

The Role of Hubballi's Bhagini Mandal in the Freedom Movement in North Karnataka**Ms. Manali Bipin Momaya**

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Introduction:

Woman is and has always been an integral half of human society. Yet, HER story has not always been a part of the compendium of our mainstream historical literature. Over the centuries, civilization has witnessed a slow, steady and consistent pattern of degradation and deterioration in the status and powers of woman as a member of the society. This pattern has been broken by several notable brave-hearted women throughout the length of history, but compared to the story of man, the story of woman is much less heard and appreciated. A vast majority of Indian women of the past have been shrouded in obscurity and anonymity simply because they weren't considered significant or even worthy enough to take some space in the pages of history. This biased prospective of history that sees only the careers and achievements of one gender and neglects all others, has been built on the strong foundations of institutionalized patriarchy.

However, just because you don't see the stars in daylight, it doesn't imply that they do not exist. Though the history has been evidently prejudiced against women in general, one simply cannot deny the significant role of women in the building of society and civilization. Right from the smallest unit of society, i.e. family, life without women is unimaginable. Although in history, women have been lauded as loving mothers, dutiful wives, virtuous daughters and so on, the identity of women goes far beyond these roles that define her based on the nature of relationship she has with the men in her family. Aside from tolerance, virtue, honour, beauty and purity that are the general attributes attached with characters of women whether in history or literature, in reality, women have much more within them -courage, honesty, dedication, determination, devotion, intelligence, wisdom, resilience, rage, composure, vulnerability and the power to both build and destroy.

If we zoom in on our historic timeline, focusing on the modern period, we see an increased mobility among the women. At the risk of being redundant, I want to reiterate that women, as ever, had a significant role in the Freedom Movement of India that began in the 19th century and reached its zenith in the early half of the 20th century. Especially during the Gandhian Era, Women played a major role in the mass movements called for by Mahatma Gandhi. Not only did they join the various andolans in great numbers, sometimes even outnumbering men, but also, for the first time in a long time, they were taking up roles of leadership and management. Breaking down the societal walls of alienation and stereotypical gender roles, women were coming to the forefront and fighting the foe with great resilience, shoulder to shoulder with men. They were no longer just mothers, sisters, wives or daughters, but had new additional identities - that of a freedom-fighter, a martyr, a servant of the country, a leader of the masses and a popular politician.

Among the millions of women that dedicated a great chunk of their youth to the freedom movement, I have, in my paper, focused on a small organization of women that was established in Hubballi, an important trade center in North Karnataka from ancient times and a hub of pro-independence activities.

About Hubballi:

A brief geographical description of Hubballi would be as follows- Hubballi city forms greater part of the Hubballi-Dharwad Municipal Corporation, the second largest and second most populous city in Karnataka. It is essentially the heart of Dharwad District and is surrounded by the Dharwad Taluq on the North West, Navalgund Taluq on the North East, Kundgol Taluq on the South East and Kalghatgi Taluq on South West. Even today, Hubballi is the commercial hub of Karnataka. It has a wide cluster of industries and has more than a lakh small and medium industries. It is also known for its forest-based industries as well as manganese ore and granite. The establishment of a new-generation diesel locomotive shed in the city by Indian Railways was another major boost for development of industries in this region, as it was first of its kind in Indian Railways history. The diesel locomotive shed at Hubli is the largest holder of EMD locomotives in India and was set up in 1880. Along with Dharwad, it is also an important education center with numerous renowned institutions from primary to higher education as well as professional and vocational courses. Several Religious centers and historical monuments attract tourists and devotees from in and around Karnataka. It is also the headquarters of South Western Railways and the center of Hubballi Division, one of the highest revenue producing divisions in Indian Railways. It is an important junction where several trains start or pass through connecting it to all major cities in the country. It lies on the 'Golden Quadrilateral' connecting it with major cities in the region. It is thus well connected by road, rail and airways, to the rest of India. Having passed through the hands of all major dynasties of Karnataka, right from the Kadambas upto the Vijayanagara and then into the hands of Adil Shahis, the Sultans of Mysore and finally the Nawab of Savanur, who lost Hubballi to the Patwardhans of Sangli and the Peshwa rulers. In 1817-18 CE, the British General Munro defeated Marathas and captured Hale Hubballi. Patwardhan surrendered immediately after and thus, Hosa Hubballi also slipped into the hands of British. They named the region as 'Southern Maratha Country'. Records say that during 1876-78 CE, the British destructed the Hosa Hubballi fort in order to raise funds for famine relief work. Later in 1880, the British started the Railway workshop and with this, Hubli came to be reckoned as an industrial centre in this part of India and continues to be so, even after Independence.

Freedom Movement and Hubballi:

Hubballi was also the center of activities of the likes of Dr. N S Hardikar, Smt Umabai Kundapur, Smt. Sushilabai Joshi, Smt. Umabai Joshi, Smt. Krishnabai Kulkarni, Shri Shirur, and numerous others. Dr. N S Hardikar, originally from Dharwad was a doctor who graduated from College for Physicians and Surgeons, Calcutta and the University of Michigan, USA. He was also a close associate and follower of Lala Lajpat Rai, one of the most noted extremist leaders of the Indian National Congress. In America, he was the secretary of the Home Rule League and managing editor of the journal 'Young India'. Upon returning to India, he became engrossed in nation building activities. In 1923, he established the Hindustan Seva Dal at Hubballi, later rechristened as the Seva Dal. This Dal played a

stellar role during the Civil Disobedience Movement that started in 1930. It was also Dr. N S Hardikar, who, realizing the great potential in women, established the Bhagini Mandal in Hubballi in 1922.

