CHAPTER-III

WOMEN ROLE IN NON-COOPERATION MOVEMENT (1919-1929)

POLITICAL CONDITIONS OF THE PERIOD

In the preceding chapter, a reference has already been made to Gandhiji’s emergence on the political scene of India in 1918. After closely watching the political situation and events. In the country for nearly three years, he equipped the freedom fighters with a new weapon of passive resistance which came to popularly known as Satyagraha (Passive resistance movement), a technique he had earlier experimented with in South Africa.

The years following the First World War are most outstanding in the annals of the freedom struggle for, during this period an organized and country – wide attempt to overthrow the foreign rule was begun by boycotting the Government on essential things and by launching Satyagraha. It was probably due to this technique that the freedom movement which was more or less a monopoly of the intellectuals found a fertile field amongst the masses of the country and invited interest of the rich and the poor, the old and the young, the educated and the uneducated, industrialists and laborers, merchants and customers, lawyers and doctors, teachers and social workers, and above all, of the women who now came forward to join the Satyagraha Army.

Lately, women had been taking increasing interest in socio – political affairs; fillip to this was given by the partition of Bengal, the treatment of Indians in South Africa, the Home Rule League of Annie Besant, and the First World War and by the Women’s India Association which came in existence in 1917. This organization
became the pivot around which women gathered to discuss and demand their rights. A decade later an all – India organization, the All India Women’s Conference, was founded and its political goal was self- government. The members emphasized the need for responsible government which could satisfy the aspirations of the people.

The question of suffrage for women brought them to a common platform. The silence maintained by the Montagu – Chelmsford scheme on this subject, In spite of the representation made to the Secretary of State, accentuated the common feelings. Later the Southborough Committee was appointed to collect information and elicit opinion of the people of India on the projected reforms and on the question of franchise. This committee toured India. When it visited Bombay a requisition signed by eight hundred women of the Presidency was submitted to it. In addition similar requisitions were sent by the Women Graduates Union Bombay, all the Branches of the Women’s India Association which numbered about forty, the Women’s branch of the Home Rule League, the Bharat Stree Mandal and by the members of the All India Women’s Deputation which had earlier met the Secretary on this subject.

Indian ladies also appeared personally as witnesses before the Southborough Committee to express their viewpoint. The Southborough Committee disfavored the extending of franchise to women on the ground that the prevailing social conditions in the country did not warrant franchise for women. Margaret Cousins, on behalf of the Association, reiterated: “Is this handful of men better able to judge of these conditions than were the thousands of Indian delegates to the Bombay and Delhi Congresses? They urged the removal of disqualifications in all the terms of reforms”. Resolution were passed in different parts of the country protesting against this decision.
Mrs. Besant and Mrs. Naidu, who were in England as members of the deputation to give evidence before Joint Parliamentary Committee, took up the case for women’s franchise. Mrs. Hirabai Tata and Mrs. Mithi Bai Tata were sent to England by the Women’s Committee to express strong feelings of Indian women on this issue. The joint Select Committee, however, left the responsibility of deciding the question of franchise for women to be settled by the future Legislative Councils of India for each province.

Madras was the first province to remove the disqualification of sex for the legislative franchise on April 1, 1921 and other provinces followed in its wake. Thus the women of India had begun to understand their rights and responsibilities. They were conscious of the help given to the British of successful completion of the war. Some of them had helped in collecting war funds while others in sewing clothes and doing other odd jobs. Many had suffered the loss of their brothers, fathers or husbands as soldiers who fought for the Allies.

India had helped the British Government with men, money and materials throughout the war. It was, therefore, natural that they should look for reward in the way of political progress of the country. But a vehement demand on the part of the leaders of the people fell on deaf ears for it led to the enactment of the Rowlatt Bills which aimed at curbing the existing modicum of liberties. Following the armistice it was hoped that there would be some relief but the condition remained unchanged. For instance, the transport facilities were disorganized, the cost of living was still high in 1919 “and the few cotton rugs which the poorest riot wears became almost unpurchasable.”
Immediately after the publication of the proposed Rowlatt Bill in January 1919, a meeting was convened by the Indian National Congress in the Gandhi Ashram (Ahmadabad), wherein a resolution was passed to disobey this Act, if passed.

