CHAPTER-II
WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN SWADESHI MOVEMENT (1905-1911)

The spirit of violent opposition which had been suppressed with British success in 1857 had not died out; in fact, it smouldered in the hearts of many a people waiting for an opportunity to spread out like wild fire. The presidency of Bombay was prepared to give a lead and this province was conspicuous for its political activities in the ensuing period. General criticism of the British rule and against its imperial aspects occupied much more attention in western India – more particularly at Pune, the old capital of the Peshwas.

The closing years of the century were in particular a period of grim tribulations for the Indians. The last decade saw the passing of Indian Council Act of 1892 which was for from satisfactory for the people of the land. Laipat Rai observed: “After more than twenty years of more or less public agitation for concessions and redress of grievances they had received stones instead of bread.” This period also witnessed a disastrous famine in 1896–97 attended with intense economic depression, manifestation of bubonic plague, the sentence of death passed on Chaupekar brothers on account of the murder of two Englishmen (Mr. Rand and Lt. Ayest). To all these troubles was added the arrest for sedition of Lokmanya Bal Gandadhar Tilak in 1895. At the end of an exciting trail he was convicted for 18 months which inflamed the passions throughout the sub – continent.

These sufferings exposed not only the unpopularity of the alien rule in India but its failure in creating or maintaining conditions of contentment or satisfaction among the Indian people. The dissatisfied and disaffected among the educated had
hoped for and now demanded a share in the administration. The British Government instead of sending a Viceroy who could reconcile the ruler and the ruled and bring them closer to each other sent a bureaucrat par – excellence in Lord Curzon with the ultimate consequence that the gulf between the two seriously widened and grew almost unbridgeable.

Curzon’s curtailment of the powers of the Calcutta Corporation and his official Secrets Act which was condemned as a gagging measure tended to put back hands of political progress to a great extant. His explanation was “freedom is granted to the press provided you refrain from writing.”¹ The official takeover of the universities which made the education expensive and finally the partition of Bengal smothered the aspirations of loyal people.

The people were further enraged by the convocation speech made by Curzon at the Calcutta University on February 11, 1905, wherein he remarked, “Truth took high place in the moral codes of the West before it had been similarly honoured in the East.”² These remarks were condemned by the nationalists both in press and on platform. Curzon went still further and said that Indians were not fit to take up high offices. “Even more galling to our sense of self – respect than his speech in Calcutta regarding untruthfulness,” writes Dr. Sitaramayya, “was his sweeping charge that we Indians by our environment, our heritage and upbringing are unequal to the responsibilities of high offices under the British rule.”³

During this period Japan’s amazing performance in the Russo Japanese War and China’s successful boycott of American goods gave high hope to our people. By and large the educated element felt that the British imperialism could be shaken off with the will of the people of the land. The Land Alienation Act Amendment Bill and
the increase of water rates in the Bari Doab Canal caused visible commotion in the Punjab. This was followed by the arrest of Lala Lajpat Rai and Sardar Ajit Singh which in turn found expression in the extremist activities. Grady exclaimed in the British Parliament that Lajpat Rai’s arrest “had justified every tyranny committed by Dublin Castle or Russian autocracy.”

Curzon’s parting gift – the partition of Bengal – became the focus of political agitation and the revolutionary element which first saw the light of day in Western India flourished in Bengal during this period. The rank and file in this Presidency (Bengal) was one in denouncing the decision which they felt was aimed at curbing their national unity and efforts towards progress. “The request of the people,” observed Hardy, Member of Parliament, was that “even if you cannot give us back Bengal give us some modification of the present position of affairs so that we may not be a country cut in half.” Partition Day was a day of mourning for the people of this region.

ROLE OF WOMEN IN SWADESHI MOVEMENT:

The swadeshi movement, part of the Indian independence movement and the developing Indian nationalism, was an economic strategy aimed at removing the British Empire from power and improving economic conditions in India by following the principles of swadeshi (self-sufficiency), which had some success. Strategies of the Swadeshi movement involved boycotting British products and the revival of domestic products and production processes. It was strongest in Bengal and was also called ‘Vande Mataram Movement’. “The women of India should have as much share in winning Swaraj as men. Probably in this peaceful struggle woman can outdistance man by many a mile. We know that a woman is any day superior to man in her
religious devotion. Silent and dignified suffering is the badge of her sex. And now that the government have dragged the woman into the line of fire, I hope that the woman all over India will take up the challenge and organize themselves,”

Mahatma Gandhi appealed in to the Indian women to enter the struggle for India’s freedom. “If nonviolence is the law of our being, the future is with woman”.7 “If Indian women arose, he said, “no one cloud prevents the country’s march to independence”.

Swadeshi movement was a seedling for the entire freedom movement and had spread to different parts of the country. The women though staying at home insisted that there should be prohibition of foreign goods into their house. The other shape of swadeshi movement, which is a starting point for freedom, is heartedness towards foreign goods (in a small way against foreign rule). Along with foreign clothes and goods, people also prohibited foreign medicine in this swadeshi movement.

ORIGIN OF SWADESHI MOVEMENT:

The swadeshi movement started with the partition of Bengal by the Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, 1905 and continued up to 1911. It was the most successful of the pre-Gandhian movements. Its chief architects were Aurobindo Ghosh, Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal and Lala Lajpat Rai. Swadeshi, as a strategy, was a key focus of Mahatma Gandhi, who described it as the soul of swaraj (self rule).

Though Gandhi was aware of the fact that the swadeshi movement was to hate the foreign goods, however, he was very much concerned with the development of the production of goods in the village and by the villagers would help greatly in upliftment of the masses. In order to make swadeshi more influential, he wanted that there should be weaving of Charaka as a starting point.
Similarly his ideas were to involve women in weaving clothes and increase among the people, the desire for Swadeshi clothes. Further, this does not prevent the women from household works. In this way he generated idea among women will help in participating in picketing struggle for closing liquor shops and other activities. They themselves can organize and undertake these activities. Therefore, the basic thread was the read itself in the cause for freedom struggle.

