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RESEARCH ARTICLE

PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN INDIAN FREEDOM STRUGGLE

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the Indian freedom struggle and contribution of Indian women in this war of independence. The history of Indian Freedom Struggle would be incomplete without mentioning the contributions of women. The sacrifice made by the women of India will occupy the foremost place. They fought with true spirit and undaunted courage and faced various tortures, exploitations and hardships to earn us freedom. Women actively participated in the revolutionary movements for social changes during the national struggle for Independence. The participation of women was not restricted to one type of activity such as the non-violent Satyagraha Movement. Thousands of Indian women dedicated their lives for obtaining freedom of their lives for obtaining freedom of their motherland.

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INTRODUCTION

The freedom movement provided a splendid opportunity for women to show their interest and capability in public affairs and brought to prominence some women political leaders. Women's Association with public activity passed through four phases such as Swadeshi Movement (1905-1911), Non-Cooperation (1918-1920), Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-1934) and Quit India Movement (1942).¹ The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal marked the beginning of women's participation in nationalist activities.² The agitation against the partition of Bengal and the Swadeshi Movement attracted the attention of women in different parts of India. During this period (1905-11) revivalist consciousness, mass mobilization and propaganda contributed to increased involvement of women in public affairs.³ The Swadeshi Movement emphasized boycott of foreign goods, increase in education and emphasized cultural heritage. This period marked the formation of several women's organizations.⁴

'Swaraj and Swadeshi' became the slogans of the nationalists. Women who had begun to participate in the deliberations of the Indian National Congress now further took up the responsibility to share the national efforts through the press.⁵ Kumudini Mitter, daughter of Kristo Mitter a renowned nationalist, was very active during this period. She preached the cause of the extremists through *Suprabhat*; a Bengali Magazine.⁶ Sarala Devi was the niece of the great poet, Rabindranath Tagore. She formed the link between Punjab and Bengal revolutionaries. At the seventeenth session of the Indian National Congress a song composed by Sarla Devi invoking the people of different provinces of the country to join hands in the national struggle was sung in chorus.⁷ Madam Cama was the daughter of Sorabji Francina Patel. Bhikaji Cama in contract with Shyamji Krishna Verma who inspired her to join the revolutionary movement whole heartedly. She took immediate steps to establish contracts

with nationalists of Ireland, Russia, Egypt and Germany. When it was announced that the International Socialists Congress was to meet in Stuttgart (Germany) in August 1907, Madam Cama was quick enough to grab this opportunity to acquaint with the cosmopolitan gathering with the conditions prevailing in India. Her speech on that memorable occasion dealt with the lives of the dumb millions of Hindustan 'who are undergoing terrible tyrannies under the English Capitalism and British Government' at the end of speech she unfolded the Indian National Flag, a tricolor in green, yellow and red, with the words 'Bande Mataram' on the middle band. Thus Bhikaji Cama was the first Indian who unfolded the Indian National Flag in a foreign country before an international gathering.⁸

The entry of Annine Besant into Indian politics in 1914 accelerated the process of women's association with the freedom struggle.⁹ Annine Besant organized movement for the emancipation of women and to put forward the demand for political rights for women came to be established. Her leadership gave strength, encouragement and inspired the women of the land to participate in the national life of the country and to join the national movement in increased numbers. Annine Besant came under the influence of Charles Bradlaugh in 1847 and joined his national reformer; Besant made her first speech at the Cooperative Institute in Castle Street, London, and demanded political status for women and equality in all spheres. She joined the Theosophical Society under the influence of Madam Blavatsky. In 1892 Madam Blavatsky died and Annine Besant along with W.O. Judge became the Joint head of the Esoteric Section of the society. The women who came from abroad and treated this country as their motherland were Annine Besant, Margaret Cousins and Margaret Noble Bhagini Nivedita. Annine Besant played very important role in Home Rule Movement 1916. She was editing a daily newspaper called 'New India' and a weekly called 'Common Will'. She was arrested and sent to jail.