One of the Bills was, however, passed in the teeth of opposition and it gave the government powers in an emergency to judge cases without trial. The passing of the Bill came as a shock to the nation as a whole. Gandhiji, therefore, announced his intention of launching a Satyagraha movement on 30th March 1919. This date was later changed to 6th April, but unfortunately the news of this change did not reach in time to many places with the result that 30th March was observed as a day of hartal and inauguration of the disobedience movement. In the beginning the movement was non-violent, but slowly it became violent due to provocation by the police, and also, perhaps, because people were not trained enough to take part in such a mass movement non-violently. The events moved fast and the situation in the Punjab, as compared to other provinces, was serious. There was a considerable amount of fermentation in the districts, of Lahore, Gurdaspur and Amritsar. People came out in mobs and the rowdy elements damaged the railway carriages, telegraph wires and the government buildings, the post offices and a few places were set on fire as well. The Government retaliated sternly. Martial Law was proclaimed; the Punjab witnessed a reign terror which dragged on till 11th June 1919.

This movement culminated in the firing which took place in Jallianwala Bagh at Amritsar. It was in this city that a peaceful assembly of twenty thousand people was fired upon on 13th April 1919, under the orders General Dyer. According to the Hunter Enquiry Committee Report, four hundred people were shot dead and twelve hundred injured. Over and above this, people were humiliated in a variety of ways.
The women had to suffer as well and there were instances of outraging of the modesty of women. In some villages women were called out from their houses and harassed. The faces of the women were forcibly uncovered and foul language was used against them. The whole country demanded redress of the Punjab atrocities and the All India Congress Committee endorsed these demands and asked for an impartial enquiry. Ultimately, forced by the circumstances the Government appointed and Enquiry Committee with Sir Hunter as Chairman. The Indian National Congress also appointed another committee for the same purpose.

The next year saw the Report of the Hunter Enquiry Committee. The recommendations and findings of this Committee were far from satisfactory. The Government’s decision was “that Dyer’s action was dictated by a stern though misconceived sense of duty.” Following the government decision, Dyer was censured and was deprived of his command. The action was approved by the House of Commons but there was a furor in the House of Lords over the punishment inflicted on Dyer. Not only this, he was even hailed as a hero by certain sections of the people and a campaign in his favor was launched which included the sponsoring of a fund for him. He was also presented with twenty – three thousand pounds and a sword by the English ladies in India.

This action fanned the fire of nationalism in India. Added to this was the unsettled state of Turkey. The ‘Khilafat’ movement which greatly excited the feelings of the Muslims of India. Turkey was considered the greatest Muslim power by the Muslims of this country. The Sultan of this Empire was ‘Khalifa’ of Islam and as such temporal head. During the war period Muslims were given assurance by the Prime Minister of England that the Turkish Empire would be preserved. A deputation of the
Muslim Khilafat Conference also went to England to put forward their view point as regards Turkey and the Khilafat. The Government did not pay any heed to these requests and the draft treaty called the Treaty of Servers published on May 14, 1920, set aside all the promises made during the War and this desquietened the Muslims further.

Gandhiji felt that this was an opportunity to bring the two communities together. He, therefore, warned the Government that if justice was not done to the Muslims he would resume Satyagraha. A special session of the congress held in September 1920 in a resolution approved the resumption of policy of “progressive non-violence, non-cooperation until the said wrongs were righted and Swarajya established.” To achieve this end a nation-wide programme of boycotting titles and honors, elections and legislatures, schools and colleges, courts and tribunals was launched. The people were advised not to offer themselves for military service. The Government ‘durbars’, official and semi – official functions were boycotted. The sale and use of liquor and foreign cloth was prevented through peaceful picketing.

Mahatma Gandhi had faith in women. Writing in 1921 he said; “I expect great things from you. I expect the women to do their full share in the struggle. Let government capture every one of our soldiers – I do’nt mind. Our work is so very easy that even our women can carry it and without difficulty”\(^2\) The Satyagraha movements which was inaugurated by Gandhiji was such that women could not sit and watch the battle between the Government and the people and so a quick response was made to the call of Mahatma Gandhi. They (women) took out processions propagated the use of Khadi and even courted jail. Though the number of women
arrested was very small, yet a beginning was made and an example set that, if need be, women would not hesitate to face the most difficult situations.

