CHAPTER-IV
WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE AND
DANDI SALT MOVEMENT (1930-1935)

The failure of the Government to take up the Nehru Report to take up the Nehru Report and take note of the demand of the people within the stipulated period forced the Indian National Congress to proceed with its plans of lunching Satyagraha as had been decided at its session in December 1928, at Calcutta.

Therefore, the Indian National Congress which met in December 1929, at Lahore declared on the midnight of December 31, 1929, the goal of the Congress to be complete independence instead of Dominion Status. Thus the New Year was ushered in with new hopes, a changed creed and the prospect of an active fight ahead. The congress members of the legislature were instructed to boycott elections and 26 January 1930, was declare as Independence Day which was to be celebrated throughout the country every year. Gandhiji was empowered to initiate the Civil Disobedience Movement in any manner he considered best. Gandhiji selected the breaking of Salt Laws as the centre of gravity. He felt that since salt was a thing of common use, salt tax was unjust for the poor in the land.

SALT SATYAGRAHA

Gandhiji started his historic march to Dandi on the sea coast near Jalalpur on 12 March 1930, and formally inaugurated the Campaign. For breaking the Sal Law he was arrested on the 6th of April. Mahatma Gandhi’s arrest was the long awaited signal and the campaign started with countrywide hartals. It specially electrified the patriotic
zeal in women which not only gave a twofold strength and support to the cause but also invited attention and appreciation from the outside world.

At first, women had not been allowed to participate as Gandhiji had thought they would complicate matters. But the women of the land, coveting a place of equality with men, could not sit back at the call of the nation. They protested that in these critical days there should not be any watertight compartments of services. Women demanded that “no conference, no congress or commission dealing with the welfare of India should be held without the presence on them of their king. Similarly they must ask that no marches, no imprisonment, no demonstrations organized for the welfare of India should prohibit women from a share in them.” Later they were permitted to take part in all phase of the campaign.

They (the women) started their march on the road to liberty by breaking salt laws, forest laws, taking out ‘Prabhat Pheries’, processions picketing schools, colleges, legislative councils and clubs. The Government met the just demand with lathi charge, shooting, arrests, Section 144, Press Ordinance, Unlawful Instigation Ordinance and Intimidation Ordinance.

Women had determined to participate in the movement in the face of various punishments inflicted by the government. The Provincial Secretary of the Bengal Congress Committee reported that sex was no protection. Two women had been caned on their bare backs. In another incident at Allahabad the police did the most hideous thing by lathi charging a procession led by Smt. Swaroop Rani Nehru, wife of Shri Motilal Nehru who also received a lathi blow as a result of which she became unconscious. In Delhi ten women were injured including the mother-in-law of Pandit
Jawaharlal Nehru as a consequence of lathi charge; while in Madhya Pradesh three women were killed as a result of firing in connection with the defying of Forest laws.

These atrocities did not discourage the women, but activated their desire to suffer more, to sacrifice more and to achieve more. As a protest against the high-handed measure of the government, the women in high places resigned their posts. To name a few, Muthulakshmi Ammul resigned her seat in the Legislative Council and her office as Deputy President of the Council. Mrs. Hansa Mehta and Kamabbi Lakshman Rao resigned their offices as Honorary Magistrates. Miss. Dikson, the first woman member of the Central Legislative Assembly not only resigned her seat but also refused the Kaiser-I-Hindi Medal. Besides, a large number of women took active part in the Civil Disobedience Movement. First and foremost among them was Sarojini Naidu.

**SAROJINI NAIDU**

Sarojini Naidu, known as the poetess, politician and peace-maker, was born in Hyderabad on February 13, 1879. Her father Dr. Aghonath Chattopadhya, a Bengali gentleman, was the founder of the Nizam College and till his death labored hard in the field of education. He was a scientist of repute. After matriculating at Hyderabad, Sarojini was sent to England in 1895, for higher studies on a scholarship awarded by the Nizam. She studied at King’s College, London, and then Girton College, Cambridge University. She could not pursue her studies due to oil health and came back to India in 1898. She spent a few months in Switzerland and Italy before returning to India. The rich historic past of Italy seems to have kindled her heart for freedom. She married Dr. Naidu in 1898, breaking the barriers of caste and religion.
Mrs. Naidu appealed in 1909, to the students in the Byramji Jeejabai Institution, Bombay, that “The highest ideal, climax of modern spirit should be the unification of the races of India, the unity, which of mutual industry of a common education, of disinterested labour, of breaking up ancient barriers, of eliminating ancient hatred and of the recognition of common brotherhood, that bound the Hindus and Mohammedans, the Mohammedans with Parsis and the Parsis with Christians.”

In the same year she attended the Social Service Conference and moved a resolution for the protection of the Hindu widows. Later she dwelt upon the education of women. Until and unless, she said, “they raise the fallen women in this country and make their voice heard; India’s salvation was only a distant dream.”

Mrs. Naidu appeared for the first time on the political platform as the “ambassador of Hindu Muslim unity” in 1913 when she attended and addressed the Muslim League Session. Three years later, in 1916, Mrs. Naidu spoke from the Congress platform sponsoring the resolution on self–government. Then onwards she took a prominent part in the country’s political life. The period that followed was fraught with difficulties and as such of ceaseless activities for the people who were determined to serve the motherland.

Sarojini Naidu, who saw the salvation and joy of life in the service to the country, fought for self-government on the one hand and women’s rights on the other. Mrs. Naidu led the deputation of leading women in social and political field in December 1917. This deputation waited on Montagu with a view to secure voting rights for women. Next year in September 1918, she attended the special session of the Congress at Bombay and was instrumental in getting the resolution on women’s franchise passed, whereby they were not to be disqualified on account of sex.
Mrs. Naidu went to England in 1919 as a member of Home Rule League Deputation to give evidence before the Joint Parliamentary Committee. She took this opportunity to put forward women’s case for franchise as well. Mrs. Naidu felt that without effective propaganda the Montagu – Chelmsford Constitution was likely to be marred with sex disqualifications. She, therefore, organized a powerful agitation in England. She also headed a Joint Deputation of all the different Indian political organizations then in England and made a powerful claim of the Indian women for franchise. She demanded that the province should be left free to decide whether or not special arrangements were needed where purdah existed.

Early in 1919 when Gandhiji inaugurated her Satyagraha Movement, Sarojini Naidu was one of the first to take the pledge. After this new went to Bombay, Madras and Ahmedabad and worked incessantly to propagate the cause. Sarojini Naidu made special appeals to women of the land against the Rowlatt Act. She also sold proscribed literature and took part in Satyagraha demonstrations in Bombay.