As the Swadeshi movement was multifaced, it could attract all sections of the society. The movement could spell its charm to attract landlords, low-caste people, students, and women at all. Though the Swadeshi movement was a mass movement, the fact remains that it disappeared by 1908-by and large it were a ‘failure’. Inspite of it being dubbed as a failure, the movement, nevertheless failed to make its own contributions. It is, indeed, this movement, which mooted the ‘idea of nationalism’. Inspite of its disappearance, the impact of Swadeshi movement could be witnessed in every stage of freedom movement like Non co-operation movement, Civil Disobedience movement and Quit India movement.

The Anti-partition movement, or the Swadeshi movement as it came to be called, was remarkable, in many respects and most of all in the active programme which it placed before the nation. The program was fourfold; a) Boycott of foreign goods, especially of British goods; b) The exclusive use of Swadeshi goods and the promotion indigenous industries; c) National education as different from the soulless education which was meant only to manifacature intelligent clerks and finally; d) Demand for Swaraj, or self-rule on the same pattern as England itself.

The swadeshi movement had its origin in the anti-partition movement. During 1900, Bengal had become the nerve centre for Indian nationalism. At that time it was
the biggest province of British India and included parts of Bihar and Orissa. To weaken it, Lord Curzon (1899–1905) the Viceroy of India, proposed partition of Bengal. The official reason was stated as administrative convenience due to the size of Bengal. But partition itself was based on a religious and political agenda. Bengal was to be divided into two regions i.e. East Bengal and Assam out of the rest of Bengal. Thus to reduce the nationalist movement in Bengal and thereby in the entire country, Bengal partition was to take place on 16 October 1905.

H. H. Riseley, home secretary to the government of India, stated on 6 December 1904: "Bengal united is a power; Bengal divided will pull in several different ways. That is what Congress leaders feel; their apprehensions are perfectly correct and they form one of the great merits of the scheme... in this scheme... one of our main objects is to split up and thereby weaken a solid body of opponents to our rule".

So the British tried to curb Bengali influence on the nationalist movement and also introduced a new form of division based on religion to create challenges for the Indian National Congress, which was slowly becoming the main opponent to British rule. But the Indian nationalists saw the design behind partition and condemned it unanimously, starting the anti-partition and the swadeshi movements. The swadeshi movement was also known as ‘Vande Mataram’ movement.

The proposal of partition of Bengal became publicly known in 1903, followed by immediate and spontaneous protests all over Bengal. 500 meetings were held in East Bengal alone. 50,000 copies of a pamphlet with a detailed critique of partition were distributed. This phase is marked by moderate techniques of protest such as petitions, public meetings, press campaign, etc. to turn public opinion in India as well
as in Britain against partition. This movement also involved the boycott of British products. Western clothes were thrown onto bonfires. To let the British know how unhappy the Indians were at the partition of Bengal, leaders of the anti-partition movement decided to use only Indian goods and to boycott British goods. People gathered at the cross roads and burnt the imported clothes that they had. People picketed the shops selling foreign goods, and imported sugar was boycotted. People also resolved to use things made only in India and this was called the Swadeshi movement.

The two main features of the anti-partition agitation were the swadeshi movement and the boycott. In the word Swadeshi “swa” means own and “desh” means country, the letter “i” being the usual adjectival termination; Swadesh therefore means “one’s own country”, and Swadeshi, “pertaining to one’s own country”\(^9\). The Swadeshi movement accordingly consisted, economically, of using goods produced in the country in preference to those imported from abroad, and politically of making the administration as far as possible Indian.\(^10\) The boycott was mainly the boycott of all kinds of foreign goods, particularly those of English manufacture; and the Hindu agitators expressed it. Swadesh and boycott were positive and negative aspects of the same thing. Swadeshi, however, had a political side which went much further; it aimed at a change in the Government of the country with which the use of foreign goods had little or nothing to do, namely, self – Government or Swaraj.\(^11\) Hence Swaraj means self Government, and the official translation of “local self–Government” is “Sthanik Swarajya”. It was, however, new to Bengal when it was introduced to the local leaders of Indian National Congress in Calcutta, in 1906, by Dadabhai Naoroji, the celebrated Parsi leader from Bombay. Through these two movements, then, Swadeshi and boycott, it was hoped to force the reversal of the
partition by bringing pressure to bear on the Government and on the British elector, the assumption being that the former was very sensitive to agitation, and the latter to anything that touched his pocket.\textsuperscript{12}

The Indian national movement was a revolutionary movement in the initial stage. Even so, the two years from 1905 to 1907 were a period of only passive resistance, the nationalists carrying on a vigorous anti-British propaganda and indulging in free use of tongue and pen. They did it with great sacrifice and their protest found full expression in the celebrated swadeshi movement – the first Indian National Movement – as Jawaharlal Nehru rightly termed it.\textsuperscript{13} There were twin agitations, namely swadeshi and boycott of British goods. The weapon of boycott was turned not against an individual but against British goods. To the advocacy of swadeshi, which aimed at using goods produced in India, the advocacy of swadeshi, which aimed at refusing British goods, was added. These activities marked the first stage of the “coalescence” of the Indian people into a united nation.\textsuperscript{14} The watchword of the new movement was “India for the Indians” which, after all, advocated the boycotting of all goods not made by Indian labour. Commenting on boycott nearly a decade after the launching of the Swadeshi movement, Annie Besant said that it “had one admirable effect”. The Bengali youths addicted to the wearing of ugly British coats and trousers, appeared in the graceful dhoti, shirt and shawl of Bengal\textsuperscript{15}. The year 1906 was declared as the Swadeshi year. The slogan “Be Indian and buy Indian” was chanted everywhere. The nationalists knew that India’s one sure means of drawing England’s attention to partition and other wrongs of the British Indian administration was the boycott of British goods.
The cry to Bande Mataram was raised as a political slogan, for the first time at the historic Town Hall Meeting held on 7 August 1905 for passing a resolution of boycott and for taking the vow of Swadeshi. Since then, a multitude of voices throughout the country rent the sky with these words and made it the battle cry of a subject nation.\textsuperscript{16}

