

Role of Women Organizations in Freedom Struggle

Joshi Pralhad B.

Prof. of Commerce

Government Degree College Yadgiri

Introduction:

Women of all political opinions, including those who had become Communist or had Communist leanings, joined in the release political Prisoners campaign. The movement for release of armed revolutionaries started joining momentum and women too began to be drawn into this movement. As a result of a nation-wide demand, a number of them had been released in 1938 but there were still many in jail. For the release of political prisoners a campaign was started by the women in Calcutta. An office at 98 Premchand Baral street in Calcutta was also set from where the women political activists organizing their movement¹.

Another organization formed by women with the name Congress Mahila Sangha in which Leela Roy of the Sree Sangha group, Bina Das and Kamala Das Gupta of the Jugantar Party and a member of the underground Communist Party, and many others also joined. This was the first attempt aiming at building a united Women organization in which political women were in forefront. The All India Women Conference had already been established but in West Bengal, radical political women never looked upon it as their organization. It was decided to bring out a women's magazine called Mandira to be the mouth piece of the Congress Mahila Sangha and it was published from the Sree Saraswati Press, Calcutta, with Kamal Chattejee as editor. For a year, she edited this magazine but as anti-communist feeling began to rise, she left the magazine and Kamala Das Gupta took over its editorship².

The Congress Mahila Sangha joined in the Release Political Prisoner's Movement. Women organizing and speaking at a street - comer meeting was a rarity in those days. One of the early streets - comer meetings was held in Rashbehari Avenue in Calcutta. Lalika Sen, Kamala Mukhejee, and her followers of Stree Sangh and the Gandhite Labanya Lata Chandra of Congress, all participated in this meeting. Mani Kuntala Sen, who was later to become one of the good Communist orators, spoke in public for the first time.

When the agitation for the release of Andaman prisoners reached its peak in 1938 women student in large numbers participated in the mass meetings and demonstration organized by the students held throughout the country. It was at this stage when the need for organizing the girl students was felt. But they had not come in large numbers in the organization like All India Student's Federation which was

the predominantly held by the boy students. It was decided in the meeting of AISF to set up the girl student's³.

In 1940, women student from all over India came together at Lucknow. Where Sarojini Naidu the Patron of Youth, inaugurated the conference. Her eloquence poetry and the fiery speech concentrated on telling these young women that the future of India lay in their hands, if they did not allow them to lie idle and waste them in only domestic drudgery. She urged them, "to join with young student and bring fresh blood into the mainstream of the battle for freedom"⁴. After the All India Student's Federation, national conference in Delhi and the formation of the Girl student's Association after the Lucknow Conference, work began in right earnest to organize girl student's not only in Bengal but in Bombay, Punjab and other places as well. Enthusiastic young women students among whom one can recall names like Nargis Batlivala, Perin Bharucha, Santa Gandhi, Kamala Das Gupta, Kalyani Mukhejee, Santi Sarkar, Geeta Roy Choudhari along with a number of others starting touring and organizing the women students. In the building of mass militant women organization, the girl student cadres in almost all districts of West Bengal as also in the Punjab and Bombay played an important role⁵.

Maharashtra:

One of the well-known struggles led by Godavari Parulekar a communist's leader in Maharashtra, who eradicated the slavery from the primitive adivasis living in Umbergaon, Dhanu and Palghar Talukas of Thana district. Hardly sixty miles away from the modern city of Bombay, these tribes eked out a starving existence in jungles and valley areas⁶. Their liberation movement was organized and launched by the All-India Kisan Sabha of the Communist Party of India which was founded in 1936. In 1943, the membership of the Sabha was 9,996 in Maharashtra⁷.