At a public meeting at Ahmadabad she criticized the Montagu Chelmsford Reforms. Speaking about the visit of the Secretary of State, Montagu, she said that “His sentimental journey through the length and breadth of the land in the company of Lord Chelmsford and their expression of sympathy bore no fruit, for in one hand they had the sword and a cup of poison in the other seemed to say; ‘here is bread for you but before you reach out for it you must drain this cup of poison to the dregs.’ But she asserted; “As long as Indians have rectitude and strength in them, as long as they have any sense of self – respect they will stoutly refuse to empty the cup of poison.”3 She was in England, in 1920, for treatment and continued her work there. She acquainted the public in England with the highhandedness of the Martial Law authorities. Her speech in Kingsway Hall, London, resulted in what is known as Naidu – Montagu controversy.
Unmindful of her shattered health, this courageous soldier went on working for the redress of the Punjab and Khilafat wrongs. She attended the debate on the Punjab issue in the British Parliament and was pained at the indifferent attitude of the participants.

The same year Mrs. Naidu attended the International Conference in Geneva. She was questioned by people as to why did she take to politics. Her answer to the question was a symbol of her desire to bring Hindus and Muslims closer. She said: “I think it is inevitable that one should become interested in politics if one is a true Indian. The importance of Hindu – Mohammedan unity appealed to me. I lived in a Mohammedan city and you see, I had so many Mohammedan friends. Very few Hindus have had such intimate relations with Mohammedans as I, for I have taken part in all their political and educational movements. I have presided over their meetings and spoken at mosques. That is the thing which counts most among men and women, especially men. The first political speech I made was at a meeting of the Moslem League.”

For her, unity was an important thing. Whether she spoke to the students, women or the politicians or the people at large, her watchword was unity among the races. Naidu felt that unity would quicken the attainment of freedom. She had hardly recovered from her heart disease when she came back to India. These were the days of Non – Cooperation Movement which was launched by Gandhiji in 1920. Like a loyal follower she followed Mahatma Gandhi’s programme and was once again in the midst of the fight.

There were riots in Bombay followed by the visit of his Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales, in 1921. Mrs. Naidu personally went to the affected areas to disperse
the crowds and to make peace. Then came the Moplah outbreak, referred to earlier. Mrs. Naidu went to Malabar with a view to quieten the atmosphere. She criticized the Martial Law authorities operating in the area. The Government of Madras threatened to prosecute her if she did not apologies for the statements and criticism made by her. However, Sarojini was unaffected by these threats. She invited the Government’s attention to many more statements made in this regard by other people which corroborated hers. So she challenged the government to withdraw the remarks or make good the threats. Sarojini gave back the Kaiser-i-Hind Medal to the Government. Gandhiji was arrested in 1922 and his parting message to her was; “I trust the unity of India in your hands”.

Heavy work again had its effect on her health and Sarojini had to leave for Ceylon in 1922. But she could not keep herself away from political activities for long. Even there she delivered a number of lectures pleading India’s cause and on her way back to India she stopped at many places to propagate the cause and to shake the country from its slumber.

Mrs. Naidu stood for unadulterated Gandhian non – cooperation and opposed the suggestion of Council entry. She attended the all India Congress Session at Calcutta in November 1922 and opposed in vehement terms the resolution favoring the Council entry. The Akali movement also invited her attention and she moved a resolution in the Indian National Congress of 1923 – 24 condemning the stand taken by the Government. Mrs. Naidu said; “I feel that I am but discharging a very small portion of the debt of inspiration that I owe to the ideals and the achievements of that dauntless little section of Indian humanity who, in their black robes and their black turbans, stand in the vanguard of the army of India’s Freedom. So great was the
inspiration. When I rose from sickbed almost unable to walk, I, none the less re-entered public life my marching at Amritsar in the ‘Unlawful Akali Dal as a protest against the tyranny of the Government and as a practical token of my resolution not merely to stand by and support but to participate if necessary in the activities of the Akalis.”

Early in 1924 Mrs. Naidu went to South Africa to study and improve if possible, the sad condition of Indians in that country. She raised her voice against the Anti-Historic Bill (1924), which was calculated to exterminate the Indian community in South Africa. She also presided over the East African Congress. In her presidential address she urged the audience; “You must with one united voice give an answer to the government and say though in natural history rivers don’t flow backward, we shall make the river of your decision flow backward.” She held discussions over the Indian question with the Government and members of the parliament of South Africa and thus became well-acquainted with the viewpoint of all concerned and hence was able to present the matter to the Government of India in all its details.

Mrs. Naidu’s services were amply rewarded when she was elected President of the Indian National Congress in 1925. Mrs. Naidu was the first Indian woman to be placed in charge such an exalted office. Her election to the presidency was an honor to the womanhood and recognition of their rights. She herself made reference to this fact in her presidential address at the 48th session of the Congress at Kanpur in 1925. She said. “I am fully aware that you have bestowed upon me the richest gift in your possession, but rather in – generous tribute to Indian woman hood and as token of your loyal recognition of its legitimate place in the secular and spiritual councils of the Nation.”
Sarojini Naidu outlined a scheme creating different departments relating to divergent needs of the people like a department for the re-organization of villages, for the industrial workers and for education. She held that the education system of the time was unsuited to the special trend of our racial genius. She felt that military training should form an integral part of education. She was in favor of having a national militia by voluntary conscription of which the nucleus might be the existing volunteer organizations. The question of giving aerial and naval training was also considered.

Sarojini’s message of the new year as a President of the Congress was; “Mine, as becomes a woman, is a most modest domestic programme merely to restore to India her true position as the supreme mistress in her own home, the sole guardian of her own vast resources and the sole dispenser of her own hospitality. As a loyal daughter of Bharat Mata, therefore, it will be my lovely though difficult task, though the coming year, to set my house in order, to reconcile the tragic quarrels that threaten the integrity of her old joint family life of diverse communities and creeds and to find an adequate place and purpose and recognition alike for the lowest and highest of her children and foster children, the guests and strangers within her gate.”

From 1923 to 1929 she was in America visiting parts of the United States and Canada. She delivered two hundred lectures during her tour and acquainted the people with the conditions in India. Speaking at a banquet given in her honor by the Hindustan Association of America, in New York, on November 10, 1928, Mrs. Naidu said: “It was futile to aspire for the freedom of the world without a free India.”

Sarojini’s lectures in these countries for the major part were on “Interpretation of Hindu Womanhood, “An ultimate study of Mahatma Gandhi”, and Interpretation of
the spiritual life of India.” In April 1929 Mrs. Naidu sailed for England where she had interviews with the members of the Government. The same year, presiding over the First Provincial U.P. Youth Conference, she exhorted young men to understand the meaning of “give me liberty or death”. As the only choice before them in the interest of the country.

Sarojini was specially nominated by Gandhiji to initiate raid upon Dharasana Salt Works in May 1930. Before taking charge of the raiding party she declared in a public speech. “The time has come in my opinion when can no longer seek immunity behind the shelter – of their sex, but must share equally with their men comrades all the perils and sacrifices for the liberation of the country.”