The Swadeshi movement, which was triggered by the British decision to partition of Bengal in 1905, saw women's entry into the movement, and the skilful tactics of several women leaders contributed to increase the participation of women in public life. Mobilization also facilitated this participation. Attempts at mass Pamphlets were written in Bengali and widely distributed. One of those was a pamphlet by Ramendra Sundari Trivedi entitled "a vow for Bengali women", which tried to explain the Swadeshi movement in simple language in for a village woman to understand. The pamphlet called upon women to participate in the ritual of Rakhi Bandhan and Arandhan (not lighting working fires) and the boycott foreign goods.\textsuperscript{17}

Simple and unsophisticated rural women participated in the Borsad (1923-24) and Bardoli (1928) Satyagrahas in Gujarat. To popularize the boycott of foreign clothes in 1930-31, the Videsh Kapda Bahiskar Samiti (Association for the boycott of foreign cloth) was formed in Ahmedabad with Sarla Devi as its president. It organised processions in which women wearing saffron-coloured Khadi saris, sang patriotic songs and marched through the streets of Ahmedabad. Mridula Sarabhai on the other hand organized the Vanar Sena of children and also prabhat pheris which moved around the city at dawn to the accompaniment of drums, bugles and ‘manjiras’ (cymbals).\textsuperscript{18}
The peasants of Bardoli were compelled to abandon their land; their buffaloes and cows were confiscated; their domestic articles were auctioned. But they still didn’t pay taxes. The women supported their men completely. Manibehn Patel, Mithubehn Petit and Bhakibehn Desai set their tents and huts on the land announced to be sold by the government. Bardoli set a new example as this was the first time that simple, unsophisticated rural women participated in the freedom movement, though they belonged to the well-off sections, who possessed the land they cultivated.

Women organized themselves into groups and wanted to join processions, face police firing and go to jail. They broke the salt law, picketed shops selling alcohol and foreign manufactured fabric. Women joined terrorist groups and assisted in editing and distributing banned newspapers and making bombs. Young girls in their teens and women with children went to jails where conditions were uncomfortable. Hundreds and thousands of Indian women dedicated their lives for obtaining freedom of their motherland.

The Swadeshi movement had its genesis in the anti-partition Bengal. At first the Congress in India was involved in the agitation activities against British. The Congress changed from conservative to political extremism, from terrorism to incipient socialism, from petitioning and public speeches to passive resistance and boycott, and thereby affected our altitudinal change. And it was the beginning of quite a new phase in the history of Indian Nationalism with the struggle against the partition of Bengal. The aggressive programme of swadeshi was the boycott of national education, the boycott of Manchester cloth, Liver-pool salt and "Swaraj" became the slogans of the nationalists. People began to participate in the deliberations of the
Indian National Congress and introduced the word "Swaraj" into congress parlances for the first time. The Swadeshi movement called the people of the country to promote indigenous industries and consume Indian made goods rather than imported commodities.\textsuperscript{23}

Swadeshi movement spread to the extreme south of India during 1906-1916. The rise of extremism completely changed the complexion of political agitation in the Madras Presidency. The visit of Bepin Chandra Pal to Madras and his speech fired thousands of people with the spirit of patriotism and nationalism and attracted them to the rows of Swadeshi and Swaraj. Madras roused to a new life by the wonderful oratory speech of Bepin Chandra Pal\textsuperscript{24}.

Women became actively involved with the Swadeshi struggle protest meetings held all over Bengal and some of these exclusively women’s gatherings. For instance, about five hundred women met at Jenokand village in the district of Mushidabad to protest against the government’s decision to partition Bengal and to urge to need for using indigenous, country- made goods. Likewise ladies in their streets and colonies arranged meetings and even spinning wheels were introduced in the zenana.\textsuperscript{25}

Swadeshi movement also marked the formation of several women’s organizations. Mahila Shilpa Samithi (1906 -1918) was inspired by the Swadeshi Movement. Earlier in 1910, Sarala Devi Chaudharani had formed the ‘Bharat Stri Maha Mandal’, after serious differences with the male leadership of the National Social conference\textsuperscript{26}. As the secretary of this organization, she worked tirelessly and successfully and instituted branches of the Stri Maha Mandal in Allahabad and Calcutta.\textsuperscript{27}
In the Madras Presidency a women’s magazine was started by Kamala, wife of Indian Christian social reformer Stalinthan. A Brahmin widow’s home was founded in 1913 by Subbalakshmi Ammal and a Mahila Seva Samaj in Mysore in 1913.28

‘Swaraj’, Swadeshi’ and National Education’ became the slogans of the nationalists. Women who had begun to participate in the deliberations of the Indian National Congress now further took up the responsibility to share the national efforts through the press and the platform. There was no mass awakening amongst the women at this time but there was some sort of movement spreading slowly in them.

Some five hundred women met Jenokand village in the district of Murshidabad to protest against Government’s decision and to urge the need of using the country – made goods. Meetings were arranged by the ladies in their streets and spinning wheels were introduced in the zenana.

Women contributed their bangles, nose rings, and bracelets to the national fund. In villages they had started putting away a handful of grain daily for such purpose. During the Provincial Conference of 1906 Smt. Sarojini Bose, wife of Tara Prasanna Bose, pledged that she would not wear gold bangles till the “Bande Matram” circular prohibiting the use of this slogan was cancelled. Mrs. J.k. Gangauli gave her bracelet as a contribution towards paying off the fine of Shri Durga Mohan Sen, who was convicted for seditious activities. Women outside India also did whatever they could to further the national cause. Prosecutions and convictions became widespread. When Bhupendra Nath was convicted on July 24, 1907, some two hundred women presented an address of appreciation to his mother.
Kumudini Mitter, daughter of Kristo Mitter, a renowned national was very active during this period. She organized a group of educated Brahmin ladies for maintaining an illegal liaison between the different revolutionary leaders who were watched by the police. This organization also helped in the circulation of revolutionary leaflets and literature. She preached the cause of the extremists through Suprabhat, a Bengali Magazine. It propagated the cult of revolution.

