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## **ROLE OF WOMEN IN INDIA'S STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM FROM 1920 TO 1947**

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# Role of Women in India's Struggle for Freedom from 1920 To 1947

Mandeep Chahal\*

M.A. (History) From Kurukshetra University Kurukshetra, Haryana-136118, India

**Abstract – The present work aims at understanding the contribution of all sections of women towards the freedom struggle of India in accordance with the nationalist approach. As the available sufficient research material required to examine their role as per different streams, this research work is an humble attempt to examine how the women and students, as pioneers, played a vital role in the same context. Whether they were part of urban educated elite class or illiterate traditions bound or patriarchy bound rural women all of their multifact activities have been thoroughly analysed.**

**Keywords:- freedom struggle, women, women working as laboures, etc.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Soon after India got independence, the scholars interpreted India's freedom struggle from different points of view. In the colonial India some scholars like Lala Lajpat Rai, A.C. Majumdar, Patabhi Sitaramaya Surender Nath Banarjee, C.F. Andrews, etc. had come with their writings and later on supplemented by others such as B.R. Nanda, Bishwar Prasad, Amlesh Tripathi, Tara Chand, R. C. Majumdar etc. Their works throw light on the nationalist historiography of freedom struggle of India. As propounder of the nationalist approach, these scholars and leaders came out with an effective notion that the modern historical struggle in India developed as a unified and collective opposition based on national feelings as a whole against the British colonial rule. The peasant women, the landless labour class women as well as women working as laboures in Industries all have undergone a critical examination so far as their commitment to the saga of sacrifice and participation in the freedom struggle is concerned. Till the early decades of the nineteenth century, there was hardly any socio-political awakening in the country. A number of social ills like child marriage, female infanticide, *purdah*, *Sati* dowry, prohibition of widow remarriage, indignities suffered by widows, etc. had started manifesting in all their ugliness. Further, lack of education among women made matter worse; the basic idea behind giving education of women was to establish on a firm footing the traditional notions of femininity. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the founder of Brahmo Samaj in 1828 at Calcutta, was the first social reformer in modern India who championed the course of women. As an advocate of equality between man and women, he openly spoke that women was not a weaker sex and in no way inferior to men morally and

intellectually. He protested against evils like early marriage, polygamy, *kulinism* and supported female education, widow and inter caste marriage. He, in fact, wanted that women should enjoy the rights of her tance and property. It was all due to his serious efforts that Lord William Bentick declared the practice of *Sati* as illegal and punishable offence in November 1829. Further, the leaders of *Brahmo Samaj* were also instrumental in enactment of Brahmo Marriage act, 1872, which aimed at abolition of child marriage. Moreover, this first social organisation established schools for the education of girls and also raised the voice in favour of widow marriage and against polygamy and *purdah*.

Besides, the Arya Samaj advocated for banning the against child marriage and expensive ceremonies as well as pomp and show at marriage time. It also did not approve widow remarriage. However, the Arya Samajists favoured the opening of widow-homes where they could take vocational training. While condemning *purdah* the Samaj made provisions that the women could be on any administrative or general body of this organisation. Thus, by reprehending all the social evils and making the educational environment available, the Arya Samaj paved a way for women to play an important role in the social and political life of the country.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar (1820-1891) is also prominently known for his ardent efforts for social advancement in the history of modern India. The reforms dealing with widow remarriage and the education of girls were successfully carried out by him. He was also largely responsible for helping the

