

Individual Satyagraha

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The outbreak of the World War II (began on 1st September 1939) which, in fact, was declared by England on German Reich, "Professedly in defence of democracy and the weak nations"¹, could not go on without effecting Indian masses. It is needless to explain that England, while considering its prerogative declared India as a belligerent nation against the Axis-powers on 3 September 1939 without consulting the leaders of the Congress and members of the Indian Legislative Assembly or the Provincial Governments. Consequently, both Nehru and Gandhi with other likeminded leaders were against the participation of Indian masses in war in support of Britain as per policy of Indian National Congress adopted in manifesto made public in 1936 about its "opposition to the participation of India in an Independent war"².

Moreover, the working committee of Indian National Congress which was held (from 10 September to 14 September 1939) had also made its stand clear in the same context. This committee observed that the "declared wishes of the Indian people..... have been deliberately ignored by the British Government, and while the committee "unhesitatingly condemns the latest aggression of the Nazi Government in Germany against Poland..... the issue of war and peace for India must be decided by the Indian people"³.

Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru prepared the draft of the manifests asking the British Government to state clearly in an unequivocal terms its war aims in regard to democracy and imperialism and also called upon the government to specify how these aims would apply to India. Did they include the elimination of imperialism and the treatment of India as a free nation?⁴ On the other hand, Gandhi who did not like the political bargaining favoured an unconditional support to the Britishers as he believed that "the Congress support will mean the greatest moral asset in favour of England and France"⁵.

The All-India Congress Committee in its meeting on 9 October 1939, at Wardha, approved the Congress manifesto on war crisis and asked the British Government to elaborate their war and peace aims⁶. But the Viceroy Linlithgow expressed his inability and assured that the Government of India Act, 1935, would be reviewed after the war⁷. As this statement created profound disappointment, the Congress Working Committee considered this unfortunate statement as "an unequivocal reiteration on the same old imperialistic policy"⁸. Further, in a resolution of the Congress Working Committee held in November, 1939, it was

hoped to explore all means of arriving at an honourable settlement between Indian National Congress and British Government.

The talk between Gandhi and Viceroy Linlithgo on 5 February 1940 was significant to some extent whereas the Viceroy put some proposal regarding the Dominion Status. Though Gandhi regarded this failure to be of use as “a stepping stone to success”⁹. As the British Government was not prepared, in any way, to concede the demand of total Independence, it provoked Gandhi to launch his Individual Satyagraha campaign and to openly pursue antiwar propaganda. After the AICC meeting (Bombay) on 15- 16 September, 1940, Gandhi asked the Congressmen” to be prepared for anarchy and chaos” with faith in nonviolence¹⁰. The struggle was now launched for the denial of the right for preaching against the participation in the war. The whole movement was planned to pass through the four stages. Wherein Individual Civil disobedience which was also known as “Quality Satyagraha”¹¹, adopted as a ‘symbolic’ or token ‘protest’ without retarding the war efforts. Only one person at a time was allowed to offer Satyagraha under this programme and the protest was against India being unwillingly dragged into the war.

The movement was inaugurated by Vinoba Bhave on 17 October, 1940, and he was arrested on the same day after making an antiwar speech at the village, Panwar. He was, later on, sentenced to three months imprisonment¹². He was followed by Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru who was also arrested (on account of his antiwar speech) on 7 November 1940 even before a week of his proposed date¹³. The arrest of both leaders evoked a great enthusiasm and consequently the Congress leaders started to declare themselves as Satyagrahis one by one opposing government policy. The number of such individual Satyagrahis (including women) who had gone to jail had reached to almost 20,000 by June 1941 but the movement declined after that¹⁴. So far as the women participants were concerned, they took part in the movement going on in the different parts of the country but their number was small as compared to men activists.

The first batch of Individual Satyagrahis constituted of twenty seven names as finalized by Gandhi himself out of a list of forty eight people which was sent to him by Orissa Provincial Satyagraha Committee¹⁵. The movement which was inaugurated there, near Blasore, by H.K. Mahatab on 1 December, 1940 included Smt. Sarala Devi. She was the first women who became women Satyagrahi¹⁶. Another prominent lady who obtained permission was Smt. Priyambada Devi who did offer Satyagraha but Malati Chaudhury was not given permission to take part in the movement as her daughter was one year old at that time¹⁷. Similarly, in Ganjam District where Individual Satyagraha was started on 4th December 1940, Smt. A. Lakshmibai was arrested when she was delivering anti war speech in a meeting at

Berhampur.⁶⁴ Smt. Champa Devi, a fearless lady, was also arrested on delivering anti-war speech even in front of the police at Rasalkonda (Bhanjanagarl)¹⁸.