Another lady, Smt. Bhag Bati of Noakhali (Eastern Bengal), who wrote a song describing the wretched state of Indian people. She concluded with the following sinister prayer; “Kali! If you are under the influence of an evil planet, please save us we will sacrifice white goats in Ganges if Bengal prospers.”

While the women in Bengal were busy promoting the cause of freedom, women in Punjab also stepped into the political arena. Smt. Sushila Devi of Sialkot delivered a series of lectures in which she attacked the government and exhorted women to rise to the occasion.

Har Devi, wife or Roshan Lal, a Barrister of Lahore, who was a great social reformer and editor of a Hindi magazine, The Bharat Bhagni, also joined the ranks of the political workers. During this period she arranged meetings and collected funds for the purpose of assisting anarchists under trial.

The women workers of the Arya Samaj were also responsible for arousing national spirit among the people. Smt. Purani, who was working for the Arya Samaj at Hissar, was a prominent worker of the time. She toured the various districts of the Punjab and advocated the cause of swadeshi. Speaking to the women at Hissar, Smt. Purani criticised the caste restrictions, undue observance of which, she said,
“prevented women from bringing up their sons as was done by the women of old, to be warriors and greatmen. “She exhorted them “to bring up their sons not with a view to joining government service, but to an independent participation in trade especially the manufacture and sale of swadeshi.”

Agyavati in Delhi was another person who took interest in the movement. She addressed both men and women and described the part played by the women in the management of the affairs of their own country in former times and she urged that until women were educated and took interest in the welfare of the country there was little chance of Indian making any real progress. She was reported to be a “very bold woman”, Agyavati started a Vidhawa Ashram where widows and other women, without distinction of caste or creed, received political training and were taught to spread the same.

**SISTSER NIVEDITA**

Margaret Noble, known as Sister Nivedita, the daughter of Rev. S.R. Noble, was born at Dunganonco, Tyrone, on October 28, 1867. She was interested in education and became a trained teacher. She opened a school at Wimbledon with a broad and lively conception of education for girls. Nivediata was very active at this time and was also instrumental in the establishment of Sesame Club (social centre for women and men).

In the year, 1895, she came in contact with Swami Vivekananda. She came under his influence and came to India at his suggestion. By 1898 Nivedita was in India. The centre of her efforts was now shifted from London to Calcutta and India became her adopted motherland. She took strenuous tours of the north – west region
along with Swami Vivekananda and three other western women. These tours were to serve as a guide in her future activities.

The conditions prevailing at that time were painful to Nivedita. She expressed her feeling in a letter written in 1901 which indicated the interest she had developed in Indian affairs. The letter reads: “Only your friend is right about India’s requiring foreign rule. Does the history of India bear the statement out? Of course, not. Even as written by her enemies it shows that India as large as Western Europe, never suffered from such disorder. Think of wars between France and England alone, between England and Spain, between Germany and France, of the French Revolution Nothing is so extraordinary in India as the combination of intense religious conviction with marvelous political peacefulness, when one takes a large enough view of the situation to get facts at a true, focus. The only thing that never is written is good history, at least about India that I do understand.”

Sister Nivedita met Sarla Devi and acquainted herself with her work. But somehow she found a more congenial comrade in Sri Aurobindo who was striving to organize western India for revolutionary work. She is reported to have had affiliations with the Irish Revolutionary party.

Her visit to Baroda in 1902 enabled her to have an insight into Sri Aurobindo’s work at close quarters. When she returned to Calcutta she gave away her library of valuable books on the revolutionary and nationalist movements of different countries to the centre of revolutionary activities in Calcutta. It was at this place that she addressed the young men on the nationalist movements of other countries. She is reported to have been a member of the National Revolutionary Council along with Sri Aurobindo.
Nivedita was present in the University Hall when Curzon made his convocation speech in 1905. She took the lead in condemning Curzon’s observations. It was on account of her efforts that an article under the caption ‘Lord Curzon in various capacities’ appeared in the Amrita Bazar Patrika of February 13, 1905. This article was mainly written to prove that there was no truth in the statement made by Lord Curzon.

The leadership of the revolution which swept Bengal following the partition of the province was assumed by Rabindranath Tagore who fostered it and kept it and up its fire by his great literary creation of national songs, a unique poetry of patriotism. These patriotic poems were set to music with Ajit Chakravorty every evening in the hall of the Metropolitan Institution where the Dawn Society was located. His close associate in this work was Hirendranth Dutta, and behind them was Sister Nivedita than whom a more passionate patriot the country has rarely seen.

The famine and flood in East Bengal in 1906 was disastrous and Sister Nivedita was an eyewitness to the troubles of the peasants. She went from one farmhouse to another helping, healing and consoling the weak and the miserable. She addressed women’s meetings and preached the use of swadeshi goods. Nivedita also emphasised the need to take to Charkha and other useful crafts. Writing about the famine in Bengal in 1906 she observed: “Under western imperialism the methods of exploitation are different from those of the past. The subjection had become financial and growing exploitation proceeds along building of rail – roads, the destruction of native industries and the creation of widespread famine – there are so many landmarks, as it were, in a single process of subordination and exploitation”.32
She believed that it was the school and not the parliament which was to be the cradle of new social combination. Her opinion was that the schools in British India had long stood without any morals, because there was no central ethical imperative round which could gather the new morality of the new era. Every student of every race and every province had caught the word of command “Arise and become a nationa! Be the servant of your people! Be a man of your own land!”

While referring to the peasants Nivedita observed that they had enough commonsense to take the affairs of their country in their own hands. She further said that those who paid the revenue also had the right to control the expenditure. This fact could not be denied by the Englishman. “As long as India is contented to sit and argue the question” remarks Nivedita, “he is perhaps but worldly wise to take what he can and refuse concession. Argument is never dangerous. But if a day should come when she ceased to argue, if she suddenly declared that she cared nothing about theory, for three hundred millions of human beings had determined on a new arrangement? Not our right but our will. If this cry were heard throughout the land what could be said by the tax gatherers then? What then? What then?”