It was on May 15, that she raided the Salt Works. Sarojini and her comrades were attested, but were released the same day. Sarojini another batch of twenty – five hundred raiders upon the same Salt works on May, 21, 1930. Webb Miller who was an eye – witness to the happenings at Dharasana wrote that Sarojini called the volunteers for prayers before the March. She exhorted them thus; “Gandhi’s body is in jail but his soul is with you. India’s prestige is in your hands. You must not use any violence under any circumstances. You will be beaten but you must not resist; you must not even raise a hand to ward off blows.”

After the prayer the volunteers started marching towards the salt deposits which were surrounded by ditches filled with water. A batch of volunteers reached near the barbed wire stockade which was guarded by the police. This batch was ordered to disperse but the volunteers did not care to obey the command as a result of which the “police rushed upon the advancing marches and rained blows on their heads with their steel shaft lathes.” The injured men were removed and then many a batches
of volunteers advanced to meet the same fate. Ultimately the volunteers changed their
tactics and sat in the ground near the salt pans.

The authorities could not even bear their assembling in this way and orders to
disperse them were given again. They (volunteers), as usual, paid no heed to this
order. As a consequence the police “commenced savagely kicking the seated men in
the abdomen and testicles. The injured men writhed and squealed in agony, which
seemed to inflame the fury of the police. The police then began dragging the sitting
men by the arms or feet, sometimes for a hundred yards and throwing them into
ditches.

Mrs. Naidu was arrested the same day, i.e., May 21, 1930. In a message to her
comrades she said thus; “Whatever happens, strictly adhere to the law of non violence. Don’t budge an inch form the place you have taken”. Mrs. Naidu was
released following “Gandhi-Irwin Pact” signed on March 5, 1931. During the year
the second Round Table Conference was convened in London. Mrs. Naidu attended
the conference as an official representative of the women of India.

The Gandhi – Irwin Pact was not respected by Lord Irwin’s successor, Lord
Willingdon, with the result that most of the national leaders were again put in jail.
Gandhiji returned to India on December 28, 1931, after attending the Round Table
Conference at London. He was arrested on January 4, 1932, and was confined in the
Pune jail.

Mrs. Naidu became the acting President of the Indian National Congress in
1932. The Reception Committee of the Congress was declared unlawful. This
Reception Committee of the Congress was declared unlawful. This did not deter from
her determination to hold the conference and she shifted the venue of its session to Delhi.” On April 20th Mrs. Naidu was served with an order directing her not to act in furtherance of the Civil – Disobedience Movement and not to leave the city limits without the permission of the Commissioner. She did not pay attention to this order and left for Bombay by Frontier Mail. The train was stopped at Bandra, ten miles short of Bombay, and she arrested. She was sentenced to one year’s imprisonment.

BOMBAY

KAMLA DEVI CHATTOPADHYAYA

Smt. Kamla Devi Chattopandhyaya is another woman of this time who did outstanding work for the furtherance of the cause of national freedom. Kamla Devi was born in Mangalore in 1903 and was married while she was yet in school. Her husband died and Kamla became a child window. She continued her studies which was contrary to the customs of the time and later joined the Queen Mary’s College at Madras. She was remarried to Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, bother of Mrs. Naidu, setting an example of inter–caste, inter–provincial and window remarriage.

Kamla decided to join active politics in 1922 and joined the Congress the same year. She always remained in the thick of the fight for freedom. This courageous lady was the first woman to contest election for the Legislative Assembly of Madras in 1926. Kamla Devi was associated with many women’s organizations and attended the International Congress of Women’s League for peace and freedom which was held on August 23, 1929, in the city of Prague. She acquainted the gathering there with the conditions in India.
Presiding over the youth Conference at Ahmadabad in 1929, Kamla Devi complained that “We are very fond of holding ourselves as ready for martyrdom but when the time comes for baring our necks we retreat and say wait till the next blow. Each time the coward gets the better of it. Start Civil Disobedience, declare independent republic, establish a parallel Government, do it at any cost.”

During the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930, Kamla Devi addressed meetings, prepared salt and picketed foreign cloth and liquor shops. In one of the meetings she addressed at Esplanade Maidan, Bombay, she exhorted the people to follow the lead given by Gandhiji by defying the laws as that would paralyse the Government.

Kamla Devi offered passive resistance and guarded the salt pans when the police raided the Congress House, Bombay. Salt was publicly prepared by her and was sold in the open market. She even chose High Court premises for selling salt. The salt was sold at a high price.

While it was the privilege of Sarojini Naidu to raid the Dharasana Salt Works, it fell to Kamala Devi to plan a raid the Dharasana Salt Works; it fell to Kamla Devi to plan a raid on the Salt Fields in the precincts of Bombay city. Before she could realize her dream, she was arrested. Her parting message to the people was; “Carry on the fight until British Imperialism becomes only a dark shadow of the past; India’s freedom will open the gate for world freedom.”

Kamla Devi was taken to the Court for trial. Instead of taking notice of her trial the fearless soldier invited the Magistrate to buy salt and started selling it in the Court room. She also asked the Magistrate to resign the job and join the Satyagraha
Army. For this act she was awarded six months imprisonment and a fine of Rs. 150, and three months more under the Salt Act fine of Rs. 20 or in default two weeks’ imprisonment. Both the sentences were to run consecutively.

Kamla was released in 1930. This was the time for the preparation of a bigger fight ahead. She, therefore, made a whirlwind tour of the country with a view to opening branches of the Hindustani Seva Dal. This organization was an autonomous body which for the last seven years had been training workers for the service of the country. In the beginning it had only recognition from the Congress but later it was administered and controlled by the Congress itself. Kamla Devi was incharge of women’s organization under the Hindustani Seva Dal. She arranged camps for the training of women workers. The training course was separate for the girls. The course of training included literary education, training in domestic hygiene, child rearing, sewing and spinning, in organizing meetings and course of study in Indian history and geography. The course was designed to make women fit for all that the country expected them to do.

During the year Kamla Devi addressed the students also. She was the Vice – Chairman of the Bombay Youth League. Kamla Devi presided over the students’ Conference at Lahore in October 1931. She condemned the education system and said, “It is a frame that ill fits us for it is cast in a sinister mould and that we have slipped it round our neck, it is strangulating us in slow, deliberate manner.” She exhorted the students to organize study circles, study the political and economic problems and explain them to the masses. Kamla Devi was attested in 1932 and was sentenced to one year’s imprisonment. Kamla joined the Congress Socialist Party in 1934 and presided over year it’s All India Conference at Meerut the very next year.
There were a large number of other women in Bombay who participated in the great struggle. But special mention must be made of Jaishri Raiji, Hansa Metha, Perin Captain, Sofia Somjee, Lilavati Munshi, Maniben Patel and Khurshedben, the granddaughter of Dadabhai Naoroji. They worked in various ways – led processions, held meetings picketed cloth and liquor shops and organized classes for women to prepare them for national struggle.