The prominent women who actively took part in Individual Satyagraha in Bihar were Priyambada Devi, Janki Devi and Jagatrani Devi. Consequently, all of them were arrested in Gaya and sentenced to an imprisonment of four months in addition to a fine of Rs. 200 each.⁶⁶ Interestingly, some of the activist women who took part in Satyagraha were also spared from their arrest by district administration as happened in Santhal Pargana¹⁹. For example, Mrs. Mahadevi Kejariwal (wife of the President of Santhal Pargana Congress Committee) who while offering herself as Satyagrahi delivered anti-war speech along with a prior notice given in written to Dy. Commissioner, at the residence of Dy. Commissioner was not arrested as he did not pass the order of her arrest²⁰.

Other Congress women of top scale who participated in individual Satyagraha were: Vijaylakshmi Pandit, Sarojini Naidu and Sucheta Kriplani. Vijay lakshmi Pandit was jailed for four months²¹. However, Sarojini Naidu who was arrested on 3 December, 1940, had to be released from Jail on 11 December, 1940 because of her illness. Sucheta Kriplani was holding charge of women Department of A.I.C.C. at that time since 1939 also courted arrest. In Delhi, the eminent women leaders who enlisted themselves in the list of jail visitors included Satyawati, Ved Kumari, Hans Kaur and Siddheshari Devi²². Besides, the name of Aruna Asaf Ali too, a well known lady, was along with her husband in the list of those chosen by Gandhi for participation in Individual Satyagraha. She along with her husband courted arrest in the same context as testified in her own statement²³.

The Punjabi Provincial Congress Committee, on the direction of Gandhi, was also transformed into a 'Supreme Satyagraha Committee' on 5 April 1940. It directed all the District Congress Committee to start the enrolment of Satyagrahis²⁴. A Provincial Satyagraha Camp, with an aim to give training in the constructive programme, was inaugurated by Pandit Jawahar lal Nehru on 24 May 1940 (contrary to the earlier reports that it would be opened on 7 May) which was followed by 13 such camps organized in the month of Jun 1940²⁵. Smt. Sucheta Kriplani, wife of the General Secretary of the A.I.C.C. J.B. Kriplani, made an appeal to women to get enlisted as Satyagrahis²⁶, Consequently, the eminent women like Smt. Bhagwati Devi (wife of Lala Dunichand) as a member of working committee Smt. Savitri Devi (wife of Ramkishan) and Smt. Prakash Kaur (wife of Sardul Singh kaveeshar) were appointed as delegates to the Congress Committee at Lahore²⁷.

At Jullundur, Smt. Lal Devi Sondhi (wife of Lal Hansraj was elected member for the working committee and also a delegate to the District Congress Committee²⁸. About 209 Satyagrahis were enrolled in the Jullundur district. Hissar district with an enrolment of 206 Satyagrahis, by the first week of July 1940, registered itself at the second position in Punjab.⁷⁷ The total number of registered Satyagrahis in Punjab by

the end of July 1940 was 1300 as reported by the government data.⁷⁸ However, the approved list of Satyagrahis which was sent back after Gandhi's scrutiny from Sevagram included two women leaders Bibi Raghbir Kaur, the then M.L.A., who was to offer Satyagraha on 8 December 1940 and Smt. Bhagwati Devi for whom no date was fixed²⁹. Interestingly, Sarla Prashar who originally belonged to a family of Hoshiarpur, an official stenographer of Bihar Assmbly, voluntarily offered herself for Satyagraha. She was the first Sevika from the area of Doaba who was also given permission to offer Satyagraha³⁰.

The first phase of Individual Satyagraha in Punjab was inaugurated on 29 November 1940 (rescheduled date instead of earlier 26th November) at the arrest of Mian Iftikhar-Din in his home village of Baghbanpura near Lahore after making anti-war speech³¹. He was later on sentenced to one year's rigorous imprisonment and a fine of Rs. 6000 under Rule of 38 of the D.I.R.³² Similarly, Dr. Gopichand was arrested and detained under Rule 26 of the D.I.R. on 30 November 1940 before he could offer Satyagraha in Lahore³³. Among the women of Punab, Smt. Bhagwati Devi, M.L.A., was arrested on the night of 5 December at the residence of her son at Begum Road, Lahore, before she could offer Satyagraha in meeting on 6 December as per her notice given to government. She was arrested under D.I.R. 129 and was taken to women's cell Lahore³⁴. Another eminent women leader Bibi Raghbir Kaur, M.L.A., was arrested on 8 December, 1940 in a village, Noshera Punuan in district Amritsar where she had shouted a few anti-war slogans before her arrest. She was sentenced to one year's rigorous imprisonment under Rule 38 D.I.R. and was taken to Amritsar sub-Jail³⁴.

The second phase of the movement was started two days later instead of 27 January 1931 as scheduled in Punjab as the first was suspended during the Christmas.

Besides men activists, about 40 leading women of the Congress took the responsibility of visiting mohallas of Satyagrahis. Along with this, they propagated Khadi in a house-to-house campaign³⁵. Among the names of women selected (of the total number of Satyagrahis 652 as per official list whereas 740 volunteers as per Punjab Provincial Congress Committee) to offer Satyagraha were Mrs. Lai Devi, Mrs. Freeda Bedi and Mrs. Vidya Kumari³⁶.