Bengal had been in the vanguard of the freedom movement and women of this province did not lose any time and came out in the field. The organized “Mahila Karma Samaj” or the Ladies Organization Board of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, to carry out propaganda and constructive work amongst the women of Bengal. The organization had its own office and arrangements for the stay of the whole time workers also. Branches of this organization were spread all over Calcutta. A group of twenty-five or thirty women workers were given a number of houses to carry out their work. The women members of the organization addressed meetings as well. It was in one such meeting organized by Smt. Inder Prabha Majumdar and Smt. Radu Bibi that in response to the appeal made by these ladies many women present gave up their ornaments, broke their foreign ‘churies’ (bangles) and vowed that they would not wear these again. Women volunteers were also enlisted at the meetings. In a single meeting at Gauhati (Assam) sixty women volunteers were enlisted. They went about on foot carrying the message to the people to stop selling or wearing foreign cloth.

Smt. Besanti Devi and Urmila Devi, wife and sister, or Desbandhu das, were the leaders of the women’s movement in Bengal. They went about the streets of Calcutta selling Khaddar and propagating against the use of foreign cloth and the habit of drinking. They were arrested while selling handloom cloth. The others who were arrested with them were: Smt. Anukul Mitter, Smt. Sirya Shome, Smt. Umashi Deri, Smt. Satya Devi, a few boys and eight Sikh ladies. They were, however, released in the evening. But their arrest stirred the people of Bengal and further
strengthened the movement. Later when Smt. Urmila Devi was interviewed in Ahmadabad and was asked why they had courted arrest, she replied, “We felt that although Bengal was sympathetic it was only a sort of passive sympathy. To make it most dynamic we thought Bengal must be appealed to in a special manner of involving of course, a special measure of sacrifice and so, our arrest produced the desired effect”. 3 Urmila Devi urged the women to join the ranks of volunteers. She said that women would be called upon to undertake responsibilities while men were being put behind bars.

Mrs. Besanti Devi also presided over the Bengal Provincial Congress session in 1922 at Chittagong. She said, “Freedom will come as a matter of course to the extent we are able to do penance by our sacrifice, by our sorrows and sufferings, by our patience and by the strength of our character”. 4

In Bombay women also held protest meeting against his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales’ visit and the municipal address which was to be present to him on behalf of the citizens of Bombay. After the meeting, they went in a procession to a temple and offered prayers for the attainment of Swaraj.

Kasturba Gandhi, who had her first lesson in Satyagraha in South Africa, took her place here as well. She presided over meetings and also toured the various States propagating for the success of the movement. Presiding over the Gujarat Provincial Conference, she condemned untouchability and preached Swadeshi. She appealed to the women to take to spinning and weaving of Khadi. “If we want to earn Swaraj” she said, “we shall have to fill the bowl of Goddess of Freedom.” 5 When it was reported to her that her son Devdas Gandhi has been arrested, she took the news saying; “Only two sons of mine have gone to jail, but twenty thousand sons of mother Hind are in
Jail; how can I bemoan my lot! Young sons of mother Hind, Prosecute how I can bemoan my lot! Young sons of mother Hind, prosecute the work of Khaddar with such zeal that you may either regain your brothers or join them in jail."

In the Punjab the first ladies’ meeting was held on the 6th and 7th December 1922, which was presided over by Kasturba Gandhi. Radha Devi, wife of Lala Lajput Rai, was the Chairman of the Reception Committee. In her address (this was read on her behalf by Smt. Paravati Devi) she declared that the object of the conference was to strike a note of warning to the idlers while the leaders were undergoing imprisonment. She exhorted her country women to support the Swaraj movement with zeal and courage characteristic of Punjabi ladies.