Picketing of shops was not easy; but these brave ladies had a lot of patience and determination at their command. They asked the shopkeepers and traders to stop dealing in foreign cloth. Since picketing cloth shops was declared illegal women had to suffer rigorous imprisonment, lathi charge and rude behavior of the police. In the prison they received harrowing treatment. Maniben Patel, who was arrested in connection with the Satyagraha Movement, was treated as ‘C’ class prisoner. There were many political prisoners who were kept along with the criminals. Seventy – seven prisoners with four babies including fifteen ordinary criminals were locked up in a single barrack. There were no proper bathrooms. In addition they had to sweep the arracks and verandahs twice a day, clean the vessels and wash latrines. But these difficulties did not shatter their faith. Many more were taking training to enlist them for the service of the country. A class to train women to take part in the Satyagraha campaign of Gandhiji for breaking salt laws was started under the supervision of members of the Satyagraha Ashram and Khurshedben. These trainees were taught to sing propaganda songs and to organize village meetings, to show how to preserve peace and order at the meetings, sanitation, and first aid to the injured, nursing and spinning.
Rastriya Stri Sabha, another organization of women, launched an intensive campaign for the propagation of Swadeshi throughout the city. Members of this organization paid house to house visits and secured signatures for the pledge of swadeshi. Gujarat was the citadel of this campaign. The province was well trained under the direct teaching of Gandhiji. The women – folk showed marvelous power of organization and steered the movement successfully. In Gujarat most of the dictators were women. The men were rounded up in the first few days and it was left to women to come out as war dictators one after the other.

The women of Gujarat informed the Governor that they supported Gandhiji’s policy and action. They were determined to fight for prohibition and Swadeshi because the two questions affected them personally.

BENGAL

The women of Bengal did not only participate in Mahatma Gandhi’s Civil Disobedience campaign but also in the revolutionary activities. They were encouraged to adopt the revolutionary creed by Sughas Chandra Bose and a good many young girls came into the fold of the revolutionary party.

An annual report of the Police Administration stated that “Organized attempts, seldom successful, were made to hoist the Congress Flag on Government buildings in the mofussil. An increasing share of the work was taken up by women, both because it was becoming more difficult to find male recruits and because the presence of women – folk was calculate to prove an embarrassment to the police.”

This, of course, was a twisted statement. Women did not join the ranks primarily to embarrass the police. The distinction of sex never worried the police
authorities much, as the women were often punished the same way as men i.e., they were dragged, their processions lathi charged and life sentence passed on some. In spite of such treatment, women went along their chosen path and picketed colleges, schools, clubs and courts. Women’s organizations, like Ladies Picketing Board, Nari Satyagraha Sangha were declared unlawful.

MAHILA RASHTRIYA SANGHA

Lotika Ghose was entrusted with the organization of women. She, with the help of Subhas Bose, founded the Mahila Rashtriya Sangha and Subhas Bose’s mother was the first president. This body had its branches in other districts as well. Women joined the Salt Satyagraha by preparing salt in the seaside districts. Rashtriya Sangha was able to send batches for nearly six months for picketing and courting attests. The members went in batches picketing schools and colleges and this work was supervised by Lotika Ghose while another member of the Sangha, Arunbala Sen, under took the work of picketing the foreign cloth shops in the Bara Bazar and several women’s organization visited this place to stop the sale of foreign cloth. The trade in foreign cloth virtually came to an end for the time being.

NARI SATYAGRAHA COMMITTEE

Another institution which played a prominent part during this period was Nari Satyagraha Committee. Smt. Urmila Devi, sister of Deshbandhu C. R. Das, was its president and amongst its vice – presidents were important Congress women workers of standing like Mohini Devi, Jyotirmoyi Ganguli, Hemprabha Das Gupta and Ashoklata Das. Samiti Das and Bimal Partima Devi were the secretaries. They took
out processions violating government orders. They were harassed and intercepted by
the mounted police, but nothing intimidated them so they were arrested by police.

The Amrita Bazar Patrika of May 25, 1930, reported that for the first time in
the annals of Calcutta the game of football had to be abandoned on Saturday owing to
lady picketers making their appearance at club tents.

**LADIES PICKETING BOARD**

In May 1931, a Picketing Board was started by the women of Bengal to
boycott and picket in collaboration with Bengal Provincial Congress Committee. The
work of this Board was to propagate against the use of foreign goods; to popularize
home industries and to help develop cottage industries; specially those of spinning
and weaving Khadi; to arrange processions and meetings; emphasize the importance
of liberty and equality of nations; the need for removal of untouchability; to enlist
members of the Congress, who would follow the directives of the National Congress
stipulating that the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee work in close cooperation
with the National Congress.

Boycott and Picketing Section: The work of this section was to carry out
peaceful picketing in different markets and shops against the sale of foreign goods,
especially cloth.

Swadeshi Frchar Section: To popularized and preach for the use of Swadeshi
goods, specially Swadeshi cloth and Khadi in private homes; and to recruit women
workers to join the Board and enlist as members of the National Congress.
Prabhat – Pheri Section: To carry on Prabhat-Pheries (morning processions) in different parts of the city in accordance with the instructions of the Board and to recruit members for the Picketing Board.

Constructive Workers Section: To demonstrate the use of Charkhas and Taklis and to help – spinners to get in touch with weavers for the yarn spun by them. To help manufacture a variety of hand – made goods and to get markets for the same; to establish Ashrams where little girls and boys are instructed to spin yarn.

General Section: This section engaged itself in holding meetings and to take out processions. The aforesaid scheme was very comprehensive and the women of Bengal did a lot of work in various parts of Bengal.

Conference and meetings of the ladies was an everyday occurrence in Bengal. In a conference at Camilla which was presided over by Uumila Devi the following resolutions were passed. 16

1. The formation of Mahila Samities.
2. Boycott of foreign goods.
3. Establishing Hindu – Muslim unity.
4. The removal of untouchability and purdah.
5. Demanding open trial of detenus in jails.
6. Urging the ladies to support the Congress cause.

The prominent worker of this place (Comilla) was Hemprabha Majumdar, President and first Dictator of the Tippera District Congress Committee. She was later arrested for her anti – government activities like taking out processions. She was sentence to one year’s rigorous imprisonment for leading a procession and six months
rigorous imprisonment for distributing unauthorized Congress bulletins. The sentences were to run concurrently.

**Revolutionary Activities**

The cult of violence which, perhaps, never died in Bengal was renewed with the Civil Disobedience Movement. The organization of the revolutionaries was very active in Dhaka, Comila and Chittagong and young college girls came into its fold. The famous group of the women revolutionaries consisted of Samiti and Suniti, Bina Das, Kalpana Dutta and Preetilata Waddedar.

