

WOMEN AND INDIA'S INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT

Role of Indian women:

The entire history of the freedom movement is replete with the saga of bravery, sacrifice and political sagacity of great men and women of the country. This struggle which gained momentum in the early 20th century, threw up stalwarts like Mahatma Gandhi, Lala Lajpat Rai, Motilal Nehru, Abul Kalam Azad, C. Rajagopalachari, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Jawaharlal Nehru and Subash Chander Bose. Their number and stature often gives us an erroneous impression that it was only a man's movement. But it is not so. Many prominent women played a leading role in the freedom movement.

The important place assigned to women in India dates back to the time of the Vedas and Smritis. Manu declared that where women were adored, Gods frequented that place, During the Vedic age the position of women in society was very high and they were regarded as equal partners with men in all respects. Who had not heard of Maitri, Gargi, Sati Annusuya and Sita?

In keeping with this tradition, burden of tears and toils of the long years of struggle for India's freedom was borne by the wives, mothers, and daughters, silently and cheerfully. The programme of self-imposed poverty and periodical jail going was possible only because of the willing co-operation of the worker's family. In the various resistance movements in the villages, the illiterate women played this passive but contributory part as comrades of their menfolk.

Rani Laxmibai

The first name that comes to mind is that of the famous Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi. Dressed in men's clothes, she led her soldiers to war against the British. Even her enemies admired her courage and daring. She fought valiantly and although beaten she refused to surrender and fell as a warrior should, fighting the enemy to the last. Her remarkable courage inspired many men and women in India to rise against the alien rule.

Begum Hazrat Mahal

Another woman whom we remember in this connection was Begum Hazrat Mahal, the Begaum of Oudh. She took active part in the defence of Lucknow against the British. Although, she was queen and used to a life of luxury, she appeared on the battle-field herself to encourage her troops. Begam Hazrat Mahal held out against the British with all her strength as long as she could. Ultimately she had to give up and take refuge in Nepal.

During the later half of the 20th century the struggle for freedom gained momentum and more women took leading part in it.

Kasturba Gandhi

The life companion of the Father of the Nation contributed her mite to the freedom movement in a subtle manner. As the closest associate of Gandhiji during his epic struggle in South Africa and in India, she suffered in no small measure.

One simply marvels and wonders how this quiet self-effacing woman underwent countless trials as Gandhiji's wife, and how gallantly she agreed to the Mahatma's endless experiments and self-imposed life of poverty and suffering.

Swarup Rani and Kamala

The mother of Jawaharlal Nehru, Swarup Rani Nehru cheerfully gave her husband and children to the country's cause and herself, old and frail entered the fray at its thickest.

Jawaharlal's brave wife, Kamala; kept smiling all through the long years of travail of her brief life.

Kamala Nehru was a flame that flickered briefly in the raging storm of the freedom movement in India. Not everybody knows that she braved lathi-charges, picketed liquor shops and languished in jail for the cause of Indian independence. She influenced her husband Jawaharlal and stood by him in his determination to plunge into the movement started by Mahatma Gandhi, to free the motherland from the clutches of the British rulers.

With Jawaharlal away in prison, Kamala took to social work to begin with. She started a dispensary in her house in Allahabad and also started a movement for women's education and to get them out of purdah.

As a member of the Rashtriya Stree Sabha which was set up on a Jallianwala Day in 1921, Kamala Nehru worked for the entry of Harijan into temples.

Kamala Nehru was first among the group of volunteers to sell contraband salt during the Salt Satyagraha. All through the long months of 1930, the Desh Sevika Sangh which she led along with Kusturba Gandhi and Sarojini Naidu, did hard jobs like policing disturbed areas in Bombay. While the men were in jail, they took over.

Sarojini Naidu:

Great as a poet and orator, Sarojini Naidu was one of the most enlightened women of modern India.