Margaret Cousins and Annine Besant tried their utmost to obtain franchise for Indian women.¹⁰ she was the first President of the Indian Women's Association and was largely responsible for putting forward the demand for political rights of women. The membership of her Home Rule League was open to men and women above eighteen years of age. In 1917 Annine Besant became the first woman to be elected as the president of Indian National Congress.¹¹

Sarojini Naidu appeared for the first time on the political platform as the 'Ambassador of Hindu Muslim Unity' in 1913 when she attended and addressed the Muslim League Session. Three years later, in 1916, Sarojini Naidu spoke from self government. Then onwards he took a prominent part in the country's political life. Sarojini Naidu who saw the salvation and joy of life in the service to the country, fought for self-government on the one hand and women's rights on the other. In the same year Sarojini Naidu led the deputation of leading women in social and political field in December 1917. This deputation waited on Montague with a view to secure voting rights for women. Next year in September 1918, she attended the special session of Congress at Bombay and was instrumental in getting the resolution on women's franchise passed whereby they were not to be disqualified on account of sex.¹² Sarojini Naidu went to England in 1919 as a member of Home Rule League Deputation to give evidence before the Joint Parliamentary Committee. She took this opportunity to put forward women's case for franchise as well.¹³

This Movement culminated in the firing, which took place in Jallinwala Bagh at Amritsar. It was in this city that a peaceful assembly of twenty thousand people was fired upon on 13 April 1919, by the orders of General Dyer. According to the Hunter Enquiry Committee Report, four hundred people were shot dead and twelve hundred injured. The whole country demanded redress of the Panjab atrocities and the All India Congress Committee endorsed these demands and asked for an impartial enquiry. The Indian National Congress also appointed another committee for the same purpose.

This action fanned the fire of nationalism in India. Added to this was the unsettled state of Turkey, the 'Khilafat Movement' that greatly motivated the feelings of the Muslims of India. The Turkey was the considered the greatest Muslim power. The Sultan of this Empire was 'Khalifa' of Islam and as such temporal head. During the war period Muslims were given assurance by the Prime Minister of England that the Turkish Empire would be preserved. A deputation of the Muslim Khilafat Conference also went to England to put forward their viewpoint as regards Turkey and Khilafat. The Government did not pay any heed to these requests and the draft treaty called the Treaty of Sevres published on 14 May, 1920, set aside all the promises made during the war and this disquietened the Muslims further. Gandhi felt that was an opportunity to bring the two communities together. He, therefore, warned the government that if justice were not done to the Muslims he would resume Satyagraha. A special session of the Congress held in September, 1920 in a resolution approved the resumption of policy of 'progressive non-violence, non-cooperation until the said wrongs were righted and Swarajya established. To achieve this end a nation-wide programme of boycotting titles and honours, elections and legislatures, schools and colleges, courts and tribunals was launched. The people were advised not to offer

themselves for military service. The government durbars official and semi-official functions were boycotted. The sale and use of liquor and foreign cloth was prevented through peaceful picketing.¹⁴ It was the Mahatma Gandhi who gave a new direction, strength and inspiration to the freedom movement and drew into it women in large numbers. The dawn of a new era is brought by Gandhiji call to women to join the freedom struggle.¹⁵ He was a great liberator who adopted a revolutionary approach in raising the status of women.¹⁶ Bai Amman mother of Ali brothers was a fiery crusader against British rule and toured the whole country making speeches and collecting funds for the Non-Cooperation Movement. In this connection she visited Rawalpindi, Gujranwala and Kasur. She addressed another Ladies's Conference at Bombay in which six thousand people attended. A resolution urging the women to enroll as members was passed at the gathering. At another meeting at Ahmadabad, she appealed to the people to unite, for "without co-operation among the different communities we can't liberate our country or live peaceful and honorable lives."¹⁷ It was a measure of her forward approach that she involved her daughter in-law Amjadi Begum also in the cause. Abida Samiuddin, Professor in Political Science, Aligarh Muslim University, who has writing book on 'Muslim Participation in Politics,' Begum Hazrat Muhani who opened Swadeshi store in Aligarh along with her husband. In the same period women were like Saadat Bano Kichlu from Lahore, Begum Abdul Majeed Khwaja from Aligarh who became a member of the All India Congress Subject Committee in 1921. There were a lot of women who joined the national movement like Fatima Ismail from Bombay, Zatul Kapasi and Heera A. Ahmad, Amina Tyabji, her daughter Rehana, Begum Sakina Luqmani, Ameena Quershi from Surat, Bibi Amatus-Salem from Punjab was the first Muslim woman to join Gandhi's Ashram.¹⁸

A non-tax campaign was launched in Bardoli under the leadership of Sardar Patel. This campaign was undertaken in order to correct an economic injustice. The women of Bardoli took part in this movement from its very inception but they lacked leadership. Mithuben Petit and Bhaktben Desai greatly strengthened the movement amongst women in Bombay. The women attended the meetings even if it meant covering long distance on foot.