Chittagong Armory was raided by the revolutionaries on April 13, 1930. This resulted in a clash between the revolutionaries and government officials in the village of Dhalghat near Chittagong. Two of the revolutionaries and Captain Cameron of the Chittagong Armory were killed. An old Brahmin lady of the village gave shelter to the absconding revolutionaries. She was arrested and tortured in a variety of ways for eliciting facts of the case. Later she was joined in the jail by Kalpana Dutta whom she warned not be cowed down by police tricks. She said; “They might torture you but even then you must never tell them anything, they might even threaten you with hanging, but you must never give way,”\(^\text{17}\)

This lady wrote a poem on the atrocities of the Police:

“The wicked men come politely
And sit close to you;
They extract words by giving threats
And take away your life at the end.”\(^\text{18}\)
She was ill – treated in jail. But she did not worry much about the rules and regulations of the jail. Her son died in prison and she could not get permission to see him. She was released at the expiry of her sentence in a desperate condition. Later she joined the Nari Samiti when a branch of it was opened in Dhalghat.

Kalpana Dutta and Preetilata Waddedar were revolutionaries of a high order. Both of them were together in the school and since their youth had disliked the British domination. While studying in the senior class in the school they wanted to change the pledge “to be loyal to God and king” into “to be loyal to God and Country.”19

After completing their studies Preetilata joined the Dhaka University and attended Deepwali Sangha, an organization to train the patriots in lathi and sword play. Klpana Dutta joined the Calcutta University and became a member of the Ladies Association. They both came in contact with the revolutionaries in 1931-32.

It was on September 24, 1932, that Preetilata Waddedar led a raid on the Pahartali Railway Officers Club. As a result of this raid one European lady was shot. In an attempt to shoot those who had gathered in the club she had to lose her life by taking potassium cyanide. Some revolvers, live cartridges and red leaflets threatening the authorities were found in her pocket.

Preetilata was the first woman who died in action. She was a courageous lady and had a number of interviews with Ramakrishna Biswas, a revolutionary who was hanged. She also faced the machine gun of Captain Cameron who was shot at Dhalghat. She was suspected of anti – government activities but the police could not catch her as she went underground.
Kalpana was another active worker of the revolutionary party. She was seen quite often, dressed in male attire, in the vicinity of Pahartali. She was suspected of revolutionary activities so a police watch was kept on her. But the authorities could not find anything substantial to put her on trial. When the Pahartali Club was raided the police became convinced that she was a party to the raid. But lack of evidence kept the authorities from taking any action against her. So she was sent for trial under section 109. She was later released on bail. Kalpana escaped while still on bail before the trial was completed. She was again arrested after three months and tried by a special tribunal in connection with the Chittagong Armoury Supplementary trials. She was sentenced to transportation for life.

Suniti, daughter of Uma Charan Choudhry, and Samiti, daughter of Debenddra Lal Ghose, a professor in the Comilla College, shot the Magistrate of Comilla on December 14, 1931. They were arrested and were award a life sentence.

The next action was that of Miss Bina Dass. She was a student of Diocessasn College. She moved from her house to the college hostel on the pretext that it would enable her to devote more attention to her studies, but this move was to perfect her plans for the forthcoming University Convocation.

On February 6, 1932, the day Calcutta University had its convocation; Bina was one of the recipients of Bachelor of Arts degree. As the Governor got up to address the convocation she fired five shots in an attempt to kill him. She was caught immediately. Following this action on her part of Bina Das, a number of attests were made. A search of her belongings at the Diocesan College was made and a number of documents came into the hands of the police. It was discovered that she was a member of the terrorist party. In a written statement to the Court she boldly pointed
out; “I fired at the Governor impelled by my love of the country which is being repressed. I thought that the only way to death was by offering me at the feet of my country and thus make an end of all my suffering. I invite the attention of all to the situation created by the measure of the Government which faced even a frail woman like me, brought – up in all the best tradition of Indian womanhood. I can assure all that I have no personal feeling of animosity against Sir Stanley Jackson, the man who is just as good as my father and the Hon’ble Lady Jackson who is as good as my mother. But the Governor of Bengal represents the system which has kept enslaved three hundred million of my countrymen and countrywomen”. 20 “She was sentenced to nine years rigorous imprisonment”.

Another girl, daughter of Late Bankim Chandra Gupta of village Mirzapur, district Mymensingh, was arrested because a suitcase containing seventy – eight packets marked dynamite, three coils of fuse wire and a large number of revolutionary books was found in her possession. She was awarded five years rigorous imprisonment under Section 5 and 5A of the Explosive Substances Act. Her mother was also arrested for declared political offenders.

There were many more women who took part in the revolutionary activities and served varying terms of imprisonment. To name only a few who went to jail, were Kamla Chatterjee, Bimal Pratibha Devi, shobharana Dutta Ujjala Devi, Parul Mukerjee, Jyotikanta Dutta, and Banala Das. Santishda Ghose of Barisal was arrested while trying to encash a forged cheque of twenty – seven thousand rupees in Gringlays Bank, Calcutta. The money was needed to carry on revolutionary activities.
The government of Punjab inaugurated the Civil Disobedience Movement by taking out a procession of five thousand ladies at Lahore in 1930. Processions, meetings, picketing and Prabhat Pheries in defiance of Section 144 became their daily routine. Day after day they held demonstrations before the gates of the Council Chamber. The police and their lathi charge had ceased to scare them. When the viceroy came to address the Council members they shouted slogans like “Long Live Revolution”, “Up! Up! The National Flag,” “Long Live Bhagat Singh,” “Gandhi Ki Jai.”

The life and soul of the movement was Mrs. Lado Rani Zutshi, Parvati, daughter of Lala Laipat Rai, Smt. Kartar Kaur, Atma Devi and many others.

Lado Rani Zutshi was the leading woman of the time. She was married to late Pandit Lalji Prashed Zutshi, a leading lawyer of Lahore. Her interest in politics began in the Martial Law days in the Punjab in 1919; and over after she was an active Congress worker. During this movement she gained importance for her singular activities and was appointed the eighth Dictator of the War Council and steered the movement successfully.

This courageous woman and her daughter and other women offering Satyagraha picked the cloth shops, law courts and the quarters of members of the Legislative Assembly. She had arranged a uniform of red trousers, green shirts and white Gandhi caps resembling the National Emblem for volunteers.

Addressing a meeting outside Mori Gate, Lahore, she appealed to women to follow the example of those of Bombay; “The arrests of women shows the weakness of the Government.” She went on to say “Government imprisons persons for one
offence or another because it wishes to prevent those people from carrying on Congress work outside jails.”

In another speech on June 23, 1930, she encouraged the people ‘to bear the tyranny of machine guns and lathi blows. How much her government can tyrannize us? ’ she asked. She also distributed seditious matter, the publication of which was punishable under Section 124 A 153A of the Indian Penal Code.

Speaking at the death anniversary of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, she referred to the highhandedness of the Government. “These people,” she said, “are wild beasts and devoid of humanity. Their civilization is only temporary. They have come into power only temporarily, and have forgotten what humaneness is. They are now to learn to what extent this tyranny can go.”

As a result of these activities she was called upon to show cause why she should not be ordered to execute a bond of ten thousand rupees with sureties of rupees five thousand each for good behavior for a period of one year. She was sentenced to one year’s imprisonment, but was released under the Gandhi – Irwin Pact in 1931 before the expiry of the sentence, only to be re-arrested in 1932. This time she was sentenced to eighteen months imprisonment. She had to be released before the end her term on account of ill–health.

