

## Leadership of Sarojini Naidu at Dharasana Salt Movement:

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### **Introduction:**

During this Salt Satyagraha Movement Gandhiji and Abbas Tyabji were arrested after their arrest in Salt Satyagraha, Sarojini Naidu assumed the leadership at Dharasana, the scene for the mass breaking of the salt laws, Though a few Congressmen protested at the idea of exposing a woman to a situation of political violence from the police. In fact, Gandhiji had already nominated Sarojini Naidu to lead the raid at Dharasana<sup>1</sup> after his and Abbas Tajabji's arrests. It is interesting to note how after assuming this leadership as an ambassador of Hindu Muslim unity as well as a staunch feminist, Sarojini successfully converted herself into a dynamic leader at Dharasana as testified by the words of her speech she made before the raid was started "the time has come in my opinion when women can no longer seek immunity behind the shelter of their sex, but must share equally with their men comrades all the perils and sacrifice for the liberation of the country"<sup>2</sup>.

As a leader, her confidence and unafraidness may further be corroborated with her sentiments as expressed at another press statement: "As is quite natural the sense of chivalry of my co-workers, particularly members of the working committee, was greatly perturbed at the idea of permitting me to undertake what by its very nature, must be an onerous task, but when on April 6th Mahatma Gandhi nominated me as one of his successors. I accepted all the implications of the risks as well as of the responsibilities of that high privilege. The leaders assembled at Allahabad also felt that it was inadvisable for me to undertake this task in view of the fact that my presence was needed for other equally important work elsewhere specially in connection with the Hindu Muslim problem, but I felt that I cannot break the word, I have given to Mahatma Gandhi"<sup>3</sup>.

Sarojini Naidu along with her fellow comrades started the raid at Dharasana Salt works in a procession in order to take possession to it on 15 May 1930. The district and police administration, while feeling helpless how to handle the situation, decided to take passive action against the raiders. In fact, the British officers feared that any tuff action on their part would be exaggerated and publicized as an example of the brutality and rough treatment towards women. Consequently, the entire procession was cordoned off by police persons and not allowed to reach the salt depots. The activist followers got frustrated in their purpose and uncomfortable in

the mid day heat as they were left to slowly disperse. The police arrested Sarojini Naidu, drove her out the city and then released her on the same day<sup>4</sup>.

Though the district administration gained success in dispersing the satyagrahis on 15th May but that was not an end of the movement. Sarojini Naidu while making second call to raid Dharasana salt works launched another Satyagrah on 21 May 1930. She now successfully led a batch of twenty five hundred raiders. A mere looking at the whole event written by Webb Miller, an eye witness, is sufficient for someone to judge the leading capacity of a true nominee of Mahatma Gandhi who was now in jail. It tells that after calling the volunteers for prayer in order to start the march, she exhorted them thus: "Gandhi's body is in jail but his soul is with you. India's prestige is in your hand. You must not use any violence under any circumstances. You will be beaten but you must not resist; you must not raise a hand to ward off blows"<sup>5</sup>.

The volunteers immediately marched ahead at the command of Sarojini and reached near the barbed wire stockades which were guarded by the police. Earlier, they continued to send their fresh batches in order to take place of injured volunteers who were mercilessly beaten with steel shaft lathis by the police<sup>6</sup> but, later on, while changing their tactics, they just sat on the ground near | salt pans. The authorities did not tolerate their sitting and started kicking in their abdomen and testicles and lastly began dragging the sitting volunteers by the arms or feet and threw them in the ditches filled with water<sup>7</sup>. Sarojini Naidu was arrested the same day i.e., 21 May, 1930. In a message to her comrades, she said explicitly: "Whatever happens, strictly adhere to the law of nonviolence. Don't budge an inch from the place you have taken"<sup>8</sup>. She was released following the Gandhi-Irwin Pact<sup>9</sup> signed on March 1931. During the same year, the second Round Table Conference was held in London. She attended the conference as an official representative of the women of India.

On returning to India after attending Round Table Conference in London, Gandhi was again arrested on 4th January, 1932. He was confined in Poona Jail, while setting aside Gandhi-Irwin Pact by Lord Willingdon who had joined as successor of Lord Irwin. The reception committee of Congress was also declared unlawful by the government.