Besides being a revolutionary of a high order Nivedita, took up the pen to arouse the zeal for the cultivation of national art, architecture, literature and history, education and culture. Though she did not join the political movement or any political party she advocated the revolution. “The promotion of the cause of Indian nationality was with her a mission and a passion, as was women’s education.” Nivedita dreamt of a unified India and desired that all should join together to achieve success in this great work. Talking about the unity of India she writes; “Side by side must work bothers of all shades of opinion, of all forms of energy, for the recreating of the Dharma, for the building anew in the modern world, of Mahabharata, Heroic India.”
Nivedita went to the Court in 1907 to stand surety for Bhupendranath Dutta, youngest brother of Swami Vivekananda, who was arrested for sedition as editor of ‘Yugantar’ and subsequently convicted to one year’s rigorous imprisonment.

Hard work had its effect on Sister Nivedita’s health and she breathed her last in 1911. Speaking on her memorial meeting, Rashbehary Ghose said: “If the dry bones are beginning to stir, it is because sister Nivedita breathed the breath of life into them. If our young men are now inspired with a burning passion for a new, a higher, a truer and noble life the credit is in no small measure due to the lady who has been so prematurely called away from us” he further said, “If we are conscious of a budding national life at the present day if is in no small measure due to the teaching of sister Nivedita.”

SARLA DEVI

Sarla Devi was one of the prominent personages of this period. She formed the link between Punjab and Bengal revolutionaries. She was the niece of the great poet, Rabindranath Tagore, and was born in the year 1872. Her mother, Swarn Kumari, was an ardent worker for the swadeshi cause.

The spirit of patriotism was imbibed in Sarla Devi by her mother. Her work from the year 1897, when she took over the editorship of ‘Bharati’, which she edited till 1899, is of great significance. Through the pages of Bharati, she advocated the Hindu – Muslim unity as unity alone could oust the foreigners. At the seventeenth session of the National Congress a song composed by Sarla Devi invoking the people of different provinces of the country to join hands in the national struggle was sung in chorus.
Sarla Devi’s impressionable years were spent in western India with her uncle, Satyenranath Tagore, where she witnessed the revival of Ganapati Festival, Shivaji coronation festival and the organization of the society of physical and military training by Damodar and Balkrishan Chaupekar, who were Chitpavan Brahmmins. She felt so inspired that she wanted to introduce similar activities in Bengal to revive the heroic spirit among the people. She established a centre for physical culture at her home in Calcutta and suggested to the Congress to organize an exhibition of physical feats. In the year 1903 she organized the celebration of Birastni Brata and Pratapaditya Brata modelled on the lines of Shivaji ‘Utsav’ of young Marathas, who followed Tilak. Just as the Marathas celebrated the Puja of Bhabai, tutelary deity of Shivaji, so Sarla Devi celebrated the Kali puja, tutelary goddess of Pratapaditya. Referring to this move of Sarla Devi, Bipin Chandra Pal wrote in New India, “As the necessity is the mother of invention, Sarla Devi is the mother of Pratapaditya to meet the necessity of a hero for Bengal.”

Sarla Devi opened ‘Lakshmi Bhandar’ for popularizing swadeshi goods. In 1904 she won the gold medel for exhibiting improved varieties of textures of fabrics. Sarla Devi was married to a popular Arya Samajst and a well known nationalist leader, Rambhoj Dutt Chaudhery of Lahore, in 1905 and her centre of activities then shifted from Bengal to Punjab, she continued to direct her activities from Punjab and maintained the link between the two provinces.

Sarla Devi gave a new life to the Suhrid Samiti in 1905. The Suhrid Samiti was started in 1901 as a benevolent institution in Mymensingh district of Bengal. It became a political organization and its changed creed was due to the trend of the time in general and the two special causes in particular. The first was the visit of
Aurobindo Ghose, Subodh Mullick and Bipinchandra Pal to Mymensingh district in 1905 and the second special cause was the predominant influence of Mrs. Rambhoj Dutt (Sarla Devi). She attended the provincial conference and then organised Samiti as an instrument for political work and tried to infuse a martial spirit into the members by introducing religious rituals. The association had its headquarters in Mymensingh and they aimed at starting new centers for propagating their ideas. In 1908 it had six branches in Mymensingh, four in Dhaka and six in Sylhet and one each in Noakhali and Chandanpur. The Brati Samiti and Sakti Samiti of Calcutta and Sevak Samiti of Dhaka were also branches of the same society. It was reported in 1908 that Mrs. Rambhoj Dutt maintains a fairly brisk correspondence with leading members of this Samiti.

She had organized agricultural farms to propagate her work. One such farm was started in Sylhet district under the charge of Kedar Nath. The ostensible object of the farm was to teach the arts of agriculture to ‘Bhadralog Youth.’ But in reality agricultural aspect of the farm was if “not a mere pretext than at any rate a subsidiary object.” It was found that the youth on the farm were in closest touch with the authorities of the ‘Suhrid Samiti.’ The members of the Suhird Samiti figured in numerous political demonstrations.

The minds of the ‘Suhrid Samiti’ members were well trained by religious ceremonies, inflammatory speeches, songs and literature and by participation in political meetings and demonstrations. They were subjected to physical training designed to develop muscles and arouse martial spirit. Boxing, wrestling, drill, lathi exercises, sword and dagger exercises, were among the items of this training. Most of the volunteers possessed daggers and sword sticks. Many had unlicensed revolvers.
The members of the Samiti looked up to Sarla Devi as their leader and she continued to exert powerful influence from Lahore.

Sarla Devi went from Lahore to preside over the New Year’s Day 1909 and Pratapaditya Anniversary. It was in this meeting that an attempt was made for the first time to use the word “Bande Matram” as a national slogan. “Each member of this Samiti after nestling to mother country mine”, exhorted Sarla Devi, “should consider every act beneficial to the mother country as my work, my duties and try to accomplish it without waiting for the other with the motto to accomplish by witchcraft or to die to guide you in life, carry through whatever you feel to be my work”.