Lado Rani had instilled patriotic zeal in her daughters also, and they all shared her responsibilities in this struggle. As many as seventeen women were attested on October 9, 1913, including Prof. Janak Kumari Zutshi and Swadesh Kumari Zuthsi for picketing educational institutions. This was the first time such a large number of
women were apprehended in the course of a single day. The Lahore Women’s College students did not attend the college as a protest.

Later when the Zutshi sisters were put on trial they refused to attend it unless their relatives were allowed to witness the proceedings. The case had to adjourn. They were fined and to realise the fine the police attached the clothes and beddings belonging to the convicts. These things were however returned later.

Mrs. Monmohini Sehgal (then Manmohini Zutshi), daughter of Lado Rani, also joined hands with the freedom fighters. She started her career in the political field by becoming Chairman of Reception Committee of the Second All Punjab Students Conference, presided over by Subhas Chandra Bose, in October 1929. She later became President of the Lahore Students Union founded by Bhagat Singh of the Lahore Conspiracy Case, in December 1929. Manmohini was threatened by her college authorities with expulsion if she did not resign from the Student’s Union. Later her degree was withheld by the university. It was only with the good offices of S. Radhakrishnan that she was able to get the degree of Master of Arts.

She was attested for picketing educational institutions on October 8 and followed her mother to jail. She was sentenced to six months imprisonment. Manmohini was released from jail only to be attested again in January 1931 along with her sisters for picketing shops. This time she was sentenced to one year’s imprisonment. She was, however, released under Gandhi – Irwin Pact. Manmohini was again attested in March 1932, for defying a notice served on her by the Punjab Government and was sentenced to a year’s rigorous imprisonment. She had to undergo her full period in jail.
Manmohini had become a member of the Provincial Congress Committee in 1933-34 and also was one of the Punjab delegates to the Swaraj Party Conference convened at Ranchi by Shri Bhulabhai Deasi and Dr. M.A. Ansari.

Manmohini worked as Headmistress of Bihar Mahila Vidyapith till she was married in 1935. She had to curtail her political activities after her marriage and involved herself in social work. She became the honorary Secretary of the Simla Branch of the All India Women’s Conference and took up work in the village also. Manmohini became the General Secretary of the National Council of Women (affiliated to the international Council of women) in 1945.

Manmohini gave evidence before the Cripps Mission in 1946 as representative of the National Council. She was associated with a large number of women’s organizations till her death. Another important woman of this period was Parvati Devi, daughter of Lala Lajpat Rai. She was a steadfast Congress worker. Parvati took part in all the programmes of Satyagraha Committee. She was arrested under Section 124A Criminal Procedure Code (Sedition) for her patriotic activities. She was asked to execute a bond for rupees ten thousand with two sureties of rupees five thousand each. During the pendency of the case she was further required to execute another bond of two thousand rupees to ensure her attendance. She preferred to go to Jail. She was sentenced to two years rigorous imprisonment, and was fined twenty thousand rupees.

Laxmi Devi also took a leading part in the various activities of the freedom movement. She was the wife of Mr. Trikha, then President of the District Congress Committee, Simla. Speaking at a public meeting on July 30, 1931, she alleged that “the government had started committing such tyrannies that we can’t find any peace.”
In another speech she observed that the government only listens to the police and gives punishment to innocent people. She condemned the death sentence passed on Ranbir Singh, Durga Das and Chuni Lal, in connection with the conspiracy to shoot the Governor.

Laxmi Devi was convicted for her activities and was asked to pay two thousand rupees or undergo imprisonment for one year. She preferred to go to jail.

MADRAS

In madras Smt. Rukmini Lakshmapati had the honour of being the first lady to be arrested in connection with the Salt Satyagraha. She was the President of the Tamil Nadu Provincial Congress committee.

The women of Madras played a prominent part in organising youngsters into the “Vanar Sena” or the ‘Monkey Army’, as it was called in the memory of the monkeys who according to the Hindu mythology, joined together to assist Rama. The dynamic energy of these youngsters was thus utilized into systematic and disciplined activity.

DURGABAI DESHMUKH

Another famous woman of this time is Mrs. Durgabai Deshmukh who became the war dictator in the city of Madras and carried on the movement sponsored by the Congress till she was arrested. Durgabai was born in 1910 in a village near Rajamundry, Andhra Pradesh. She was married at the age of eight into a conservative family. Durgabai became a widow at an early age. “Durgabai was not an ordinary child. She was the daughter of liberty, the nursling of not just her cultured parents but
of the peerless, powerful sea, the intrepid winds, and the master of her own thoughts. In the midst of limitations she never faltered, freedom and light were shored in her heart, and when the time came these became her inspiration and strength.”

Her interest in politics can be traced back to the year 1921 when she was merely a child. It was during this year when the Non–Co-operation Movement was at its height that she, along with her mother, went around the town selling Khaddar.

Durgabai was well versed in Hindi, a knowledge which came in very handy at the time of Kakinada Session of the Indian National Congress 1923. She had trained nearly six hundred volunteers who were to work for this language. Her interest in politics was further accentuated after meeting Gandhiji at this session. She participated in processions and prepared salt openly during the 1930–31 movement. Later she was nominated as the second War Dictator after Sri Prakasham. She was arrested for her activities on May 25, 1930, at Arcot and was sentenced to nine months imprisonment.

Durgabai joined the Hindustan Seva Dal was again arrested for her political work. This time she was sentenced to three years imprisonment. While in jail she took up the study of English. After her release she wanted to join the men’s college of the Andhra University to study Political Science as a subject. She was refused admission on the plea that there was no hostel arrangement for girls. As a challenge to the authorities she started a hostel for women. She took up her Master’s degree in Political Science and a Bachelor’s in Law as well.
The year 1942 saw her as a practicing and she was the first woman to appear and argue in a murder case. In 1946, while a practicing lawyer, she became a member of the Constituent Assembly and later a member of the provisional Parliament.

Durgabai was taken as a member of the Planning Commission. She went to China which further widened her horizon. She married C. D. Deshmukh, then Union Minister, in 1953. Women’s cause remained dear to Durgabai Deshmukh. She started the Central Social Welfare Board and was its chairman from 1953 to 1963.

