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**REVIEW ARTICLE**

**WOMEN AND THE INDIAN FREEDOM MOVEMENT**

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# Women and the Indian Freedom Movement

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In the great uprising of 1857 some Indian women boldly contributed for the cause of freedom. Maharani Lakshmibai "the bravest of all rebels shines like a bright star on the horizon of that mass movement. She was wholeheartedly assisted not only by the Hindu women but Muslim women also. The number of such women crusaders was very few. The mobility of women was by and large restricted to the four walls of their dwellings. An average Indian woman had no access to school, college and other public places. A fairly large majority of them lived as deaf and dumb driven cattle.

It has been very often and correctly said that India's struggle for independence has also been a struggle for Indian women's socio-economic emancipation. The resurgence of the Indian womenfolk has also been helped by some foreign born women like Dr. Annie Besant, Neili Sengupta and Margret Cousins who worked in India, for country's freedom and its socio-economic development. The path shown by them is continuously being followed by the rural women also. Many of the enlightened women then, plunged into India's freedom movement. There is a long and unending list of the women who enthusiastically participated in this crusade in one way or the other, But the sufferings and sacrifices of Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur, Kasturba Gandhi, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Sucheta Kriplani, Sister Nivedita, Kamla Devi, Subhadra Kumari Chauhan, Kamala Das Gupta, Durgabai Deshmukh, Basanti Das, Meera Behn, Aruna Asaf Ali, Behn Satyawati Devi, Lila Roy, Ramabai Pandita, Rani Gaidinliu etc are worth remembering.

Madam Bhikaji Cama the first Indian women socialist was also the first Indian women revolutionary who fought for her motherland's freedom, after the 1857 uprising. She was born at Bombay on 24<sup>th</sup> September 1861. She was 24 when the first session of the Indian National Congress was held at Bombay. The same year she was married to Rustomji Cama. Since both of them had divergent views, their marriage proved an utter failure. In 1902 when she fell very sick, her husband sent her to London for treatment, and in all probability to get rid of her. In England she contact with the Indian revolutionaries, particularly Shyamaji Krishan Verma, living there. Before that she came in contact with Dadabhai Naoroji there, in whose election

she worked day and night. Her activities enraged the British Government and before she could be arrested she arrived in Paris and continued her revolutionary activities there also. She did not appreciate 'the politics of petition' and held a belief that the British imperialists listened only to the language of revolution.

She also started the publication of Vandematram from Geneva and this paper served the cause of the India's liberation struggle for nine years. In 1907 she hoisted the Indian flag in Europe. The flag was tricolor and was inscribed with Vandematram. At the age of 74 in 1935 when she was weak and prolongedly ill she was allowed to return to India. When she reached Bombay in November 1935, she was taken to a Parsi Hospital, where after about eight months she died on August 13, 1936. The last word uttered by her was Vandematra. She was long ago declared that India would be a Republic with Hindi as national language and Devanagari the National script.

Dr. Annie Besant, was born on October 1, 1847 and she entered the public life in very dramatic circumstances. Her marriage with Frank Besant in 1867, was very unhappy. In 1873 she separated from her husband. She arrived in India on November 16, 1893 and made Adyar Near Madras her home. In India she was moved by the pitiable socio-economic conditions of the Indians under the oppressive British rule. She started arousing the Indians through her forceful writings and fiery speeches. The British Government arrested her, while in Jail 1917 she was unanimously elected the congress President. Apart from her revolutionary activities she took a leading part in many social activities. She started Central Hindu College at Varanassi, which later on provided the foundations for the Banaras Hindu University. She also worked for the emancipation of Indian women in collaboration with Sarojini Naidu and Margaret cousins. She passed away peacefully at Madras on September 21, 1933.

Sarojini Naidu, the Bharat Kokila or Nightingale of India, was a born poetess who composed her first 300 lines verse at the age of 13. Born on February 13, 1879 she matriculated at the age of 12 and stood first in the Madras Presidency. She went for an inter

caste marriage with Dr. Govind Rajulu Naidu and had a successful married life. On the inspiration of Gopal Krishna Gokhale she entered public life. However her contact with Gandhiji was a turning point in her career and thereafter she plunged head long into politics as well as social work. In the salt Satyagraha, after Gandhiji's arrest, she led the peace marchers and was arrested on May 23, 1930. During the 1919 movement she had distributed thousands of copies of the 'banned pamphlet' in Bombay she was elected the congress president in 1925 she also took part in the Second Round Table Conference. During Quit India Movement she was again jailed. When Gandhiji went on a last in Agha Khan Palace, Pune, Mrs. Sarojini Naidu nursed him. After Independence she was the first Woman Governor of Uttar Pradesh. She died at Lucknow on March 2, 1949 while in office.

It is said that behind a great and successful man, there is very often a great woman. This saying is true in the case of Mahatma Gandhi, who had a very faithful wife in the person of Kasturba Gandhi popularly addressed Ba. She completely identified herself with Babu's life and works. In south Africa she was imprisoned for leading the women satyagraha. In 1930 and 1932 she was put behind bars in India for picketing wine and foreign cloth selling shops. During the 1942 agitation she was again arrested for violating the prohibitory orders at Bombay. During all the fasts of Mahatma Gandhi she took one meal a day. On February 22 of 1944 she died while in detention at Agha Khan Palace. She had endeared herself to the Indian masses by her acts of valour and sacrifice to such an extent that the grateful nation collected a sum of Rs.1.25 crores in those days, for setting up Kasturba Gandhi Trust.

