ajaib Kaur, Amar Kaur and Bhagwant Kaur. Ajaib Kaur, wife of Niranjn Singh organised people for the freedom of the country. She collected 10,000 dollars for INA and contributed 8000 dollars herself. Amar Kaur, wife of Rur Singh joined INA and worked for three years. Bhagwan Kaur, wife of Kesar Singh donated 10,000 dollars to INA fund. She served INA in Rani Jhansi Regiment and surrendered herself to the British forces in 1945.³⁰

IV

Arrests were made for leading processions, holding meetings and delivering provocative speeches against colonial rule. Arrest were also made for picketing, staging boycotts, distributing proscribed literature or raising nationalist flags on government buildings. Arrests could be made both in accordance with ordinary law and the law of ordinance, which were institutes by the Colonial Government.³¹

Women freedom fighters were also arrested and sentenced to jail. During the Non-cooperation movement, Parvati Devi was arrested in Meerut for the so-called inflaming speeches. She was convicted and was sentenced to two years imprisonment. This was the highest sentence so far given to any woman.³² Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay before the raid at Wadala Salt Pan was arrested and sentenced to 6 months imprisonment and a fine of rupees 150, and in case of default three months simple imprisonment.³³ Vidyawati was sentenced to one-year simple imprisonment for seditious speeches. Nikko Devi of Peshwar was arrested in February 1931. She was directed to leave Lahore. Durga Devi had joined the civil disobedience movement in order to evade police arrest with a changed name as Indumati. However, she surrendered herself to police in Lahore. In November 1932, Suhsila Devi was also arrested.³⁴ By 1933, most of the women revolutionary from Bengal were in prison. There had been between sixty to seventy revolutionary women, who had aided the revolutionary groups and of those approximately forty were imprisoned.³⁵

Life and treatment in jails was not good. Women were treated very harsh and severely in the jails. There was only one jail for the women political prisoners at Lahore in the Punjab. But they were kept in other districts jails Multan, Jhang, Agra, Jalandhar, Amritsar, Ambala, Karnal, Rohatak, Saharanpur, Hissar, Nabha and Patials. Sometimes 10-12 women were crammed in one barrack. They were not given basic necessities. Every method was used to break their spirit.

Harsh treatment, bad environment of the jail and serious hardships affected the health of women. The food, which was given to them, was 'C' class. At the time of illness, no proper medical facilities were given. Second, imprisonment was a social stigma as the women who went to jail were generally ill-treated by their immediate social circles. Things went so far that many a time the family was not prepared to take the jailed women back. When women were in jails, it became particularly difficult for their children.³⁶

The behaviour of jail authorities with women prisoners was very tyrannical. Smt. Kartar Kaur shared her experiences in a pathetic speech on 10 September 1930 at Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar. She said, 'Government has now run short of bread, even a lamp is not given in the jail and threw snakes, scorpions, and centipedes from within. Nothing appears in the papers. We were got beaten and after all the tyrants had to provide us with a lamp. The jail authorities forced the Hindu female convicts to carry dung. Sixteen women, who were sentenced to transportation for life, were sold, and the amount recovered thereafter was kept by the Government'. Manmohini Zutshi was jailed in 1930, narrated her experience that 'most of their time spent on cooking, washing and cleaning the barracks'.³⁷

Women prisoners related to India revolutionary and political leaders were particularly targeted and treated with unkindness during their stay in jail. For instances, Durga Bhabhi was kept in solitary confinement. Nobody was allowed to meet her. Anybody who came to meet her had to give four *annas* to the warden. Besides, many restrictions were put on women in jails. In Jail Rajkumari Amrit Kaur's brother passed away when she was in jails. The restrictions were such that she was not even allowed to send a message of condolence to her sister-in-law.³⁸ Her letters to her sisters-in-law were not allowed to be sent. Similarly, when Amar Kaur became seriously ill in Lahore Jail, her husband was not allowed to meet her.³⁹ During Quit India Movement, Pushpa Gujral went to jail with her little daughter. In jail, her daughter became sick with typhoid. Pushpa Gujral remained dauntless and made arrangements for her treatment in the jail. Harman Kaur of district Faridkot also went jail along with her two children. Both her children died in Ferozpur Jail. Later on, when she was arrested for the second time, she gave birth to a girl child in Lahore Jail.⁴⁰ Similarly, Paladugu Varalakshamma gave birth to a girl in jail.

In retrospect, we can see that women played very significant role in the Indian freedom struggle. They were not lag behind in matter of sacrifice. Thousands of women from all corners of country, belonging to different families, step forward in the freedom struggle. They were arrested and exploited but they never step behind from the movement. They participated in demonstrated in the streets, went jails, suffered indignity there, and came back to their families with stigma attached, signifying a remarkable change in India social attitude. They had to undergo innumerable difficulties and atrocities as political prisoners. However, the participation of women in freedom struggle validated Indian unity and re-shaped it. It legitimates their claim to a place in the governance of India. Let us elucidate the role of Indian women who participated in the freedom struggle against British East India Company and British Empire and made great and rich contribution in various ways.

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