**PARVATI DEVI**

Parvati Devi an ardent worker of the Congress was arrested in Meerut for the so called inflaming speeches. She was taken to Agra Jail in jail-clothes. No one was allowed to be on the platform. As a mark of respect ladies took out a procession on December 16, 1922. She was convicted and was sentenced to two years imprisonment. This was the highest sentences so far awarded to any lady.

**BAI AMMAN (ABADI BANO BEGUM)**

Bai Amman was one of the important personages at this time. She belonged to an aristocratic family of Muslims but threw off her veil when her sons were deprived of their liberty. She went about addressing meetings all over India. She was invited to join the deputation for women’s franchise. But she refused on the ground that she would rather influence her own countrymen than go to an Englishman with a petition.
Addressing a meeting at Lahore she said the Indians have committed two follies during the last 150 years; it was they who sided with the British which brought about the capture of their won King and secondly, they helped the English during the outbreak of 1857. If Indians had not done so there was no possibility of these “merchants” getting supremacy in India and shackling Indians in the fetters of serfdom. “Would they”, she continued, “commit another folly and put their aged mother to shame.” “Be man” she added, “and carry out the determination you have formed.”

In an open letter Bai Amman thanked the people for their kind feelings towards her sons. She hoped that the Muslim women would rise to the occasion and help the national cause by putting every pice, and handful of grain that could be spared as duty to the motherland. She wrote, “We had been sacrificing ourselves for our fathers and husbands and sons, but so long as this spirit of Indian womanhood is not lost, I, for one, feel that nothing really matters is lost.”

Bai Amman advised the establishment of Panchayats throughout India. She ardently advocated the use of Khaddar and the Hindu – Muslim unity. Her services to the cause of the Khilafat, Swaraj and Hindu Muslim Unity, were invaluable. In this connection she visited Rawalpindi, Gujranwala and Kasur. In a meeting at Simla in September 1922, she made a special appeal to women to take up Khaddar. She was keen to visit the Frontier Province, but orders were issued banning her entry into that region.

In another meeting in the Punjab, Bai Amman said that some people left houses or ornaments to their children after their death, but she was of the opinion that there was nothing as good as freedom and asked women to leave Swaraj after their
death for the children. Swaraj, she said, could not be had by asking, but was sure to come if people had courage and women a heart to make sacrifices for the cause.

Bai Amman addressed another ladies’ conference at Bombay which six thousand people attended. A resolution urging the women to enroll as members was passed at the gathering. At another meeting at Ahmadabad, she appealed to the people to unite, for, “without co-operation among the different communities we can’t liberate our country or live peaceful and honorable lives.”

In February 1922, she went to Patna and Bhagalpur. At Bhagalpur she was not allowed to see the political prisoners and as a protest the prisoners and their relatives refused to see each other. She collected sixty thousand rupees from Darbhanga (Bihar) for Khilafat Committee and she was presented with a purse of twenty thousand rupees at Mongayr (Bihar).

The question of prosecuting Bai Amman for objectionable speeches also came up before the government. But her arrest was not considered advisable. Mahatma Gandhi sent a special message to Bai Amman on the eve of his arrest in March 1922. He said: “Tell Bai Amman to pray for me and for all of us and to carry on the work which we have left behind. Her prayers and work will be quite sufficient to ensure our quick release and success.”

Bai Amman continued the political work so dear to till her death in 1924. Mahatma Gandhi paid a touching tribute to her. He said: “She realized that the freedom of India was impossible without Hindu – Muslim unity and Khaddar. She therefore, ardently preached unity which had become an article of faith with her. She had discarded all her foreign or mill made clothing and taken to Khaddar.”
Women in almost all the provinces were doing their best to encourage men to participate in the struggle and were helping to carry on the propaganda. Mrs. Motilal Nehru, when she heard of the conviction of her only son, Jawaharlal, said: “I am happy Jawaharlal has the courage and bravery to stand for his conviction for the cause of liberty and truth”. She appealed to her sisters to consider the touch of foreign cloth as polluting. “This cloth has blood of our brothers and sisters, how can we wear it?” She said that the work for which Jawaharlal had gone to jail could not be stopped. If the men of India have lost courage she said, “We women will do it. Are the jails of mother India meant only for men?”

