

Role of Women in the History of Freedom Struggle

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Introduction:

The year 1930 witnessed the altogether changed perspective of women in two ways in the history of freedom struggle of India. Firstly, they marked their successful and decisive leadership along with the changing concept of "Women uplift" to "equal right" with that of men¹ and secondly they joined the movement in a massive participation. The launching of civil disobedience movement under the ideology and leadership of Gandhiji was to be initially carried out without participation of women in it. The women of the country in general and within Congress took it humiliating. It happened so as they had already reached to such a level of awakening in regard to the right of equality through the continuous efforts made by some prominent and dynamic women leaders, in the foregoing decade, like Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu, Kamla Devi Chattopadhyaya, Basanti Devi, Urmila Devi, Rameshwari Nehru, Hemprabha Majumdar and Bee Amman, etc.

The resolution passed at the Lahore session of Indian National Congress, in regard to launch Civil Disobedience Movement was significant in two ways. Firstly it set aside the earlier demand of dominion status and demanded the complete Independence. The Congressmen were instructed to boycott elections and 26 January 1930 would be observed as an Independence Day. Interestingly, the Congressmen not only observed this day through out India as proposed and they also publically sang a song, Jhanda Uncha Rahe Hamara in the same context². Secondly, it empowered Gandhi to launch the movement as per his own wish and vision.

Civil Disobedience Movement:

It is significant to note that at the beginning of Civil Disobedience Movement, Gandhi did not allow women to join it. He was of the opinion that the participation of women might be considered cowardice. In fact, he was thinking so in terms of his sense of chivalry³. To him Englishmen would not touch women just as Hindus would not kill cows. But the women who were already charged with the new concept of equal rights arose to the resentment. Margaret Cousins even addressed through a letter of their protest to Gandhi. In these stirring critical days of India's destiny, there should be no watertight compartments of service⁴. Further, women even went ahead while demanding that "no conference, no Congress or commission dealing with the welfare of India should be held without the presence on them of their kind. Similarly, they must ask that no marches, no imprisonment, no

demonstration organized for the welfare of India should prohibit women from a share in them." Later on, they were permitted to take part in all phases of the campaign⁵, Launched by the Congress.

Gandhi wanted women to join the constructive programme meant for the public welfare and nation. He even had planned a different strategy for women to be trained and disciplined as Satyagrahis so that they could get an opportunity to demonstrate their ability in picketing foreign cloth and liquor shops as these should be exclusively reserved for them but as far as the Salt Satyagraha was concerned their contribution would not be considerable⁶. He further emphasized on his strategy from economic perspective also while advocating the picketing of foreign cloth and liquor shops as compared to the breaking of salt laws. To him, as per calculation, the removal of salt laws would save 850 million rupees annually and successful picketing of stores would dramatize the effective and important role of women in such a political movement⁷.

He was of the firm opinion that nationalist movement was not merely a political struggle but a new mode of regenerating and rejuvenating the Indian society. It is quite true that woman's nature particularly suited to nonviolent Satyagrah as it, required no physical strength but the moral courage and spiritual determination. The non violence and self sacrifice were essential qualities required for the Satyagrahis. He even made it more clear; "To call woman the weaker sex, is libel; it is man's injustice to women. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior. Has she not great intuition, is she not more self sacrificing, has she not greater power of endurance, has she not greater courage"⁸.

The Gandhian movement, in fact, was to be initiated through the breaking of salt laws as the centre of gravity. As salt was a common thing of use, Gandhi justified that charging of tax by government on such a common thing was unjust for the poor masses of the country. The essential features of whole programme of Gandhian movement consisted of seven aspects to wreck the British Imperialism in the country:

- (a) All India Satyagraha at Dharasana Salt Work and technical breaches of salt laws elsewhere to make sacrifice.
- (b) Intensive boycott of foreign clothe.
- (c) Campaign for non-payment of land revenues and taxes in certain provinces and areas.
- (d) Breaches of forest laws.
- (e) Boycott of British goods and British banking, insurance, shipping and other institutions.
- (f) Boycott of liquor shops"⁹.

The nationalist women actively participated in the Dandi March which began from the Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi, a small village at the sea-coast about 241 miles

away, where the salt laws were to be defied and challenged government monopoly over salt manufacturing. While leaving Sabarmati on March 12, 1930, he did not include any woman in the group of 79 marchers of the satyagrah as already determined¹⁰. The women at his Ashram were disappointed as he took only four or five with him as he had replied there would be time enough for that. He explained to them that since sufficient numbers of men were likely to follow while the presence of women was not essential. Gandhi received not only verbal feminine reaction and response on his denial on participation of women but also in writing as well. Khurshed Behn, granddaughter of Dadabhai Naoroji, wrote an angry letter to Gandhi asking him why he was not allowing women to join the March¹¹. Mridula Sarabhai, then a student of Gujarat Vidyapith, even ignoring the instruction of Gandhi jumped into the struggle despite Principal Kaka Kalelkar's order not to do so. Consequently, both these young women were arrested at Ahmedabad¹².

Historical Dandi March was joined by Sarojini Naidu and Mithubehn Petite. Gandhi started his historical march on 12th March 1930 from his Ashram at Sabarmati to Dandi a small village on the sea-coast about 241 miles away and reached the destination along with the batch of 79 co-marchers on 13th April¹³. Though no women accompanied him on the march, women were everywhere on the way to greet him and to hear him. It is significant to note that about two thousand women out of approximately five thousand audiences welcomed him while he was on the way to Dandi march. Similarly twenty five percent women audience were present on Matwad village on the next day i.e. 11th April and even at Dandi on 13th April, more than 500 women received him with warm welcome¹⁴. Some women were, attracted by Gandhi's politics, as they believed him an incarnation of "Ranchodrai" i.e. Shri Krishna, hence they came in out thousands to have his "Darshan" on the historic march.

Gandhi's speeches in the meetings on the way to Dandi exhorted women not to carry Chatties of toddy, and picket liquor and toddy shops and stores selling foreign cloth. Besides, he insisted on to wear Khadi and to ply the Charkha as an alternative. While making his statement on the importance of such assigned duties to women, he often said "Drink and drugs sap the moral well-being of those who are given to the habit. Foreign cloth undermines the economic foundations of the nation and throws millions out of employment. The distress in each case is felt in the home and therefore by women¹⁵.

While Gandhi was on his way to Dandi March along with his co-marchers, the activities at his ashram at Sabarmati simultaneously went on. He could not expect that the women would accept his decision passively and would sit silently. He had trained and educated them in a way to also think for themselves. In the same line of thinking, Khurshed Ben Naoroji¹⁶ started imparting training to women Satyagrihs at Sabarmati Ashram. The Times of India while publishing a cynical

report brings to light that “These would” be amazons will be taught to sing propaganda songs to facilitate works in the villages, how to organize village meetings and how to preserve peace and order at meetings, sanitation, first aid to injured, sick nursing and spinning”¹⁷.

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