Sarla Devi toured extensively, more especially the Punjab. She opened the Arya Samaj branches for women. Addressing a meeting at the Arya Samaj Girls School, Saharanpur, she said that, “knowledge is the great remedy for fear. Give knowledge to your womenfolk. Get them rid of fear and they will transmit fearlessness to your veins. Do not let all this remain mere talk, a theme for day’s platform speaking, clapping only but be sincere, be alert, arise, awake and having achieved the goal, rest”.

She also condemned the police officer of the Criminal Intelligence Department, who had followed her to keep a watch over her activities. She said. “Here was a stripling, a boy of my own race and blood corrupt to the core, treacherous to a degree, trying in the meanest cowardly fashion to frighten a lady supposed to be partial to the motherland out of wits to get lift in Criminal Intelligence Department.”

Addressing a meeting on May 1, 1908, at Lahore, she said that it was required of every true and loyal son of the soil to take an oath of allegiance to the country, to
revere the past, to preserve relics of the past, to study history and science, to have thorough mastery of the language, to strive for their own rights and privileges and on behalf of others.

Sarla Devi supervised the work of the Hindustan Press. She regularly attended the office and skillfully divided the press into two parts, setting aside three machines for jobbing and there for regular work of the paper. The object of this decision was to save three machines if they were ever ordered to be confiscated.

To provide immediate incentive to the people to take interest in the affairs of their country, Sarla Devi arranged competitions and her favourite subjects were: (i) Welcome to hardship, (ii) Knowledge, and (iii) Patriotism, as also for the best essay in Punjabi language and Hindu – Muslim unity. Meetings were also arranged by her in whom she encouraged discussions on topics like women’s education and patriotism.

Sarala Devi took steps to organize women’s movement. The nucleus of this movement was formed at Lahore in 1910. She was the tireless Secretary of the Bharat Stri Maha Mandal which was organized in the teeth of opposition. Branches of Stri Maha Mandal were also instituted at Allahabad and Calcutta. The object of this society was to bring together the women of all castes and creeds on the basis of their common interest in the moral and material progress of women in India. The government could not ignore the activities and the lead given by Sarla Devi and so she was put under surveillance. She was told that if she objected to being watched she should restrict her activities.
Sarla Devi came under the influence of Gandhiji in the year 1919. She was one of the few women in Punjab who raised their voice against tyranny of General Dyer. She also took part in the franchise movement set in motion by Mrs. Cousins. In Bengal it was she who was instrumental in securing a voting right for women. Sarla Devi remained an ardent Congress worker till her death in 1945 and participated in the various campaigns launched to achieve freedom.

Indian women outside India also did their best to make this cause a success. Most important of those who worked for the revolutionary activities were Mrs. Shyamji Krishan Verma, Miss P. Nauroji, grand – daughter of Dadabhai Nauroji, Miss M. Chattopadhya, sister of Nirendranath Chattopadhya and Madam B.K. Cama. The last named was amongst the top ranking leaders of the revolutionary party in Europe.

**MADAM BHIKAIJI RUSTUM K. R. CAMA**

She was born on 24th September, 1861. She was the daughter of Sorabji Framji Patel. Her education was completed in Bombay at the Alexandra Parsi Girls School. After leaving the school she devoted herself to the mastery of some foreign languages which was useful to her in later life. She was married to the son of K. Rustum Cama, a Parsi reformer, who made a name in the Presidency.

She went to Europe in 1902. Madam K. R. Cama spent a year in Germany, Scotland and Paris before settling down in London in 1906. These wanderings were perhaps a prelude to her political career. By the time she was back in London the seed of Revolutionary Party had already been sown by patriots likes Shyamji Krishna Verma. But it was left to Madam Cama to nourish this tender sapling into a vigorous tree.
Bhikaiji Cama in contact with Shyamji Krishana Verma who inspired her to join the revolutionary movement whole-heartedly. She had, perhaps, already made up her mind to dedicate her life to the cause of her motherland and started the work in a systematic manner. She took immediate steps to establish contacts with nationalists of Ireland, Russia, Egypt and Germany. She was mindful of the handicaps of the extremists at home and supplied them revolvers concealed in toys ostensibly sent as Christmas presents.

When it was announced that the International Socialist Congress was to meet in Stuttgart (Germany) in August 1907, Madam Cama was quick to grab this opportunity to acquaint the cosmopolitan gathering with the conditions prevailing in India. Her speech on that memorable occasion dealt with the lives of the dumb millions of Hindustan “who are undergoing terrible tyrannies under the English Capitalism and British Government.” She said that million pounds were taken annually from Indian and consequently people, in India died of poverty. At the end of speech she unfolded the Indian National Flag, a tricolour in green, yellow and red, with the words ‘Bande Matram’ on the middle band. Thus Bhikaiji Cama was the first Indian who unfolded the Indian National Flag in a foreign country before an international gathering. Subsequently she made it customary to unfurl the national flag before addressing any meeting because she said “she was in the habit of speaking under the flag.”

Madam Cama did a yeoman’s task for the election of Dadabhai Naoroji to the Parliament, her being the first Indian to sit in the House of Commons. Immediately after the conference in Germany she left for America where she was to launch a vigorous campaign to win the sympathy of the people of that great republic for her
just and sacred cause. She was interviewed by the pressmen at New York. She boldly replied that “Swaraj an Self – Government” was her goal. She told the interviewer that “starved and uneducated as we are, the past few years have shown an increase of millions of patriots. We shall have liberty, fraternity and equality some day. We hope for freedom within ten years.

On October 28, 1907, Madam Cama addressed the members of the Minerva Club at the Waldroff Astoria Hotel in New York and asked their help for political enfranchisement of India. She said that “The people here know about the conditions in Russia but I do not think that they know anything about the conditions in India under the English Government. Out best men are deported or sent to prison like criminals, and there they are flogged so that so that they have to go to the prison hospitals. We are peaceful, we do not want a bloody revolution, but we do want to teach the people their rights and throw off despotism.” She addressed meetings at several places. She was the first Indian (woman) unofficial ambassador of the people of India to the United States.