Sarojini Naidu, a true Gandhian, again shouldered the responsibility to respond against the attitude of British Government. In fact, it demand her duty to perform on becoming as acting President of Congress in the same year. She not only made a call to hold the session of the Congress in order to start the movement again but also shifted the venue of its session to Delhi<sup>10</sup>. On April 20th, she was served with an order directing her not to do any act in furtherance of the Civil Disobedience movement and nor to leave the city limits without the permission of the Commissioner<sup>11</sup>. Avoiding to pay heed to the order of government, she left for

Bombay by Frontier Mail. The train was stopped at Bandra, ten miles before Bombay where she was arrested<sup>12</sup>. Later she was sentenced to one year's imprisonment.

### **BOMBAY:**

The other woman leader of the nationalist movement was Kamla Devi Chattopadhyaya who launched the Civil Disobedience Movement at Bombay. Rising from the dissuading condition even since her child widowhood she not only continued her education but also entered into public life with the support of her second husband Harinder Nath Chattopadhyaya, brother of Mrs. Sarojini Naidu. She always remained active in politics since joining it in 1922. The credit goes to her as first female candidate contesting election for Legislative Assembly of Madras in 1926. Before joining Salt Satyagraha, she had already been active in preparing masses against British rule through her enthusiastic speeches. She was also associated with various other women organizations. She being an erudite orate could successfully cast the spell of her words on the audience. In the same context, while attending the International Congress of Women's League for peace and freedom held at on Prague 23 August, 1929, she acquainted the audience with the condition of India. One of her speeches may be worth here quoted to testify her passion toward the freedom of country. When she was presiding over the Youth Conference at Ahmedabad in 1929, in which she complained that "we are very fond of holding ourselves as ready for martyrdom but when the time comes for baring our necks we retreat and say wait till the next flow. Each time, the coward gets the better of it. Start Civil Disobedience, declare an independent republic, establish a parallel Government, do it at any cost"<sup>13</sup>.

The commencement of Civil Disobedience Movement in Bombay was to take place at Chaupati, the centre as well as important place of the city. As Dharasana salt works was raided under the leadership of Sarojini, it fell to Kamla Devi to plan a raid on the Wadala.Salt Fields of Bombay City<sup>14</sup>. About the gathering of raiders it has been recorded that in response to an appeal made by Bombay Provincial Congress Committee about 50,000 people assembled at the sea shore at Chowpati to break the laws<sup>15</sup>. The presence of a large number of Gujarati Women in this crowd was particularly noticeable.

The enthusiasm and passion of satyagrahis on the occasion of the day of raid at Bombay has been narrated by Aruna Asaf Ali in her monograph that thousand of women strode down to the sea like proud warriors. But instead of weapons they bore pitchers of clay, brass and copper; and instead of uniform, the simple cotton sarees of village India. Every passer-by stopped, slipped a coin into their hands and held out proudly a tiny pinch of salt. The Satyagrahis appealed to the rich, going into the cotton, grain, cloth and bullion markets of Bombay with cries of, who will buy the salt of freedom? 'Don't you want the salt of freedom? To raise funds for the movement. The auctioning of the illegally made salt would bring in fabulous sums:

one package fetched Rs. 10,000. Women's participation in the salt satyagraha was on a much larger scale than in the non-cooperation movement in a decade earlier"16. Unfortunately before Kamla Devi Chattopadhyaya took to lead, she was arrested but her parting message to the people was: "Carry on the fight until British Imperialism becomes only a dark shadow of the past; India's freedom will open the gate for world freedom"17. She herself recalls that when she was arrested on the eve of a salt raid, she was to have led in Bombay, "I was represented by my little son of seven, who proudly carried the banner and engaged in the drama of his first battle"18.

It is interesting to note that her trial at court, her courage was so high that she invited the magistrate to buy salt and then started selling salt in court room. She even asked the Magistrate to resign the job and join the Satyagrah army. As a result, she was awarded 6 months imprisonment and a fine of Rs. 150 and three months more under Salt Act and a fine of Rs. 20 or in default two weeks imprisonment. Both the sentences were to run consecutively.35 She was put in the 'C' class jail K.Natarjan, editor of the Indian Social Reformer, wrote strongly against this harsh treatment when he came to know of it from his daughter who happened to see Kamala Devi in the prison. She was then transferred to the 'B' class. She was released from jail in 1931.