DELHI

It was in this great city that twenty – four girl guides refused to salute the Union Jack as a result of which their names were struck off the rolls. Mary Campbell, who was a temperance worker in India, writing in the Manchester Guardian of June 1931, described the courage of Delhi women in the following words; ‘I was in Delhi when Mr. Gandhi, on his way back to jail, sent word – ‘I leave the work of picketing the drink and drug shops to the women of India’. I thought he had made a mistake this time that the Delhi women, so many of who lived in purdah, could never undertake the task, But to my astonishment out they came, and they picketed all the shops in Delhi, sixteen or seventeen in number. I watched them day after day. They stood there saying nothing but politely salaming each customer who approached. The same thing happened repeatedly. The man would stop and say; ‘I beg your pardon sister. I forgot myself in coming here’ and go away. That went on for some days until the licensees appealed to the Government. The hefty policemen arrived with police vans and warned the women to go away. I thought those delicate sheltered women would give in now; they would never endure being touched by a policeman. But they did, and as fast as one relay was arrested, another took its place. Although about sixteen hundred
women were imprisoned in Delhi alone. But they had done their work. Though the shops were opened no one went in…. At last the licensees themselves closed them, and so far as I know they are still closed today.”

It was again in this historic city that a thousand women went to the court with a view to persuading the lawyers and the authorities to close down the courts. Mrs. Sahni and the mother – in – law of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru were amongst the injured on that day. Pandit Motilal Nehru, who witnessed the scene, wrote that the police officer declared the assembly unlawful. When he was asked for an order to this effect, he had none. There was no magistrate accompanying him. He threatened to open fire, if the crowd did not disperse. In the meantime five armoured cars reached the scene. The ladies refused to leave the place unless the police was withdrawn and they were allowed to return in procession. The police later withdrew to the farthest end of the courtyard and left the road free when the ladies and others marched back to the city.

SATYAWATI

The great city of Delhi also witnessed a martyr’s death. Satyawati, granddaughter of Swami Shradhanand, was another important leader of this movement in Delhi. She was a revolutionary. In defiance of social taboos, at the age of twenty – three she plunged into the Congress movement, heart and soul, in 1930. She held meetings, led processions, picketed foreign cloth shops not only in the market place but also on the river Jumna where usually the Marwari ladies in their foreign clothes came to bathe. As a result of her efforts some fifty per cent of women took to wearing Khaddar.
Speaking at a public meeting on May 3, 1930, Satyawati exhorted the audience to remain steadfast in their endeavour and boldly face the machine – guns parading the streets. On May 12, 1930, at the mourning procession of Ami Lal, who died of a gun shot, pointed out “such things do happen in attaining freedom and that flame of such fire would reduce the tyrant to ashes.”\(^{28}\) She was arrested under Section 108 of the Indian Penal Code (to furnish security to cease dissemination) and was asked to furnish security of five hundred rupees or show good behaviour for six months. She refused to furnish the security and was sent to Jail.

At her trial in Delhi, Satyawati remarked: “We have abandoned our home and children to redeem our motherland from foreign bondage, and neither the threat of the dungeons nor of bullets and the merciless beatings can deter us from the duty which we owe to ourselves and the coming generation. I and thousands of my sisters are ready to suffer, but we must win India’s freedom.”\(^{29}\) She was sentenced to six months imprisonment. In a parting message to the nation she said: “So long there was even a single child she would not let the government rest, nor would she rest herself.”\(^{30}\) She was released only to be arrested again in 1932. This time she was sentenced to two years imprisonment. During her incarceration she contacted pleurisy which later developed into tuberculosis. This did not deter her and she continued political work.

Satyawati was again active in 1937 in anti – government activities. Consequently she was arrested. She was assaulted by the police. This question came up before the Assembly resulting in a successful adjournment motion. Satyawati was asked to execute a bond for good behavior, but on her refusal she was sentenced to one to one month’s imprisonment which was later reduced. The moment Satyawati was out of the lockup she was again active. She attended the Punjab Political
Conference held in April 1938. She was ordered to leave Punjab within twenty – four hours, and her entry into the Punjab without permission was prohibited for one year. She defied the order and was arrested.

During the years 1940 and 1941 Satywati was tried twice for sedition and imprisoned. She had hardly been released when she was arrested again in August 1942, and detained as a security prisoner until her condition became so serious that the doctors gave up all hope of her life. She was released but was directed by the authorities not to enter Delhi. She naturally refused to obey such an order and even Gandhiji supported her in this matter. She defied the order and was arrested. She was later released and the case against her was withdrawn. Satywati was admitted to the hospital. Just two days before her death in 1945, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru went to see her. She said to him: “My only desire is India’s freedom.”

UTTAR PRADESH

In alladabad Swaroop Rani, wife of Motilal Nehru, inaugurated the campaign by preparing salt in front of the police station. It was in this that the police lathi – charged a procession led by her as a result of whom Swaroop Rani got a blow on her head and fainted.

The spirit of Patriotism was ingrained in the Nehru family. There was a time when all the members of the family found themselves in jail. Fact the jail had become a second home to several of them. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, writing about the activities of his wife and sister, makes a mention of the part played by them in this struggle. He writes. “Salt suddenly became a mysterious word, a word of power. Long before the movement began volunteers were being given the necessary training.
Krishna and Kamla had joined the ranks of the volunteers. The volunteers, of course, were unarmed; the idea was to make them more efficient in their work and capable of dealing with large crowds. Krishna Nehru along with Shyam Kumari Nehru was arrested for taking out a procession. They were fined fifty rupees or in lieu of it to undergo one month’s simple imprisonment. The fine was paid by some unknown person and they were released the next day.

Kamla Nehru went about like whirlwind, organizing women volunteers, peasants and the student. She played a prominent part in organizing No – Tax campaign in the province. Presiding over the U.P. women’s Political Conference she made a fervent appeal to women to prepare for the forthcoming struggle and asked them to use Khaddar. Kamla became the dictator of the war council and the acting President of the Congress Working Committee. She was, however, arrested on January 1, 1931. As she was arrested, a pressman asked her for a message. She said: “I am happy beyond measure and proud to follow in the footsteps of my husband. I hope the people will keep the flag flying.”

Another woman who was active in this period was Mrs. Mukund Malviya, daughter – in – law of Pandit Madanmohan Malviya. An attempt to hold the District Conference at Allahabad proved a failure. The police guarded all the public places to prevent any meeting. Mrs. Mukund Malviya came forward to defy the authorities and to hold the meeting near the clock Tower in the city of Allahbad. She was arrested and sentenced to one year’s rigorous imprisonment.

Chandravati Lakhanpal played a prominent part in this struggle. Her interest in polities dates back from her days. She took an active part in the movement of 1930.
Chandravati went from village to village organizing villagers to make them politically conscious till she was arrested in 1932 and sentenced to one year’s imprisonment.

Uma Nehru, who had been interested in the uplift of women for many years, now came forward to take her place in the Satyagraha Army. She became Dictator of the Provincial Congress Committee and as a result suffered imprisonment. Later she went to jail several times.

MARGARET COUSINS

Any account of this period would remain incomplete without mentioning Margaret Cousins. She played a significant role in the general awakening of the masses more especially the women. Mrs. Cousins came to India in 1915 and joined Mrs. Annie Besant at Adyar (Madras). Her interest in this country, to begin with, was mainly in the sphere of education. Later she joined the Home Rule Agitation of Annie Besant and contributed to this demand.