Lucknow also was a centre of activity at this time. Meetings under Section 144 were prohibited but such weapons of the Government did not worry the people. They had their meetings in Congress Committee’s office which were presided over by Mrs. Abdul Qadir. Women were urged to take to wearing Khaddar and to exhort men to join the national movement. A committee was formed, with Mrs. Abdul Qadir as president, to carry on the work among the women.

Sindh was not to lag behind. Women of this province took out processions and moved through the main bazaars and streets singing national songs and delivering inspiring lectures. The non-cooperation movement daily gained ground. The author of the Simon Commission observed that “Defiance of authority become widespread, an extraordinary development in Indian destructs, where the power of Government had never been questioned within living memory.”

The Government on its part met this challenge by arresting people, by lathi charging on processions and by declaring the organization as unlawful. When the Congress met in 1921 some thirty thousand congress workers were in jail. The
movement at this time was also becoming violent. There were riots in Bombay which resulted in fifty deaths and three hundred and seventy-nine wounded. The same year there was a Moplah outbreak which was quietened with the timely action of national leaders.

These riots were followed by a tragic action in Chauri Chaura in Gorakhpur district, United Provinces, where twenty-one police constables were murdered with revolting cruelty by mob acting under the excitement of the anti Government movement. Gandhiji could not bear the movement changing its creed of non-violence and as a result suspended the movement. He was arrested and sentenced to six years imprisonment.

Apparently the movement had failed; but it had awakened the interest of the masses and also imparted the first lesson in Satyagraha to the nation. Gandhiji gave a new foundation to the new movement. Emerson observes: “Gandhiji has, I believe, done his work. He has made India self-conscious. He has given India a new-sense of self-respect. His programme has been characterized by many negative features….. It has never put forward even a suggestive outline of the Government, it would substitute for the one, it would tear down…. But Gandhi has given a moral basis and a spiritual standing to India’s revolution.”

ANNIE BESENT

Mrs. Besent did not however view this policy of Gandhiji with favor from the beginning and felt that a reign of chaos would follow if his plans were given a concrete shape. She spoke vehemently against it. Speaking at a meeting of the National Liberal Federation held on 30th December 1920, she characterized non-
cooperation as revolt. Besent was so upset over the non-cooperation movement that she refused to pay her annual subscription to the Congress.

By taking this stand against Gandhiji’s line of action Mrs. Besent became unpopular. Even her own Home Rule League members refused to elect her as president with the result she founded the National Home Rule League in April 1919. Later, as its representative, she gave evidence before the Enquiry Committee presided over by Lord Selborne and constituted by the parliament.

While in England Mrs. Besent and other members of the deputation i.e., B.P. Wadia, P.K. Talang, Jamna Das and Dwarika Das tried their best to educate the public opinion in favour of Indian reforms with Home Rule for India as the goal and an Indian Parliamentary Committee was formed in England with Mrs. Besant as chairman, and a council in which several members of Parliament were members through whom the League sent our literature and information relating to India. It had one hundred and eighty – eight members with nearly three hundred Labour Associations and Trade Unions affiliated to it. She represented India with great “vigor and ability and demanded at least a partial liberation at the Centre.”

Mrs. Besant did not favor the setting up of as Council of State for, the conservative elements were already strong in the country and to strengthen them by creating a second chamber would hamper the progress. Besant was of the opinion that diarchy as envisaged by the Act of 1919 should not be for more than five years.

In India Annie Besant directed her energies to popularize the Reform Act of 1919. She issued pamphlets in different languages and exhorted the people to work for the success of these reforms.
After the 1919 Amristar Congress Annie Besant made strenuous tours and was able to establish twenty–five branches of the National Home Rule League in Madras. Forty–five in Andhra, nine in Malabar, thirteen in Bombay and two in Sindh. A few branches were also founded in Bengal, Bihar, U.P. and Delhi.

Immediately after the elections were over, in accordance with the Reform Scheme (Government of India Act 1919), Besant set about her task of calling a National Convention with a view to frame a constitution best suited to the people of the country to be ratified by Parliament later.