Mrs. Vidya Kumari, as per her own notice to District Magistrate, was arrested on 29 January, 1941 and herself chose to go to jail instead of a fine of Rs. 50,88 whereas Parvati Devi of Kamalia who was arrested at Narowal (on her notice to Distt. Magistrate of Sialkot) on 30 January 1941 and sentenced to one year simple imprisonment³⁷. Nine women satyagrahis courted arrest, in the same way, during February 1941 at various places of the province including Lai Devi Sondhi, Jullundur, Smt. Amar Kaur (wife of Mohan Lai Ahluwalia, Advocate, Smt. Chand Bai wife of Lai Sham Lai of Hissar, Smt. Puran Devi, Ludhiana, Smt. Kastur Bai,

Rohtak, Smt. Sham Devi, Ludhiana, Smt. Luxmi Trikha wife of O.P. Trikha, Lahore, Smt. Freeda Bedi, wife of Sh. B.P.L. Bedi, Gurdaspur, and Mrs. Kasturi Lai of Karnal³⁸.

So far as the punishment awarded to the above mentioned women was concerned, Smt. Kastura Bai of Rohtak was sentenced to a month's rigorous imprisonment in C Class jail³⁹. Smt. Lai Devi of Jullunder was awarded 3 months simple imprisonment in A-class jail,⁴⁰ Mrs. Freeda Bedi of Gurdaspur (arrested at Dera Baba Nanak of Gurdaspur) was sentenced to 6 months rigorous imprisonment in A-class Jail. She took her charkha alongwith her to the women's cell, Lahore. She was the first English woman who offered Satyagraha⁴¹.⁹³ Similarly, Luxmi Trikha, Secretary of the Gandhi Sewa Ashram, Shahdra, Lahore, was sentenced to 9 months rigorous imprisonment⁴².

In connection with the third phase of the Individual Satyagraha a list of 40 Satyagrahis from Lahore including six women was approved. So far as the total strength of the Congress members enrolled in the Punjab was concerned, it was 1,13,277. Among them 9,128 were Muslims and 4,256 were women Congress members⁴³. The selected women were Smt. Savitri Devi, wife of Comrade Ram Kishan of Lahore, Smt. Vidyawati Seth, wife of Lala Anant Ram, Headmaster, D.A.V. High School, Amritsar; Smt. Sant Kaur wife of Dr. Gurbax Singh; Smt. Shanti Devi, wife of Dr. Sahib Dayal; Smt. Basant Kaur, daughter of Lala Chet Ram and mother of Lala Som Raj, Pleader from Amritsar, Smt. Sita Devi, wife of Shri Ram Aggarwal, from Okara. Other women like Sardarni Prakash Kaur, wife of Sardul Singh Kaveeshar, Smt. Suhag Rani, Smt. Ram Piyari and Smt. Sushila Devi, were also among the approved list⁴⁴.

In this phase, women leaders like Savitri Devi and Smt. Sohag Rani, the wives of Hem Raj and Desraj, Smt. Sita Devi of Okara, Smt. Chanderwati of Ferojpur Dist., Smt. Gopal Devi wife of Pandit Amolak Ram, Smt. Hardevi, Smt. Sushil Devi from Batala, Ludhana, Smt. Dwarki Devi, Smt. Bhagwanti, Smt. Vidyawati Seth, Smt. Shanti Devi, from Jhelum, Smt. Bidhanti, Smt. Pushpa Gujral and Smt. Ram Lubhai offered Individual Satyagrah while delivering anti-war speeches and courted arrest, under Rule 38 of D.I.R. during March-April 1941⁴⁵. Meanwhile, the Government of Punjab (on the orders of Punjab High Court) released about 200 Satyagrahis who were arrested and convicted on mere plea of their having given notices of intension to offer Satyagrah. The women who were released on such orders were Freeda Bedi, Savitri Devi, Muni Devi, Kastura Bai, Budhwanti, Shanti Devi, Laxmi Trikha, Lajjawati, Bhagwanti, Puran Devi, Vidyawati and Chandrawati⁴⁶.

Gandhi gave permission to the released Satyagrahis to offer Satyagraha once again⁴⁷.

A Muslim lady, Begum Ghulam Fatima of Sheikhpura, was arrested in May 1941 for reciting an objectionable poem in public meeting held at Miani and

sentenced to one year rigorous imprisonment⁴⁸. No women of Punjab courted arrest in June-July but in the month of August 1941, only one woman Smt. Laxmi Trikha (who only was allowed) offered Satyagrah and courted arrest for raising anti-war slogans outside the Lajpat Rai Hall on 13 August 1941 and sentenced to 9 month imprisonment. In the month of November, two women from Ludhiana Distt. Smt. Puran Devi, wife of Amar Nath Bhardwaj, at her village Ilayal, and Puran Devi at Ludhiana offered the Satyagraha and arrested while shouting anti-war slogans⁴⁹. Except for such a few arrests, the movement started losing its popularity during the months of September, October and November. Besides no attempt was made to revive the Satyagrah movement⁵⁰.

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