In November 1908, Madam Cama was beck in London and addressed the gathering at India House. Her speech was printed in a leaflet, copies of which were afterwards sent to India in large numbers. This leaflet became the manifesto of the revolutionary creed. She justified the use of force when one was forced to use force. She explained that tyranny is tyranny and torture is torture wherever applied and that success justified any action. She said that the struggle for freedom called for exceptional measures and that successful revolution against the foreign rule was patriotism. In a message to the youth of the country she said: “March forward friend!
and lead our helpless, dying, down – trodden children of motherland to the goal of Swaraj in its right sense. Let our motto be, ‘we are all for India for the Indians.’”

It may be mentioned of the Cama was not a born revolutionary. As she said at a meeting of the India House in 1908. “Three years ago it was repugnant to me even to talk of violence as a subject of discussion but owing to the heartlessness, the hypocrisy and the rascality of the liberals that feeling is gone.”

Madam Cama was an apostle of unity – whether she addressed the Muslims, the Hindus or the Sikh – her watchword was that they should fasten the ties of brotherhood – that relation between the countries men should be firm and resolute without bringing in the question of religion.

She preached the sermon of non-cooperation in a far off land and exhorted the Indians not to accept any office however high it might be under the British Government. They ought to serve themselves, improve trade, industry and art and then the country would be their own.

By now Madam Cama’s activities were widely known and the British Government began to look upon her as a dangerous revolutionary whose aim to overthrow the British rule in India. The detectives were set to follow her like a shadow. She decided to move to Paris and left London in May 1909. Here she associated with S. R. Rana, Shyamji Krishna Verma and other revolutionary leaders. Madam Cama interested herself chiefly in the business of preparing and forwarding to India seditious literature in the form of leaflets and generally in assisting with advice and what was probably more important with her money. She was at this time the
recognized leader of the revolutionary movement and was said to be regarded by the people as a reincarnation of the goddess Kali.

In 1907, when the renowned Indian journalist and revolutionary, B.C. Pal, editor of S waraja, was prosecuted for his seditions writings, Madam Cama felt the need of having a press of her own away from the clutches of the British Government. This dream materialized in 1909 when she shifted to Paris. To carry on the required propaganda work she started the well-known monthly journal The “Bande Matram”. This journal was supported by voluntary contributions and there was no fixed subscription. The famous Press Act was imported to India by the bureaucratic government in 1910. By virtue of this Act several editors were sent to jails and the presses were closed down. Madam Cama was not to be defeated by this high-handed measure. She encouraged her countrymen and wrote in Vol. I, March 1910, of her journal that Press Act was a confession of the defeat on the part of the Indian Government and attributed to the efficiency of the revolutionary Party. It was emphasized that the Act would not affect the future of the cause since revolutionary journals and books were printed abroad. The writer added: “We must recognize that importation of revolutionary literature into India from foreign countries is the sheet anchor of the party and the centre of gravity of political work has shifted from Calcutta, Poona and Lahore to Paris, Geneva, Berlin, London and New York.”

In another article in 1911, Madam Cama appealed to the Indians in Europe to make the best of their stay in the West, by taking all kinds of physical training. Above all she asked them to “learn to shoot straight because the day is not far when coming into the inheritance of Swaraj and Swadeshi, you will be called upon to shoot the English out of the land which we all love so passionately.” Copies of this journal
found their way to America, Egypt and many parts of Europe and India. At one time nothing less than 426 copies were intercepted at the Oxford Post Office.

The cause of women was dear to her. She wanted the women to share, the responsibilities, sufferings and sorrows of their countrymen. In 1912 in an open letter to Young Orients on the subject of foreign wives, she advised them to marry oriental girls for all their weaknesses and for all their goodness and improve them and make them progressive. By doing so the young men would be improving the conditions of the country and strengthening it at the same time. She said: “You should rather everyday in your life in teaching the progressive ways to an Oriental little wife than getting a readymade article and live an easy home – life, by marrying an Occidental woman.”

At the meeting of the Egyptian National Congress at Brussels in 1910 she remarked: “I see here the representatives of only half the population of Egypt. May I ask where is the other half? Sons of Egypt, where are the daughters of Egypt? Where are your mothers and sisters, your wives and daughters?” She further remarked that they should “remember that the hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that moulds the character. That soft hand is the chief factor in the national life. So do not neglect that powerful hand.”

It would be wrong to say that she had anything against the women of other countries. In fact, she stressed: “I have nothing against American of English sisters. She said that she was an internationalist in her feeling and that it will be a day of rejoicing when she could say that “the world is my country, every human being is my relation. But to establish internationalism in the world there must be nations first.”
Madam Cama was so popular in Socialist circles in Paris that when V.D. Sarvarkar’s arrest and recapture became known she used her influence with such effect that the ‘Affair Savarkar’ was at once taken up in the Socialist Paper. Madam Cama engaged Socialist avocet Jean Longueat to watch the proceedings of the Hauge Tribunal of Savarkar’s behalf and represent him there.

Besides contributing to the National Fund of which she was the treasurer, Madam Cama also contributed liberally to the Adhinav Bhara Society. This society was started by V.D. Savarkar in India and in London which was responsible for the murder of Jackson, at Nasik and later through V.V.S. Aiyer in Pondicherry of Ashe in the Tinnevelly District.

The British Government was alarmed and the Governor – General issued orders for the interception of Madam Cama’s mail. A thorough cheek was made on all the sea ports. But Mrs. Cama was not defeated by these moves. Her leaflets and parcels reached India via Pondicherry.

The British Government thought of another device to put a check on her activities in 1910 by depriving her of her material resources. She was declared an absconder from justice under Section 88 Criminal Procedure Code on non – execution of warrants. Her property worth one lakh of rupees was attached.