**FORMATION OF A NATIONAL CONVENTION**

The National Convention was formally inaugurated in 1922 and was supported by the liberals and the National Home Rule League. Besant who was instrumental in bringing about such an organization was deputed to visit Simla to lay the scheme before the two Houses of Parliament which were in session then. An Executive Committee, from amongst the members of both the houses representing the various provinces, was formed. A conference was convened in Delhi in 1923 reasserting it. Besant carried a vigorous agitation for the recognition of this body and also started a private company in England for the foundation of a weekly newspaper called United India. This was sent to the selected list of Peers of the House of Lords and also to the Indian newspapers.

A deputation on behalf of the National Convention also was sent to England under the leadership of Besant of on 26\(^{th}\) April 1924, for the furtherance of the cause of self–government for this country. Besant divided the activities of the deputation in England into three kinds; lectures and usual discussions, large demonstrations in
Queen’s Hall, London and Free Trade Hall, Manchester, to influence public opinion in England and a special meeting with the Indian Parliamentary Committee through which the members of the House of Commons were to be addressed, and interviews with the members of the government. The deputation presented a memorandum signed by Dr. Besant and others, making a united demand for Dominion Home Rule for India.

The National Conference met in Delhi in early part of 1924 immediately after the general elections at the end of 1923. Mrs. Besant was elected the General Secretary. Dr. H. S. Gour who proposed her name for this office said: “I am sure that when the work of the convention is fulfilled and achieved, she will live in our hearts as a lady who has done far more for the emancipation of the people of this country than any political thinker or statesman of our race and blood, who has striven and worked for the achievement of the Self – Government for India.”

The Convention divided itself into seven committees to deal with different sections of the constitution to be prepared for the country. A draft was based on these reports and the convention sat in Bombay in December of the same year and considered and amended it. It printed the results and circulated them to political parties, inviting further amendments. Later the draft was submitted to a sub – committee appointed by a Committee of All Parties which was presided over by Mahatma Gandhi. Its sub – committee made a number of amendments and these with all the others were submitted to a Drafting Committee in Madras consisting of the Hon’ble C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyer, Mrs. Shiva Rao, Sir Ram Yadunandan Prasad and Dr. Annie Besant with powers to correct any oversight in language where necessary and to see the Bill through the press and publish it in the name of the Convention.
The Bill was taken to England in July 1925, and was introduced in the House of Commons as a private member’s measure in December 1925, and again in 1927. It received the active support of the Labour Party. For more than three years it stood as the first and only constitution for India drawn by responsible representatives in a National Convention and that it was in itself a sufficient answer to those who asserted that Indians lack national unity and that its leaders could produce no outline of an agreed constitution.

Even though Besant could not reconcile herself to the Non-Cooperation Movement of Gandhiji, yet she expressed her opinion at the All India Congress Committee meeting in May 1926 that she was ready to work with the Congress for Swaraj. She felt that the third party i.e. the English had taken advantage of these differences and factions. It was therefore in the interest of the country that all must unite. She again appealed in May 1927, in a cable sent from London to the Indian press: “Let us forget the recent past and unite for the coming future. If the Bill now in the House of Commons does not please you, make another and if that other gives you equal freedom with the Bill of 1925, I will be the first to tear up the old one and welcome the new.”

This Bill known as the Commonwealth of India Bill, however, was passed in its first reading. It could not become an Act as the Government of England was later approached by some leaders who were in disagreement with this Bill. Mrs. Besant also disfavored the setting up of the Simon Commission with only Englishmen as its members.

While supporting the boycott resolution at the Indian National Congress on 26th December 1927, she said: “We want men who know India’s needs and Indians’
wrongs men who can understand Indian problem. You have boycotted us, we boycott you. You have said no Indian shall sit on the Commission, we say let no English – man judge India’s fitness.”

Throughout the next year Besant appealed for unity and appealed to the nation for a single bill to be sent to Parliament as India’s demand. She attended the first meeting of the All Parties Conference (1928) where she initiated discussion which led to the appointment in May 1928, following a motion by Mrs. Besant, of the Nehru Committee. During this period the Government kept on intercepting her letters. So she challenged the Government to prosecute her if they had evidence against her.