Mrs. Vijayalakshmi Pandit was born to Moti Lal Nehru on August 18, 1900 at Allahabad. She rose to be the First Women Minister, First Woman Ambassador and the First Woman President of the U.N.O. She entered the freedom Movement neither because of her father Moti Lal Nehru nor because of her brother Jawahar Lal Nehru but after coming in contact with Mahatma Gandhi. She had been one of the closest women lieutenants of the Mahatma. She even later on, inspired her husband. Ranjit Sitaram Pandit, to join the liberation struggle. Mrs. Pandit was jailed for her nationalistic activities thrice in 1932, 1940 and 1942. In 1944 she was released on reasons of ill health. She found that a meeting of almost all nations had been called at San Francisco for deliberations on the proposed U.N.O. Though India was still a colonial country, yet somebody could be there to raise the issue of India's freedom. The British India Government would have hardly issued her a passport for paying a visit to her daughters who were studying in the United States. She arrived there and addressed many meetings highlighting the pitiable conditions of India and brutally repressive acts of the British. Mrs. Pandit returned to India in 1946. She is freedom fighter, diplomat, administrator & social worker. Who has been honoured with sixteen honorary doctorates at home and abroad?

Sucheta Kriplani, the first Indian Woman Chief Minister was born to Bengali Parents in June 1908 at Ambala. She was earlier on the Teaching Faculty of the Banaras Hindu University. In 1932 she entered public life as a social worker and in 1939 entered politics and joined the Indian National Congress. During the Quit India Movement, she went underground and rendered remarkable service of secretly organizing anti-British resistance.

Rajkumari Amrit Kaur belonged to the ruling house of Kapurthala. Her father, Raja Sir Harnam Singh, had embraced Christianity. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur was born on February 2, 1889. Inspired by Gandhiji's activities she joined congress and was one of Mahatma's closest associates. In Independent India she was a cabinet rank Minister with Pandit Nehru. During Salt Satyagraha she was arrested in Bombay for violating the salt law. When she went to the North West Frontier Province to advocate the cause of freedom struggle, she was arrested and convicted on a charge of sedition. During Quit India Movement she organized many procession. She was the President of the All India Women's Conference for seven years. She served as Secretary to Gandhiji for sixteen years.

Matangini Hazra, the Gandhi Burhi of West Bengal is that freedom fighter and martyr who shall be remembered for her heroic acts. Leading a spiritual and pious life she was sixty two when she joined the Freedom Movement on January 26, 1932. In consideration on her age she was, however let off after four hours of detention. But when she hoisted the National Flag on a heavily guarded court building, she was again arrested and sentenced to six month's rigorous imprisonment. In the jail she learnt many things about Gandhiji from other detainees. On 29, September 1942 she was in Quit India Procession. She was leading the processions with Tricolour in her hands shouting Bande Matram. The Police fired in her leg and then in her hand but she continued her march limping and injured. Then came bullets piercing her forehead and neck. In no time she lay dead on ground but the Tricolour was still held high. She had truthfully followed the Master's order of 'Do and Die'.

Subhadra Kumari Chauhan, the famous Hindi poetess, was a leading congress leader of Jabalpure region. She was imprisoned in 1940 and 1942. During the latter term she was in jail with her baby in arms. She led many an anti-British procession and faced all the police brutalities. Her poem in Hindi 'Kaisa Ho Veeron Ka Vasant' written in the background of Jallian Wallah Bagh Massacre, is that master piece which inspires and motivates the feelings of patriotism and sacrifice.

Indira Gandhi who rose to be a powerful and first woman Prime Minister of the Largest Democratic Republic of the World i.e. India, got initiated in the Freedom Struggle at an early age of 12 when she started organizing Vanar Sena at Allahabad. This organization came to enroll 60 thousand in whole of India. Her father being intensely involved in the

National Movement and she having lost her mother at a very tender age, Indira Gandhi learnt struggling against many odds, taking independent decision and becoming self-reliant at a very young age. In 1938 when she attained the age of 21 she become a member of the congress. In 1942 Movement she was jailed for 13 months. Even at a later stage she alongwith her husband Feroze Gandhi was interned for participating in anti-British activities.

Bina Das, Santi Das, Indumati Sinha Kalpana Dutt and Pritilata Wadedar were those brave and courageous women who following the lines of Anusilan and Jugantar Parties committed daring feats of shooting and killing the officials responsible for harassing and torturing the revolutionaries. Avantikabai Gokhale, Suhasini Ganguly, Hema Prabha, Sharda Ben Mehta and Lila Roy, were those fair sex freedom fighters who actively associated themselves with one or the other or all major phases of the freedom struggle. All of them were detained and imprisoned on more than one occasion for taking part in civil disobedience salt Satyagraha, Non-cooperation and Quit India Movement.

Aruna Asaf Ali a radical political leader was a nationalist in her Youth and early career and turned to be a socialist at a later stage. She entered the arena of Political activity and freedom movement because of her Asaf Ali, a nationalist Muslim. For her active participation in civil Disobedience Movement (1930) and Individual Satyagraha she went to jail. During the 1942 Movement she went underground and evading arrest worked for the regeneration of the socialist group in places like Calcutta, Bombay & Delhi. She appeared above ground in 1946 only when warrants against her were withdrawn.

Most of us do not know that there were hundreds of women officers and soldiers of the Azad Hind Fauj who fought side by side with their male counterparts. Captain Lakshmi Swaminathan gave a very able leadership to the Rani Jhansi Regiment of the Azad Hindi Fauj. These women, apart from attending a nursing duties, they offered to take up arms against the enemy and prove worthy of the name given to their Regiment. They did a commendable work by way of nursing the wounded and ailing soldiers. How can we afford to forget their services to the motherland?

Besides these women crusaders there have been thousands of women who wholeheartedly participated in the India's freedom Movement. It is evidently clear, that Indian Women did not lag behind and it has been a great contribution of Gandhiji that he, through his programmes and calls, brought about socio-economic uplift of the women; no mean an achievement.

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