Many a time the political prisoners had to go through a very humiliating condition as they were usually kept in prison along with ordinary women prisoners. For example, in 1932 political prisoners in Bombay were locked up with ordinary women prisoners in Arthur Road Jail. It was only after the political detainees objected on health grounds, because several of the prisoners were prostitutes then they were shifted to another barrack. When women with children in their arms were arrested, only infants under three were allowed to remain with mother. Other children were left on the streets19. Jawahar lal Nehru has also testified in his autobiography such type of treatment meted out to such political women prisoners during the satyagraha20. Kamla Devi as a visionary leader was not among those who wait for the next programme to be sent by top leadership. That is why after her release from jail in 1931, she started preparation again for a bigger fight. While making a whirlwind tour to the country, she activated her seven year old autonomous organization i.e. the Hindusthani Seva Dal by opening its branches at various places. It is significant to note that as General Officer Commanding of her organization, she used to arrange training camps. The course of training included literary education, training in domestic hygiene, child rearing, sewing and spinning, organizing meetings and course of study in Indian History and Geography. The course were designed in such a way that woman could fit themselves as the country expected them to do21.

Women volunteers in Bombay went through rigorous exercises and route marches as part of their training in such a camp at Borivli. This created up rove envy

in British Parliament about a “Women’s army” being raised in India. The local authorities closed down the Borivli Camp and banned the Seva Dal beside the involvement in direct agitation and training programs of the Hindustani Seva Dal<sup>22</sup> Kamla Devi continued to prepare students and youth by addressing their meetings and conferences. She, being Vice Chairman of the Bombay Youth League, presided over the students’ conference at Lahore in October 1931. While speaking on such occasion, she condemned the education system. She said, “It is a frame that ill fits us for it is cast in a sinister mould us in slow deliberate manner”<sup>23</sup>.

She exhorted the students to organize study circles and study the political and economic problems and in turn to teach the masses. As a result she was again arrested in 1932 and was sentenced to one year imprisonment<sup>24</sup>. She joined the Congress Socialist Party in 1934 and presided over its all India Conference at Meerut the very next year<sup>25</sup>. Boycott and Picketing: While allowing the direct involvement of women in salt satyagraha with a compromise spirit, Gandhi continuously insisted upon his constructive programme to be strictly followed wherein the area of operation was exclusively reserved for women. Besides salt satyagraha, the other programs containing prominently seven issues, as earlier discussed in this chapter, were also taken up by activist women followers of Gandhiji. The credit of picketing in Bombay broadly goes to the Des Sevika Sangh which was formed by Hansa Mehta and others. Their picketing was so effective that the government had to declare it illegal<sup>26</sup>.

#### References:

1. The Times of India, Bombay, 8 May 1930.
2. Ibid, 15 May, 1930.
3. The Bombay Chronicle, 26 May 1930. Letter of Sarojini Naidu to her daughter Padmaja explaining the whole event also quoted in the newspaper.
4. Webb Miller. - I found No Peace, pp. 190-192-196; quoted in Jack A Homer - The Gandhi Reader, Bloomington, 1956, p. 249.
5. Ibid, p. 252.
6. Ibid.
7. Amrita Bazar Patrika, 22 May, 1930.
8. Civil Disobedience Movement was suspended by the Congress and the Government agreed to release all the prisoners as the consequences of Gandhi-Irwin Pact.
9. Advance, 6 April, 1932.
10. Ibid, 21 April, 1932, 23 April, 1932.
11. Stri Dharma, Vol. 12, November 1928 to November 1929, p. 525.
12. Annual Register, Vol. II, 1929, p. 401.
13. Publication Division, Delhi - Women in India, p. 21; Kaur, Man Mohan, op.cit., p. 179.

14. The Bombay Chronicle, April 4, 1930.
15. Aruna Asaf Ali, Resurgence of Indian Women, p.101.
16. Stri Dharma, Vol. 12, Nov. 1928 to Nov. 1929, p. 565.
17. Ram Krishan, her child by Harinderanath Chattopadhyay, brother of Sarojini Naidu.
18. Amrit Bazar Patrika, 17 May 1930.
19. Aruna Asaf Ali, op.cit., p. 102.
20. An Autobiography, p. 344.
21. Amrit Bazar Patrika, 19 November, 1931.
22. Aruna Asaf Ali, op.cit., p. 102.
23. Kaur Man Mohan, op.cit., p. 180
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Transcript of Interview with Smt. Hansa Mehta, NMML Quoted in Indian Women Today Vol. I (ed.) Jha, Uma Shankar. Prem Lata, op. cit., 61.