In the same year (1928) while supporting the resolution on Dominion Status in the All Parties Conference, Besant urged the formation of a parallel government on Sein Fein methods. She said: “Make many Bardolis all over the country and I tell you that the English people are very practical people and before many Bardolis are established they will come to you for settlement. This is the kind of agitation they understand.”

Besant was seventy – two years old at time but perhaps not tired as yet. She started her campaign in favour of the Nehru report and visited Lucknow, Banaras, Bombay, Poona and many other cities. In December the National Congress endorsed the report but she was up against Gandhiji once again when he moved a resolution saying that if the British Government failed to accept the report in its entirety by the end of 1929, (the constitution drafted by the Nehru Committee), the Congress would again organize Non – Cooperation.
Mrs. Besant’s health was becoming worse. Ceaseless public work done by her for six decades affected the health of his tireless soldier. By 1933 she was no more, but her work in different field’s lives in the hearts of the people even today. It was Mrs. Besant’s work efforts which led gradually to the attainment of Swaraj. It is possible that the Common wealth of India. Bill 1925, if agreed upon by all political leaders, would have brought freedom to the country much earlier, and may be, without partition of the country.

It was also Annier Besant’s agitation and aspirations which led to the non – cooperation movement of Mahatma Gandhi. It was her instance that the title of Kinghood was denounced, and a beginning in disassociation form governmental educational institutions was made. The National Education Trust was also founded by Annie Besant. Sri Prakasa rightly observed that “When we think of it, might almost be said that Mahatma Gandhi who had been the undisputed leader of the Indian National Congress and as such of a major portion of political India since 1920 only intensified the programmed that had been chalked out by Annie Besant in the days when she led the extreme wing of Indian Polities.”

Mrs. Besant had taken up subjects like untouchables, educations on Indian lines and suited to the people of this land, Swadeshi from an economic point of view, women’s participation in the struggle and Hindu – Muslim unity; and these were the subjects on which Mahatma Gandhi laid stress later. It must be admitted here that Mrs. Besant was a great person, who did many great things for this land and inspired the men and women of this country to realize their freedom.
WOMEN LEGISLATORS

The years were of great significance because it was for the first time that women exercised their vote in the elections of 1926. The franchise granted to women was very restricted. During these elections 22 per cent women voted in Madras, 12 per cent in Bombay and in the Punjab, 9.6 per cent in Bengal and 4.5 per cent in the U.P. The first woman to stand for elections was Kamla Devi Chattopadhyaya. She polled 4,461 votes while her opponent polled 4,979, thus, losing her seat by a narrow margin.

Amongst the Indian States, Travancore was the first to give representation to women. Dr. Poonan Ducose was the first woman health minister in India in 1935. Smt. Madhavi Ammal was nominated to the Cochin Legislative Council.

In British India Madras led again by nominating Muthulakshmi Reddi to the Legislative Council. She was subsequently elected as Deputy President of the Madras Legislative Council. Muthulakshmi Reddi was the first women medical graduate of the Madras University. She associated herself with Women’s India Association from its very inception i.e., from 1917, and was one of members of the deputation which met the Secretary of State in connection with the women’s franchise.

Once Mrs. Reddi was in the Council, who was a staunch advocate of women’s welfare, she saw to the enactment of the abolition of the Devadasi system; and for laws to close brothels and protect minor girls. She brought amendments to the Children’s Act and worked for the creation of Health – Schools and Children’s Wards. Reddi was also an active campaigner for the Sharda Act which was passed by the Central Legislature.
Reddi also became the first Alderwoman of the City Corporation, Madras, for two years during which she took interest in problems like the child education and child welfare and beggary.

In 1928, Muthulakshmi Reddi was in England as a member of the Hartog Committee appointed by the Secretary of State to study women’s educational growth and problems in India. On her way back to India she represented the country at Pairs Congress of the Women’s International Alliance as a delegate from India.

Absorbed as she was in the work for – the uplift and education of women, the eradication of social ills and the reconstruction of Indian society on an equal and democratic basis – Mrs. Reddi could not fail to be drawn towards political activity. It was obvious that the emasculation of the nation and the economic exploitation to which it was being subjected were insuperable barriers in the way of efforts for a better society.