The mode of protest in the Salt Satyagraha was to take out a procession and manufacture salt, thus breaking the salt law. This salt was then sold to collect money for national movement and a bonfire of foreign cloth was lit. Enthusiasm was kept high by the celebrated of 'days' and 'weeks' such as Mahila Divas (Women's Day) Charkha Week, Boycott Week etc.¹⁹ Gandhiji started his historic march to Dandi and formally inaugurated the campaign.²⁰ Gandhiji declared his intentions of breaking the salt law and manufacturing salt at Dandi, a small costal village 241 miles away from his Ashram at Sabarmati.²¹ The Salt Satyagraha launched by Gandhiji in March 1930, was extended to a mass campaign at the beginning of April 1930. At first, women had not been allowed to participate in this campaign as Gandhi thought they would only complicate matters. But the women of the land, coveting place of equality with men, could not stay away from the battle. They protested that men and women showed should not be separated during such critical times. Margaret Cousins sent a spirited reply on behalf of the Women's Indian Association protesting the division of work

by sex. Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya met Gandhi and expressed her desire to be involved in the Satyagraha. Durgabai Deshmukh met the local leaders of Madras and suggested that they be included in the movement. On 6 April, 1930, the salt laws were ceremoniously broken by Gandhi. Sarojini Naidu and Methuen Patel were with him.²² After Gandhi was arrested, and however, Sarojini Naidu directed the Salt Satyagraha until her own arrest²³

The women of Bengal not only participated in Mahatma Gandhi's Civil Disobedience campaign but also in the revolutionary activities. They were encouraged to adopt the revolutionary creed by Subhas Chandra Bose.²⁴ Several women's organizations were formed to mobilize women to participate in nationalist activities including processions, pickets, and charka spinning such as the Ladies Picketing Board, Nari Stayagraha Committee, and Mahila Rashtriya Sangh.²⁵ The Satyagraha Movement was gaining momentum rapidly, snowballing into a nationwide crusade for freedom, which had committed leaders and participants in every corner of the country. In Madras the Salt Satyagraha movement had leaders such as T. Prakasan, Nageswara Rao Pantulu and the remarkable Duragabai.²⁶ Rukmini Lakshmapati had the honors of being the first lady to be arrested in connection with the Salt Satyagraha. She was the President to the Tamilnadu Provincial Congress Committee. Another famous woman of this time was Durgabai Deshmukh who became the war dictator in the city of Madras and carried on the movement sponsored by the Congress till she was arrested.²⁷ Among the scores of Karnataka, women who participated wholeheartedly in the struggle for freedom were Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, Umabai Kundapur, Krishnabai Panjekar, Ballari Siddama and even Gowramma and her co-workers to a lesser extent.

In Bihar also many women came forward courageously. Among those in the frontline were Hasan Imam who not only addressed several meetings of students in Patna but along with her daughter Sami and C. C. Das as well as several other women at Patna, organized a procession in the city of inaugurate an intensive campaign of boycott of British goods. In the North, Panjab, a massive procession of approximately five thousand like-minded women inaugurated the Civil Disobedience Movement Prabhath-Pheries, picketing and meetings became the order of the day. Prominent among the leaders of the movement in Lahore were Lala Lajpat Rai's daughter, Parvati Devi and Lado Rani Zutshi, a close relative by marriage of Pandit Jawarlal Nehru.

Similar episodes of unprecedented courage and intense patriotic fervor were etched in blood and sweat on the vast topographical map of India. More than 80,000 people were arrested during the Salt Satyagraha and more than 17,000 of these were women. Writing from Naini Jail, the pride evident in his words, Pandit Nehru said '...I had a special feeling of satisfaction because of the activities of my mother, wife and sisters, as well as my many girl cousins and friends, and though I was separated from them and was in prison, we grew nearer to each other.' Pandit Nehru's sister, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, recall how the great Gandhi transformed their lives. For not only Vijaya Lakshmi and Krishna but the aged Swarup Rani and the ailing Kamala Nehru were in the frontline of leadership in Allahabad.²⁸