government to find the first girl's school in Calcutta in 1849. It was due to his efforts that forty girls schools came into existence in Bengal between 1855-1858. Besides, the enactment of the Government Act-I of 1856 legalizing the remarriage of Hindu widows was also made by his non-tiring and continuous hard work. Pandit Ramabai Saraswati founded *Sharda Sadan* at Poona in 1892 to provide education and employment for women. Later on the activities of this organisation were extended to provide relief to the orphans, the destitutes and victims of the famines. *Shri Zoroastrian Mandal* was started in 1903 at Bombay with an aim to help the women in general and the parsi women in particular. It laid emphasis on women to become economically independent. In Baroda, *Chiman Bai Maternity and Child welfare League* was established in 1914 for the sake of health of women. Bhagini Samaj was founded at Poona in 1916 to serve the society in general and women and children in particular. From the inception of Indian National Congress, its membership was open to women. Allan Octavian Hume even went ahead asking all shades of opinion never to forget that unless the elevation of the female element of the nation proceeded pari passu (with an equal place) with their work, all their labour for the political enfranchisement of the country would prove vain<sup>52</sup>. For the first time, ten women who attended the fourth session of the Congress at Bombay in 1889 were also from Bombay and Calcutta. Among them, the prominent women were Swarna Kumari Devi, sister of Rabinder Nath Tagore, and Pandita Ramabai, an Arya Samajist of Poona. The former being an enlightened woman had already started *Sakhi Samiti* in 1886 to foster among Indian women an active and enlightened interest in the welfare of the country.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Gandhi's arrival in India was a turning point in India's struggle for freedom. After a conditional support given to Muslims in *Khilafat* movement, he brought them to Congress, as an instrumental, for Hindu-Muslim unity. The *Satyagrah* movement for first time was launched by him on 6th April 1919. The passing of the repressive Rowlatt Bills by the British Government which aimed at prohibiting public protest and suspending civil liberties were, in fact, responsible for the launching of Non-Cooperation Movement. The movement was based on six points namely:

- (i) Boycott Of Law Court By Lawyers And To Set Up Popular Tribunals For Administering Justice;
- (ii) Boycott Of School And College Owned Or Aided By The Government, And The Establishment, Of National Educational Institutions;
- (iii) Boycott Of Elections;
- (iv) Surrender Of Honours And Titles

- (v) Boycott Of British Goods And Encouragement Of *Swadeshi*; And
- (vi) A Temperance Campaign To Wean Addicts From Liquor.

In the beginning, the first civil disobedience movement was non-violent but slowly it became violent. As it was faster in Punjab, it attracted the government to proclaim Martial Law in the province. As a result, the event of Jallianwala Bagh at Amritsar took place. Some four hundred people shot dead and twelve hundred were injured (including women and children), over and above this, the people were humiliated in various ways as reported by Hunter Enquiry Committee. In retaliation, there was an outbreak of violence in different parts of the country in the form of arson, looting and even assaults on Englishmen at the physical level. Gandhi was left greatly pained at these incidents, and on 18 April 1919, postponed his *Satyagrah* campaign. He candidly admitted that his decision to launch the *Satyagrah* campaign was a "Himalya miscalculation" because the masses were not prepared for this.

## ANALYSIS OF THE STUDY

### Women in Gandhian Movement- I

The year 1930 witnessed the altogether changed perspective of women in two ways in the history of freedom struggle of India. Firstly, they marked their successful and decisive leadership along with the changing concept of "Women uplift" to "equal right" with that of men<sup>1</sup> and secondly they joined the movement in a massive participation. The launching of civil disobedience movement under the ideology and leadership of Gandhiji was to be initially carried out without participation of women in it. The women of the country in general and within Congress took it humiliating. It happened so as they had already reached to such a level of awakening in regard to the right of equality through the continuous efforts made by some prominent and dynamic women leaders, in the foregoing decade, like Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu, Kamla Devi Chattopadhyaya, Basanti Devi, Urmila Devi, Rameshwari Nehru, Hemprabha Majumdar and Bee Amman, etc.