Bhagini Mandal: A Brief History:

The Bhagini Mandal at Hubballi was established on 18 January 1922, under the leadership of Dr. Hardikar. It was an era when Indian woman still faced several fundamental challenges to her identity and existence, such as child-marriage, forced widowhood, dowry killings, sexual and moral subjugation, female infanticide and so on. The Bhagini Mandal aimed at creating a better world for the women of generations to come, to channelize their inner strength towards the struggle for national independence and to provide basic amenities to empower women, most significantly education.

Not having a building of its own at the time, the Bhagini Mandal held its early meetings in the attic of the Ishwar Temple situated in Hubballi fort. The fundamental aims of the Bhagini Mandal were promotion of Khadi, the popularization of Swadeshi Movement, education of girls and establishment of Schools for Girls and most importantly service to the nation. As such. On the auspicious occasion of Ugadi, on 17 April 1922, Tilak Kanyashala was established in Hubballi. On its inauguration, this school had 3 teachers and 15 students.

The fate of the Mandal took an unexpected turn with the arrival of Smt. Umabai Kundapur in 1923, to Hubballi. Shri Anandarao Kundapur, her father-in-law, owned large estates in Hubballi. Upon the death of his son and Umabai's husband Shri Sanjeevrao Kundapur, Anandarao came to Hubballi along with his daughter in law, where he encouraged a grieving Umabai to join the Bhagini Mandal and participate in its various activities. Not only this, but he also lent the building of his Printing Press to the Mandal to use for their meetings and such. Having already participated in the national movements on several occasions along with her husband and being very inspired by Tilak, Umabai easily became a leading lady of the Bhagini Mandal. There came a time when the relationship between Umabai and the Mandal became so strong that the two became synonymous.

The Activities of Bhagini Mandal:

The Bhagini Mandal at Hubballi also inspired the establishment of similar Bhagini Mandals in 18 other towns and cities. In 1924, over 150 volunteers from the Hubballi Bhagini Mandal, under the leadership of Umabai, helped in the organization of the Belgaum Congress Session which was presided over by Mahatma Gandhi and gained his appreciation and praise. One of these strong-willed and brave volunteers was Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, who, inspired by Umabai, later played an important role in the Salt Satyagraha at Mumbai.

Umabai herself was an active participant of the Civil Disobedience Movement, for which she was imprisoned in the Yerwada Jail of Pune. So influential had the Bhagini Mandal grown to be by that time that, upon her imprisonment, the British declared the Bhagini Mandal, The Tilak Kanyashala and the Karnataka Press (established by Shri Anandarao Kundapur) as illegal and shut them down. The support and role of Smt. Krishnabai Panajikar as a founder member of Bhagini Mandal is crucial in this event. The Tilak Kanyashala that was started in 1922 was shut down by the British Government. Due to the relentless efforts of Smt. Krishnabai, the school was reopened and started functioning again with new vigour.

The Bhagini Mandal worked extensively as the women's wing of N S Hardikar's Seva Dal and contributed its shramdaan in marches, spinning, weaving, and voluntary work in the Dal's activities. Umabai was able to make the impossible possible, by galvanizing women into action, encouraging them to leave the four walls of their domestic life and step out into the battlefield of independence. The innovative techniques that she used in enrolling women to physical training camps for marching and other nation building activities included theatrical plays and so on.

The imprisoned freedom fighters, upon release, often found themselves homeless. The Bhagini Mandal and the network of volunteers created by Umabai helped in rehabilitating these freedom fighters. In 1934, when Bihar was hit by earthquake, the Mandal extended its help in the rehabilitation of the bereaved and the needy. Umabai along with her volunteers, worked day and night in camps set up for the refugees in Bihar during this period. It was also here that she came into contact with Dr Rajendra Prasad and Acharya Kriplani. Dr. Rajendra Prasad, who later became India's first President after Independence, inaugurated the own building of Bhagini Mandal, still standing strong in Hubballi's Jaya Chamaraja Nagar, on 07 November 1959.

In 1940, the Mandal also organized a Health Exhibition during Shishu Saptaha (Children's Week) at Karnataka Press. It was a part of responsibility given to them by Mahatma Gandhi, who had made Umabai as the head of Karnataka Branch of Kasturba Trust. The responsibility also included educating rural women and conducting health awareness and child-welfare programmes.

In 1941, Bhagini Mandal organized spinning classes and presented 1,25,000 feet of spun thread prepared by members of the Mandal to Mahatma Gandhi. It was part of their Khadi promotion and pro-Swadeshi activities. Many more such programmes and activities were organized by the Mandal, both before and after the Independence.

Conclusion:

Thus, the Bhagini Mandal that was started in 1922, continued to grow and flourish under the leadership of various great women and completed its centenary in 2022. It has not only been active since a hundred years, but also created positive change in the lives of its members. Over the years of freedom struggle, the Mandal became direct and indirect participant in the various movements organized by Gandhiji and has carved a niche in the history of Indian Freedom Movement, especially the history of modern women of the Bombay Karnataka region. It is an inspiration for generations of women to come and an epitome of the resilience and strong will of women. It shows that if women put their head to something, there is no stopping them, even in a hundred years (in this case, literally!)

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