The main demands around which the movement was developed comprised of the abolition of forced labour, veth beggar, the palemor system of money lending, the implementation of minimum wages, and the distribution of land to the tiller through granting ownership rights to tenants and fallow forest land for cultivation⁸. Significantly, this struggle was developed through nonparty village level organizations, most of which included such as the Bhumi Sena and Kashtakari Sangathana in Thana district and the Shramik Sangathana in Dhulia district. Each of these movements had a loose organizational structure in which there was no hierarchical chain of command but each of the activists lived and worked among the tribals rather than directing them as alien leaders⁹.

The credit for commencement of that movement goes to first Kissan Conference held at Titwalla in Thana district in 1945. For the first time, the Worlis i.e. Adivasis heard the slogan "Down with forced labour. They were elated by it and they returned home taking with them the red flag. While charged with the ideas of liberation when the Worlis refused to do forced labour, the landlords made a daring

to take the command and went to Adivasis rousing them to fight for their rights as human beings¹⁰. As a result, a meeting of 7,000 woman was held a Kosbad on 8 October, 1945 wherein the practice of "Marriage servants" while dividing themselves in to four sections, each one took out a procession in a different direction, visiting all the landlords houses. The procession would stop in front of each house shouting the slogan, "Pick up your scrap of cloth and your earthen pot, get free and join us". "Get free from slavery" was the call to marriage servants.

The result of three days processions was fruitful as hundreds of marriage-slaves were freed. It was all made possible by the collective effort with the Red Flag as their sole support. On the other hand the landlords who had so long looked down upon these marriage-serfs, both men and women, hastily shut themselves up in their houses without daring and facing the protest¹¹.

On October 10,1945, a mischievous rumor spread that Bai's life was in danger and 7,000 Worlis came to save her from 20 villages arounds to Talwada with whatever weapons they had. The Police came and saw the Worlis all armed, and opened fire. The next day i.e. on 11 October 1945, they heard the 'Flag' had called a meeting and in spite of the earlier firing, 4000 Worlis came to the same spot. A Kissan Sabha worker somehow came there and announced the Flag had not Called any meeting, it was a trick, and they should go home. But the police and arrived, started firing. Two worlis lay wounded. A bullet struck and took the life of Jethya Gangad¹².

The next struggle was launched under the banner the Kissan Sabha aimed at to increase the wages and life style of timber labourers. The Worli timber cutters who were paid a paltry sum of about four annas a day by the contractors. Now a demand of a uniform and daily wage of Rs. 1.25 was made but the saukars and contractor refused to accept their demand, as a consequent, about 15000 Worlis went on strike under the red flag. The forest for miles around fell silent. The adivasis had a fascinating way of relaying their messages. They would tie a few toddy leaves to a stick along with a note bearing the message about the strike. This would be relayed from village to village and promptly work would stop¹³.

The strike of the timber-cutters continued unabated, In spite of their leader's externment and arrests of many Worlis. The government honouring the agreement reached between the Timber merchants Association and the workers took the side of merchants. The Kissan Sabha had to face a terrible repression. Numerous Worlis were arrested and cases were lodged against them. On February 6, 1947, their leader Godavari Parulekar was arrested on the false charge of making incendiary speeches. Further, the army was also sent to the area to bring the situation under control. However, the strong determination and unbreakable unity of the Worlis finally won and the government had to retreat. The army was called back.

On April 5, 1947, the release of the adivasi Worlis was announced, The struggle was successful resulting in such evils as serfdom, marriage servants, veth beggar, grass and forest work at four annas a day, huge arrears in rents and many other form of exploitation were swept away by the tornado of struggles the Worlis had waged since 194514.

References:

1. Chakravarti, Renu, Communists in Indian Women's Movement 1940-1950, pp. 7-8.
2. Ibid, p.8.
3. Ibid, p. 10.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid, pp. 12-12.
6. Minault Gail, The Extended Family: Women and Political Participation in India and Pakistan, p. 227, p. 226.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid, p. 228.
10. chakravartly Renu, op.cit., p. 164.
11. Ibid, p. 165.
12. Ibid, pp. 165-166.
13. Ibid, p. 166.
14. Ibid, pp. 169-169.