The next year partition of Bengal was annulled. The year 1914 witnessed the beginning of the First World War. Thus the activities of the revolutionaries were circumscribed. After the outbreak of war no foreigner was allowed to remain in Paris without license. When she received her license in which she was described as a British subject, she was indignant, and exclaimed that she was not so, but was a free
Hindu. However, when she was told that if she did not produce the license she would be locked – up at once, she had to make use of it. The French Government also yielded to pressure from the British and on 1st November, 1914, an undertaking was taken from her to cease seditious activities during the war and report herself to the police authorities once a week. She wanted to visit the war prisoners at Geneva but was disallowed by the French government.

Madam Cama fell seriously ill in 1914, but the moment she recovered, she set about her work again with the same old vigour and enthusiasm. At this time she helped in distributing copies of the Gujarati Ghadar and carried on copious correspondence with the Indian revolutionaries in all parts of the world. The Director, Criminal Investigation Department, reported that Indian nationalism is not a wide enough field for her energies and that her war cry was “the Orient for Orientals”.47 Even the Egyptians, the Turks, the Persians and the Chinese visited her for help and sympathy.48

Indian ladies, at the instance of Madam Cama, introduced a lectureship of the value of one thousand rupees for Indian women in connection with the society of Political missionaries. The only condition was that the candidate had to be in sympathy with the objects of the society. Madam Cama continued her work in the face of all these difficulties till the toil of years rendered her invalid.

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, who visited her during his European tour in 1926, wrote in his autobiography: “We saw Madam Cama, rather fierce and terrifying, as she came up to you and peered into your face and pointing at you asked abruptly who you were. The answer made no difference (probably she was too deaf to hear) for she formed her own impressions and stuck to them, despite facts to the contrary”.49
She died on 13th August 1936 at Bombay. This brave lady who sacrifice her all for the liberation of her motherland and spent practically her whole life in exile in a far off land, was amongst the pioneers of the freedom struggle.

**INDIAN WOMEN IN SOUTH AFRICA**

While Indian women in India and Europe were fighting for freedom, the women in South Africa were setting examples by exhibiting the strength of the passive resistance movement. They were taking training in Satyagraha Army of Mhatma Gandhi. This training proved useful for many of them who came back to India to take their place amongst the freedom fighters.

The judgment given in a case on 14th March, 1913, by Justice Searle of the Cape Supreme Court (South Africa), whereby all the marriages were declared illegal except those celebrated according to Christian rites and registered by the Registrar of Marriages, was a challenge to the Indian womanhood. This decision could not be accepted at any cost. Mahatma Gandhi rose to the occasion and took up leadership of the Satyagraha army which included both men and women.

Mahatma Gandhi explained to women the difficulties which might follow the observance of Satyagraha. He told them that they might have to go to jail, or starve and do hard work. “But these sisters,” remarked Mahatma Gandhi. “Were all brave and feared none of these things, one of them was in interesting condition while six of them had young babies in arms. But one and all were eager to join and I simply could not come in their way.” A batch of eleven women (all Tamilian, except one) principal among whom were: Mrs. Tambi Naidu, Mrs. N. Pillay, Mrs. K. M. Pillay, Mrs. A.
Perumal Naidu and many others entered Transvaal without permits but the police did not arrest them.

The women in the Phoenix Farm could not stay back. They joined the struggle. Mahatma Gandhi did not tell his wife Kasturba Gandhi about this programme, but she overheard the conversation and came to Gandhiji and said: “I am sorry that you are not telling me about this. What defect is there in me which disqualifies me for the jail. I also wish to take the path to which you are inviting others. Gandhiji replied thus: “There is no question of my distrust in you. I would be only too glad if you went to jail but it should not appear at all as if you went at my instance.” She assured her husband. “You may have nothing to do with me if being unable to stand jail I secure my release by an apology. If you can endure hardships and so can my boys, why can’t I? I am bound to join the struggle.”

Kasturba Gandhi joined the struggle and here after she was always beside her husband and shared his responsibilities. The second batch of sixteen women, principal among who were: Mrs. Kasturba, Gandhi, Mrs. J. K. Doctor, Mrs. Kashi Chagan Lal Gandhi, and Mrs. S. Magan Lal Gandhi, arrested and sentenced to three months imprisonment with hard labour.

The first batch of women from Tolstoy Farm was not arrested for entry into Transvaal without permits. So they took the next step of influencing the laborers to raise their voice against the indentured labour and for this went to New Castle. The Government could not tolerate any more and arrested them.

Another famous lady who had to go to jail was, Mrs. Rambhabai Sodha, wife of a passive resister. She was prosecuted for entry into Transvaal, was tried and
sentence to imprisonment. She appealed but the decision was not changed. She had a small baby in her arms and another three years old by her side. In the jail they were treated harshly and were not even provided with wholesome food. As a result, several of them, on release, were found to have reduced to a skeleton. A sixteen year old girl, Valliamma R. Munsuswami Mudaliar came out of the jail with a fatal fever and died.

Bai Fatma was another person who refused to give her finger impressions and was arrested along with her mother and daughter. During this period women had started taking interest in civil and political matters concerning India. There were women’s societies working for the uplift of their kind. One such society was in Kanchi known as Kanchi Mahila Parishad and was started by Smt. Parvati Devi who was the headmistress of Hindu Girls School at Kanjeevaram. The aim of this women’s association was “to equip the ladies of Kanchi with general information and to create public opinion among them regarding matters national.” Another society known as Gujarati Hindu Stri Maha Mandal was started in 1904. Mrs. Jamnabai Nagin Das Sakki was instrumental in “infusing a new and vigorous spirit into the lives of the women of Bombay”. During this period two other ladies, Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu, came on the political scene. They were later to rank amongst the topmost leaders of India.

Women shouldered critical responsibilities in India’s struggle for freedom. They held public meetings, organized picketing of shops selling foreign alcohol and articles, sold Khadi and actively participated in National movement. They bravely faced the baton of the police and went behind the iron bars. The Swadeshi movement spread all over the nation, in a short period of time. The people across the country gave their full fledged support to the progress of this movement and they were fully
responsible for the growth of industries and establishment of national schools, colleges in their respective areas. Khadi and boycott of foreign cloth had proved to be especially potent weapon in Indian freedom struggle in the period of 1905 after the partition of Bengal.
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