She was one among the many men and women who dedicated their lives for the freedom struggle of the country under the guidance of Gandhiji. At a very young age she wrote many patriotic poems which inspired people in India to throw off the foreign yoke. She joined the Home Rule movement launched by Annie Besant. This was her first step in politics. On the call of Gopal Krishna Gokhale, she joined the Indian National Congress in 1915. She propounded the idea of Swarajya in her powerful speech at the Lucknow Conference in 1916. In 1921 she participated in the Non-Cooperation movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi. She became President of the Congress in 1925. When Mahatma Gandhi started his Civil disobedience movement in 1930, Sarojini Naidu became his principal assistant. She was arrested along with Gandhiji and other leaders. But this did not deter her spirits. In 1931, she was invited along with Gandhiji to the Second Round Table Conference in London. In 1942, Sarojini Naidu joined the "Quit India" movement launched by Gandhiji and again was victim of the wrath of the British government

and jailed. The repeated jail terms only gave her more courage and she continued to take active part in the freedom movement. After India became independent in 1947, she was appointed Governor of Uttar Pradesh as a token of recognition of her services.

Padmaja Naidu

Sarojini's daughter Miss Padmaja Naidu devoted herself to the cause of Nation like her mother. At the age of 21, she entered the National scene and became the joint founder of the Indian National Congress of Hyderabad. She spread the message of Khadi and inspired people to boycott foreign goods. She was jailed for taking part in the "Quit India" movement in 1942. After Independence, she became the Governor of West Bengal. During her public life spanning over half a century, she was associated with the Red Cross. Her services to the Nation and especially her humanitarian approach to solve problems will long be remembered.

Vijay Laxmi Pandit

Sister of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru also played a great role in the freedom movement. She was elected to Uttar Pradesh Assembly in 1936 and in 1946. She was the first woman in India to hold a ministerial rank. She was imprisoned thrice for taking part in the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1932, 1941 and 1942. After Independence, she continued to serve the country. She was the first woman to become president of the United Nations General Assembly.

Sucheta Kripalani

The contribution of Sucheta Kripalani in the struggle for freedom is also worthy of note. She courted imprisonment for taking part in freedom struggle. She was elected as a member of Constituent Assembly in 1946. She was general secretary of Indian National Congress from 1958 to 1960, and Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh from 1963 to 1967. Sucheta Kripalani was in the words of Shrimati Indira Gandhi, “a person of rare courage and character who brought credit to Indian womanhood.”

FOREIGN WOMEN IN THE INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT OF INDIA

Besides the hundreds and thousands of Indian women who dedicated their lives for the cause of their motherland, there were a number of noble and courageous foreign women who saw in India – its religion, its philosophy and its culture, a hope for the redemption of the world. They thought that in India’s spiritual death shall world find its grave.

These noble women were sick of the material west and found in India and in its civilization, solace for their cramped souls.

First of all we will take up those who were influenced by the great men of India like Swami Vivekananda, Aurobindo Ghosh, Mahatma Gandhi, and came to this country to serve it.

Sister Nivedita

‘Here reposes Sister Nivedita who gave her all to India’ - Epitaph on her Samadhi.

Sister Nivedita was one among the host of foreign women who were attracted towards Swami Vivekananda and Hindu philosophy. Born in Ireland on 28 October 1867, she arrived in India in January, 1898, in search of truth. She was impressed by the ideals of Womanhood in India. She once remarked that India was the land of great women. She, however, felt that Indian women needed, to cultivate among themselves a wider and broader concept of the nation, so that they could participate along with men in building a free and strong nation.

On the death of her spiritual Master, Swami Vivekananda, she freed herself from the obligations of the Monastic Order, spoke and wrote against the British policy in India. She attacked Lord Curzon for the Universities Act of 1904 and partition of Bengal in 1905. She held the British responsible for disastrous state of Indian economy; she attended the Benares Congress in 1905 and supported the Swadeshi Movement. She helped Nationalist groups like the Dawn Society and the Anusilan Samiti. She was a member of the Central Council of Action formed by Aurobindo Ghosh and took up the editorship of the Karmayogin when he left for Pondicherry.