It is significant to note that at the beginning of Civil Disobedience Movement, Gandhi did not allow women to join it. He was of the opinion that the participation of women might be considered cowardice. In fact, he was thinking so in terms of his sense of chivalry. To him Englishmen would not touch women just as Hindus would not kill cows. But the women who were already charged with the new concept of equal rights arose to the resentment. Margaret Cousins even addressed through a letter of their protest to Gandhi. In these stirring critical days of India's destiny, there should be no watertight compartments of service. Further, women even went ahead while demanding that "no conference, no Congress or commission dealing with

the welfare of India should be held without the presence on them of their kind. Similarly, they must ask that no marches, no imprisonment, no demonstration organised for the welfare of India should prohibit women from a share in them." Later on, they were permitted to take part in all phases of the campaign. Launched by the Congress. Gandhi wanted women to join the constructive programme meant for the public welfare and nation. He even had planned a different strategy for women to be trained and disciplined as *satyagrahis* so that they could get an opportunity to demonstrate their ability in picketing foreign cloth and liquor shops as these should be exclusively reserved for them but as far as the Salt *Satyagraha* was concerned their contribution would not be considerable. He further emphasized on his strategy from | economic perspective also while advocating the picketing of foreign cloth and liquor shops as compared to the breaking of salt laws.

## CONCLUSION

The national movement of India has a rich legacy of both eminent nationalist men and women who did a lot through different streams in the country's long lasting and decisive struggle fought against the British colonial rule. Being equal lovers of freedom and liberty with those of men, women initially played a supportive-passive role in the movement as mothers, sisters and wives. However, soon after the beginning of the struggle, women also started plunging into it as activists after breaking all the barriers and boundaries of traditions and patriarchy bound classical family system. Undoubtedly, the First War of Independence fought in 1857 went futile, however, some Indian women like Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Rani of Ramgarh, Tace Bai of Jalour, Rani Digambar Kaur etc. evidently proved their worth of martiality in this struggle. Various socio-religious reform movements like Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, Prarthna Samaj, Ram Krishan Mission etc. and establishment of various educational institutions literature, press, means of communication and transportation started creating political awakening in India in 19th century.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

### Worker's Women in Action

It is an established fact that no sooner did an industry was established (as first time established in India) by the 1870, the workers strike was inevitable who would demand for higher wages be it in a elementary or unorganised form, such a record dealing with a strike in 1877 at the empress mills at Nagpur gleaned that labourers went on no work for revision of wage rates. It may further be cited that between 1882 and 1890, twenty five workers' strikes took place in the Bombay and Madras Presidencies. Once the awareness and

small organisations emerged among workers Their self-assertion for better wages and service conditions could not be stopped as happened during 1905-09. There was a notable advance, parallel to militant national wave. A trend of strikes witnessed in the Bombay mills against an extension of hours, serious strikes on the railway specially the Eastern Bengal State Railway in the railway shops, and in the government press at Calcutta characterised this period. The highest point reached when six days mass strike in Bombay took place against the sentence of six years imprisonment of Tilak in 1888. After the first struggle of the textile workers in 1928, the trade union movement drew women workers whenever direct action was taking place in factories where the unions gave call for struggle. The women were in the fore front of these struggles fighting with great courage and sacrifice. But the trade unions unlike those in Italy, France and Australia never built up such mechanism as the auxiliaries of women workers side by side with the unions. These auxiliaries in the above-mentioned countries have sought to keep the women workers and the wives of workers active day today and to give them experience so that they may develop into leading cadres in the trade unions themselves<sup>93</sup> Although these were never formed in India, from the 1920's and even after independence, we get the names of some trailblazing Indian women trade unionists. Among them were Sontosh Kumari Gupta, Prabhavati Das Gupta, Sakina Begum, Sudha Roy, Dr. Mairayee Bose, Bimal Prativa Devi, Duklimat didi, Sukumari Chowdhury and others in Bengal. During this period, the working class led by the Communist Party came forward resolutely against imperialist repression. The Trade Union Congress gave a call to observe September 25, 1942 as Anti-Repression Day. It popularised the ideas of national defence and launched a vigorous campaign for the daily needs of the people such as price control and rationing, the fight against blackmarketing and hoarding, and warned the people against falling a prey to imperialist provocation. This led to the growth of the trade union movement and to the influence of the Communist party in the trade union movement.

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### Corresponding Author

**Mandeep Chahal\***

M.A. (History) From Kurukshetra University  
Kurukshetra, Haryana-136118, India

E-Mail – [arora.kips@gmail.com](mailto:arora.kips@gmail.com)