Allahabad was very much to the fore in the national movement. It was a centre of activity for the Congress and other liberal parties, and can boast of having been the home of many a prominent political and literary figure. Allahabad takes pride not only in Motilal and Jawaharlal Nehru, Madan Mohan Malaviya, C. Y. Chintamani and Taj Bahadur Sapru but also on equally proud of its literary gaints, Nirala, Pant, Maha Devi and Akbar Allahabadi. Women of the Nehru family had become active in the field of women's upliftment and raised women's issues long before Motilal and Jawaharlal jumped into the struggle for freedom.²⁹ The spirit of patriotism was ingrained in the Nehru family. There was a time when all the members of the family found themselves in jail. Infact the jail had become a second home to several of them. Kamala Nehru went about like a whirlwind, organizing women volunteers, peasants and students. She played a prominent part in organizing no-tax campaign in the province. Another woman who was active in this period was Mukund Malviya, daughter-in-law of Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya. Chandravati Lakhanpal played a prominent part in this struggle. Her interest in politics dates back from her student days.³⁰ Women of the Nehru family and others such as Gyanwati Devi, Ram kali Devi etc., whose men folk were in prison or in the thick of the struggle, wore khadi, spread the message of Swadeshi and worked for women's upliftment. Gyanwati Devi who began her political work in Bijnor gave up the finery of married women for khadi.³¹

A tragic event in March 1931 grievously shocked the country. Mahatma Gandhi's fervent plea for the release of detenues, which was in fact the nation's appeal for the commutation of death sentence, passed on Bhagat Singh and his Comrades went unheeded. Bhagat Singh, Raj guru and Sukhdev were hanged in Lahore Jail on the night of 23 March, 1931. This produced intense indignation throughout India. There was a hartal at Patna on 26 January. Kusum Kumari Devi, wife of Babu Ramayan Prasad, Secretary, Shahabad district Congress Committee also delivered a speech in which she is repented to have said 'why are you lagging behind? Why don't you come forward to sacrifice yourself like Bismil, Bhagat Singh and Khudi Ram? ... Come up and join the movement'. She appealed to the people in these words at the public meeting organized on 30th March, 1931 in Arrah (Bihar) to voice the people's indignation at the hanging of Bhagat Singh and his associates. Lord Willington met Gandhi in August 1931 and as a result the Second Round Table Conference was organized in London. Gandhi attended the conference but returned without a satisfactory solution to the Indian Constitutional problem.³² It was the inauguration of Provincial Autonomy under the Act of 1935 that gave Indian women an opportunity to be elected to the State Legislatures and also act as administrators. This Act no doubt was the result of long deliberations over a number of years.³³

Begum Shah Nawaz was elected to the Panjab Assembly as a unionist although she later joined the Muslim League. Several women active in the All India Women Congress as well as the Congress won seats: these included Hansa Mehta, Lakshmi Ammal and Duragabai, Lakshmi Pandit, Jawaharlal Nehru's sister, was appointed as minister Local Self-Government and public health in the United Provinces.³⁴ during Quit India Movement, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur played a leading role in organization processions and protest meetings. Rajkumari came from the royal family of Kapurthala state.³⁵ Amrit Kaur

was most active, during the Quit India Movement in 1942; she led processions day after day. One such procession was subjected to ruthless lathi charge in Shimla, the processions led by her from 9 to 16 August were subjected to lathi charge as many as fifteen times.³⁶

Sucheta Kriplani was a lecturer in Banaras University. Individual Satyagraha launched by the Congress in 1940 and she was one of the chosen ones who was permitted to take part in this Satyagraha and she was arrested. She was again arrested in 1944. After her release in 1945, she engaged herself mostly in the social relief activities. When Mahatma Gandhi went to east Bengal and undertook to work for rehabilitation of the refugees, Sucheta joined him in the work. During the year 1947, when the partition of India took place, riots broke out in Panjab. Sucheta Kriplani rushed to the affected areas and organized relief operations. She was taken as a member of the Congress Working Committee in 1947 in recognition of her work. Sucheta Kriplani was a member of the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly and later became a member of Lok Sabha. She had been the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh.³⁷

Aruna Asaf Ali was an ardent soldier of the army of freedom fighters. She became prominent during the days of Salt Satyagraha, when she went around addressing meetings, preparing salt and leading processions.³⁸ Aruna Asaf Ali's courage and resourcefulness during the time was greatly admired by Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Maulana Azad testified the important role played by her in the 1942 Quit India Movement.³⁹ Aruna Asaf Ali was one of the most important figures of the Quit India Movement. The British Government desperately wanted to arrest her and the then princely sum of five thousand rupees was announced as a reward for her capture. She published bulletins and edited with Ram Manohar Lohia the 'Inquilab'. Yusuf Mehrally was to write in later years that "the heroine of 1857 was the Rani of Jhansi that of the 1942 revolution was undoubtedly Aruna Asaf Ali."⁴⁰

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