She propagated for the cause of India throughout America and Europe. Swami Vivekananda described her as a real Lioness. Rabindranath Tagore regarded her as Lok-Mata and Aurobindo Ghosh as Agni-sikha.

The Mother

Mira Alphonse, the Mother, was born in Paris in 1878. She had shown depth of vision and fragrance of expression even in her early childhood. She came to India in 1914 and met Shri Aurobindo. She was associated with the work of Shri Aurobindo when he started a philosophical monthly named Arya on August 15, 1914, to express his vision of man and his divine destiny.

She took charge of Ashram in Pondicherry in 1926. She was the inspirer of Auroville, the international town near Pondicherry. It was to serve as a meeting place for the followers of Shri Aurobindo.

Paying her tribute to the Mother at a women's gathering in Kanpur the late Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi said: "The Mother was a dynamic lady, who came from France and adopted the Indian culture. She played an important role in motivating women like Mrs. Annie Besant and Mrs. Nellie Sen Gupta, The Mother had also contributed to enrich India's age-old heritage and culture".

Mira Behn

Mira Behn, or Mira as she was most often called was the western world's acknowledgement of guilt and the will to atone for it. This was not at all in her won consciousness, but in that which put her forth. Gandhi did not evoke her. The most he did was to tell her she could come if she wished. She came as a daughter not only of the western mind but, specifically, of that class which had made and governed the British empire in India. Her father had been the naval commander-in-chief there.

This is how Madeleine Slade brought up in affluent environment of a proud aristocracy came to serve the cause of India's freedom by identifying herself completely with the life and work of Gandhi, who promised to Romain Rolland that he would leave no stone unturned, to assist her to become a bridge between the East and the West.

Daughter of a British Admiral Madeleine Slade renounced the life of luxury and worked in the service of India. She accompanied Gandhi to England in 1931 and undertook a tour of America and Britain in 1934 to enlist sympathy for the Indian cause. She suffered imprisonment in 1932-33 and 1942-44 for the cause of India's Independence.

Dr. Annie Besant

Dr. Annie Besant, along with Charles Braudlaugh, it is said, did more than anyone had done in a hundred years to break down the barriers of bigotry and prejudice, who won the greatest victories of their times for the freedom of speech and liberty of the press which Britain enjoys today.

A strong votary of truth, she came to India in 1893 at the age of 46, impressed as she was by its great religion and philosophy. On arrival, she found that the state of things in India were bad, and that the Indians had almost lost their moorings. Through her lectures, she tried to awaken them to their lost heritage by dedicating herself to the cause of religion, society and education of India. In doing so, she was watchful that Indian revival must be through Indian traditions and customs and not through any of the European concepts. As early as 1898 and

later in 1902 she urged Indians to wear native dress, use and develop Indian manufacturers and also develop a national language.

Dr. Annie Besant entered active politics in 1914. She demanded Home Rule for India and suffered internment for it from June to September 1917. By then she had tried and achieved unification of the Congress and Hindus and Muslims in 1916. She had done ample work to formulate favourable opinion about the Indian question in outside world. The August declaration of 1917 is attributed to her efforts.

She fittingly became the president of Indian National Congress in 1917. Tilak declared that if we were nearer our goals, it was due to Dr. Annie Besant's sincere efforts. Gokhale considered her a true daughter of Mother India. Subash considered her a doughty fighter for Indian freedom. Jawaharlal Nehru said that in India, her memory would endure, especially for the part she played in our freedom struggle in the dark days of the Great War and afterwards. Sarojini Naidu, had this to say.

“Had it not been for her and her enthusiasm, one could not have seen Mr. Gandhi leading the cause of Indian freedom today. It was Mrs. Besant who laid the foundation of modern India – Dr. Besant was a combination of Parvati, Lakshmi and Saraswati.”