Margaret Cousins and her husband were the progenitors of the idea of Vote for Women’ in 1917. Montague was expected in India at the close of the year and she wanted to take this opportunity to put this demand before the Secretary of State. Margaret, therefore, set about organizing a deputation Rani Lakshmi Bai Rajwade said that “The official leader of the delegation was, of course, Mrs. Sarojini Naidu. But the unofficial ones were Annie Besant and Margaret Cousins. In fact, if I mistake not, the idea of such a deputation had really originated with Cousins, herself an ardent suffragist – and always a champion of women’s cause anywhere in the world.

It was easier for Margaret Cousins to organize the women for this purpose with the rich experience she had of this work. In fact, the years between 1910 to 1913
were fateful for her. She founded the Irish Women’s League and joined the agitation for votes for women under this league and had to suffer imprisonment in connection with this movement. Margaret was instrumental in starting the Women’s India Association and was one of the Joint Secretaries. She edited the monthly journal of the organization ‘Stri Dharma’ for many years. At one time there were forty branches of the Women’s India Association spread over the country. She visited these branches and guided the workers.

From the year 1921, whenever the question of franchise for women was taken up in the Legislature of the various provinces, she always made it a point to be present to organize either a women’s deputation or canvass support for such a motion.

Margaret Cousins set up another organization in 1927 called the All India women’s Conference. In the 1930 Civil Disobedience Movement when women were forbidden to take part in it, she at once wrote to Gandhiji and also wrote in the Stri Dharma pointing out that it was an injustice to women. Margaret Cousins left India in 1932 for America where she organized and spoke at several protest meetings held against the imprisonment of Mahatma Gandhi, Kasturba Gandhi and Sarojini Naidu. She came back to India in October 1932. She made a public protest against the prevailing official ordinance. She addressed several meetings as a result of which she was prosecuted on December 10, 1932, and was sentenced to one year’s imprisonment.

Margaret Cousins gave an interesting statement at her trail. She said: “The fact that I am in this court today is no accident. It is the result of seventeen years of intimate living and working with my Indian sisters and brothers. In moving freely
with them, in attempting to do constructive work I and my husband learned how exploitation and injustice through foreign rule is crushing them down.”

In prison Margaret Cousins used to sing with other prisoners Mrs. Besan’s song – “God save our motherland” instead of “God save the King.” Influenced by Gandhiji, Margaret Cousins joined in the work being done among the backward classes, visiting scavengers and smiths settlements at Kotagiri. She continued her work for the Harijans in Madras till she became sick in 1943.

The part so courageously played by women in the struggle for freedom attracted attention and was appreciated not only within the country but outside as well. Writing in the Asiatic Review, Mrs. Gray observed that “If the women are to be judged by deeds rather than by words it is within the Congress that they have shown her the greatest courage. They have picketed, walked in processions, gone to prison and thus have proved their courage in many a dangerous riot.”

Desh Sevikas or Storm Troops amongst Congress women were in the forefront of the movement. They were first enrolled in 1930 and constituted a band of volunteers prepared to do active work. Some fifty of them went to prison during the first year. Most of these ladies had never left their homes until the call of Gandhiji came to them. They had first to learn the courage necessary to be seen abroad in the streets. Presently, they learned to walk long distances, to stand in the sun all day, to picket cloth and toddy shops, to hurry to danger points when summoned by the Congress, or the police, to remove stones, pipes and other obstacles placed in the middle of the road to obstruct traffic, even to shed their fear at night and of hooligan crowds.
In addition to these active Desh Sevikas who courted arrests, thousands more joined in processions, flag salutations and hartals, cooked and nursed in the Congress hospitals, and sold Khaddar. Many of these women gave up life of ease and comfort to suffer imprisonment and picket shops and went from town to town engaged in needful propaganda and unmindful of the heat or cold.

Margaret Cousins Writing under the caption ‘Towards Progress and Freedom’ remarked: Within the next three years over five thousand women had served terms of severe imprisonment, they had suffered lathi charges, loss of property, loss of livelihood form ill health, loss of caste, loss of reputation. They willingly faced publicity of the most trying kind in picketing drink shops and foreign cloth shops, in walking in public processions, in proceedings in law courts. They sacrificed all kinds of cherished privileges of caste, ceremonial purity and privacy.

The police had adopted all sorts of ways in dealing with women. The Provincial Congress Committee reported off and ill treatment these women received. It was reported from Andhra that “The police seems to be mean enough not to spare women even from their undignified behavior.” The report describes nine cases of ill – treatment. While in Karnataka in Siddarpur Taluka they were dragged along the road, beaten with lathis and canes and even whipped. Their sarees were pulled and torn and they were abused in the foulest language.

The Kerala authorities had adopted a novel way of punishing the ladies. They were taken by night trains to distant places and left uncared for at midnight at wayside stations. Fifty or sixty days old babies were often separated from their mothers. The darkest part of the repression was the treatment meted out to the female Satyagrahis. “There appears to be a general lack of the sense of respect for women in all provincial
governments. Abuses, beatings of women and even raping have been calmly allowed to be practiced.”

This repression, however, did not worry women and they remained unyielding and constant to the stand they had taken. Thus, women showed that gaining freedom of the country was not only the responsibility of men and that when entrusted with a responsibility they were able to steer through as successfully as men. This added strength to the movement. During the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930 – 31 twenty thousand women were imprisoned. In other words for every six persons who courted arrest, there was one woman.

This period of five years been taken up for consideration because of movement which stated in 1930 continued till April 1934. It was one long continuous struggle except for a brief period when Gandhiji was attending the Second Table Conference in London in 1931. During this period Simon Commission’s report was also published; but it did not satisfy the aspirations of the people. Even this report had recognized the strength of the women. It says: “No document discussing India’s constitutional system and the direction in which it can be developed and improved could omit the women of India today”.36

The period also witnessed three Round Table Conferences convened by the British Cabinet to reconcile different shades of opinion in the political field of India with a view to giving a new constitution to this country. Finally, the British Parliament passed the Government of India Act 1935, thereby giving a new Constitution to India.
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7. Congress Presidential Address from 1911 to 1934, Madras, p. 772.
8. Sitaramayya, Dr. Pattabhi, op. cit., p. 290.
13. Gandhi-Irwin Pact whereby Civil Disobedience Movement was suspended by the Congress and the Government agreed to release the prisoners.
15. Annual Report of Police Administration, Bombay, 1932, p. XI.
18. Ibid.
20. Annual Register, Volume I, Jan-June 1932, p. 11.

24. Ibid, September 2, 1930.

25. The Vanar Sena was originally started in Bombay by Shri Johri from among the Bombay Youth League leaders, and was later taken up by the All-India Youth League leaders, over the whole country. Active women participants were Kisan Dhumatkar in Bombay, Rameswaramma in Madras, Vidyā Killewala and Mrs. Kamla Devi in Bombay, while at the tender age of 12 Indira Gandhi, daughter of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru organised six thousand children in Allahabad. (Publications Division, New Delhi, Women in India, p. 21).