Mahatma Gandhi inaugurated another civil disobedience movement commonly known as the Salt – Satyagraha in 1930 resulting in his arrest. Mrs. Reddi resigned from her membership of the Legislative Council in 1930 as a protest against the arrest of Gandhiji and devoted herself to the constructive programme launched by the Indian National Congress. The All Asian Women’s Conference took place in Lahore in which Mrs. Reddi took prominent part. Mrs. Reddi visited America and attended the International Women’s Council in Chicago in 1933. The same year she went to England to give evidence before the joint select committee in connection with women’s franchise.
Mrs. Reddi was instrumental in bringing about the establishment of the Cancer Hospital in Madras. She was the first organizer and Chairman of the Madras State Social Welfare Advisory Board, a place she occupied till recently (1954 – 1957). Muthulakshmi Reddi was awarded Padma Bhushan in 1956 for her work. She continued to take active interest in various organizations. It will not be out of place to make a reference to certain provincial movements for, these movements attracted country – wide attention.

BARDOLI SATYAGRAHA – 1928

A No-tax campaign was launched in Bardoli under the leadership of Sardar Patel. This campaign was undertaken in order to correct an economic injustice. The Government of Bombay, contrary to the advice of the Joint Parliamentary Committee and country to the resolution of the Bombay Legislative Council of the Bombay Presidency in 1924, considerably enhanced the rate of rural taxation which was nominally 20 per cent but in actual application, in some instances, over 60 per cent. The public felt that the increase was unwarranted and that an impartial committee to hold enquiry be constituted. The Government paid no heed.

The people refused to pay the taxes. The authorities, however, met this challenge with the usual lathi charge, imprisonment, fines, attachments and auctions of land. But none of these threats and much effect on the people. The women of Bardoli took part in this movement from its very inception but they lacked leadership. Smt. Mithuben Petit and Smt. Bhaktben Deasi from Bombay greatly strengthened the movement amongst women. The women attended the meetings even if it meant covering long distances on foot. They had composed inspiring songs appropriate to the fight.
Sardar Patel arranged for Mithuben, Bhaktben, Maniben Patel and other ladies to camp on those very lands which were to be sold by fixing their tents and huts on it. The women in the area helped in the collection of funds also. A lady, whose name still remains unknown, gave two hundred rupees and promised to send this amount regularly every month till the fight was over. The Bardoli Saryagraha, besides proving an eye opener to the people, displayed the large measure of Strength among women. However, it served as a training ground for the women of Bombay and an inspiration for women all over the country. It was for the first time here that not only the literate but the illiterate and ignorant women participated in the movement. “The heroism of the simple unsophisticated women of Bardoli” observed Mr. Deasi. “Was an inspiration to all women outside Bardoli?” The Bardoli Satyagraha was successfully completed in September 1928, after five and a half months of struggle. It made known to the Government the strength of an organized and combined effort.

SIMON COMMISSION

The Simon Commission arrived in India in 1928. Since no Indian was represented on the Commission, it was boycotted by the nationalist Indians. The Dominion – status Constitution (popularly known as the Nehru Report) was adopted by the All – Parties Conference during the same year. The Calcutta Congress undertook to adopt this constitution if the British Parliament accepted it in its present form before December, 31, 1929, failing which civil disobedience was to ensure.
REFERENCES:

1. The Indian National Congress in its session held in December 1918 passed a resolution unanimously on the franchise of women, “that this Congress urges that women possessing the same qualifications are laid down for men in any part of the scheme, shall not be disqualified on account of their sex.” (Proceedings of the thirty-thirty session of the Indian National Congress held at Delhi in December 1918, p. 5, Modern Review, January to June 1919, p. 652).


3. Amrita Bazar Patrika, January 1, 1923.

4. Ibid, April 16, 1922.


7. Civil and Military Gazette, August 31, 1922.


10. Amrita Bazar Patrika, March 21, 1922.


12. Ibid.


14. An Indian Statutory commission was appointed to go into the question of constitutional development of India under Sir John Simon, which is popularly known as Simon Commission.


