

SAROJINI NAIDU AND THE CAUSE OF INDIAN WOMEN

Roshani Rai¹

Abstract:

Sarojini Naidu symbol of Indian womanhood and a great freedom fighter was born at the time wherein the woman's role was cast in narrow mould, hemmed in with all sorts of restrictions.¹ However Sarojini Naidu "through her eloquent oratory and strategic campaign against British domination and for sexual equality, actively proved to her traditionally male oriented society that women as well as men could be leaders and responsible citizens in times of turmoil and in times of peace."² Though there were some women who took up the cause of women to fight for their rights, it was Sarojini Naidu who provided the thrust which was needed to advance the treatment of women in India. Being a modern 'liberated' woman, she made relentless efforts for the cause of women's emancipation.

Keywords: leader, women question, purdah, movements.

Sarojini Naidu who was the eldest of the five children of Dr. Aghorenath Chattopadhyay was born on February 13, 1879. Her education was of a strictly scientific in nature under the stern eye of her scholarly father.³ Dr. Aghorenath Chattopadhyay was a brilliant scientist, philosopher, poet, linguist and a pioneer educationist. He had received his Doctor of Science degree at the University of Edinburg and continued his studies in Germany where he excelled his brilliance. P.C. Roy, the great Bengali chemist described him as a man with a capacious head "full

¹ Assistant Professor, Dept. of History, Tripura University, rai_rosh@yahoo.co.in

of grandiose ideas.”⁴ Around 1878 he was invited to Hyderabad where he established a school with English as its medium. The Nizam held Aghorenath in high esteem for his scholarship and on the Nizam’s encouragement and support, he founded the Hyderabad College and became its Principal.

Aghorenath along with the help of his wife Varada Sundari actively worked for women’s education and under his initiative a Girl’s College for women was started as a part of Osmania University. He championed the cause of women. He was a strong believer in the economic independence of women and in giving them equal opportunities with men. He also directed his energy towards abolishing child marriage and worked to establish the remarriage of widows. Very soon the New Hyderabad College grew into a cultural centre of Hyderabad where students flocked to his residence “to sit at his feet and hear him talk on any subject.” The gatherings became so important that it came to be known as the “durbars” of Dr. Aghorenath where various issues like emancipation of women, especially promoting their economic independence, prevention of child marriage and encouragement of widow remarriage and similar topics were discussed.⁵ . An intellectual group called the Angrimah-e-Ikwan-us Safa (The brotherhood Society) was formed which held absorbing discussions on social and political problems, including women’s emancipation of the country.⁶ Therefore Sarojini Naidu was born and brought up in such an environment that it was natural for her to take up the cause of women and become a part of the women’s movement of the time. In this context this paper attempts to narrate the activities of Sarojini Naidu for the cause of Indian women.

It was in December 1904 Sarojini Naidu first attended the annual session of the Indian National Congress at Bombay and the Conference mostly deliberated on the issue of women emancipation, including such problems as women’s education, the

social status of women, polygamy, widow remarriage, child marriage, the purdah system and careers for women. At the ladies gathering, held at Framji Cowasji Institute, Ramabai Ranade, first women rights activist presided and made an illuminating speech on the status of women, which left a deep imprint on Sarojini's mind. Though at this particular meeting Sarojini seemed to have remained silent, but she enthralled the audience by reciting a patriotic poem 'Ode to India'. Through her brilliant oratory and poetry, Sarojini created a stir and upheaval which resounded throughout India. She addressed gatherings of men, strongly pleading with them to give their wives the freedom which was their birthright.⁷ Sarojini's activities soon became "a great social force" in the country.

Sarojini Naidu addressed the Indian Social Conference in 1906 in Calcutta where she spoke on the subject of 'The Education of Indian Women'. According to Sarojini the whole movement of striving for a common national ideal should be centred round the 'women question'. But she regretted that: "there is not even an unanimous acceptance of the fact that education of women is an essential factor in the process of nation building."⁸ She strongly appealed to the menfolk to restore women their ancient rights for according to Sarojini, women were the real nation builders and without their active co-operation there would be no progress. Therefore she categorically remarked: "Educate your women, and the nation will take care of itself for it is true today, as it was yesterday, and will be to the end of human life that the hand that rocks the cradle is the power that rules the world."⁹

In one of the first conclaves of women which was held on December, 1906 at Bethune College in Calcutta, under the auspices of the Indian Ladies Conference, Sarojini strongly urged women to keep pace with men and emancipate themselves from the age-old shackle of subordination.¹⁰ Immediately after this, Sarojini went

back to Hyderabad where she presided over a meeting of the Hindu Social Reform Association held in Secunderabad. At this meeting she fearlessly condemned evil customs, such as infant marriage, varna sulkam, kanya sulkam, nautches, extravagant expenditure on social and religious occasions and the glaring disparity of age between girls and men when marriages were arranged.¹¹ She strongly believed that women were a potent force in the political evolution of a nation. But she was sad to see that while men were advancing and imbibing new thoughts, women were sadly lagging behind.

In a meeting held in Bombay on March 1908 on the celebration of the Jubilee of Stree Bodha, a Bombay Gujarati monthly, Sarojini made an earnest appeal for the abolition of purdah system as she felt that the purdah system was one great stumbling block in the way of social reforms in India. Again in the session of the Indian National Social Conference held at Madras on December, 1908, Sarojini moved a resolution regarding Hindu widows as follows:

“This Conference invites all communities concerned to give their earnest endeavours to save Hindu widows from the customary disfigurement, to ameliorate their conditions by providing them with educational facilities and also with a Widow’s Home after the model of Professor Karve’s so that they may become better qualified than now to be sisters of mercy and useful and respected members of society and also by placing no obstacles in the way of their remarriage.”¹²

In the year 1917, Sarojini Naidu joined the Women’s Indian Association. The Women’s India Association was the first women’s organization started on an all India basis by Irish woman worker for India, Mrs Margaret E. Cousins and Mrs. Annie Beasant and her Home Rule League. Sarojini Naidu sponsored from its

inception. Following the example of Annie Beasant, Sarojini Naidu and Margaret Cousins, women came forward to work for the emancipation of women and the national cause and this gave a direct impetus to the women's movement in India. The Women's India Association provided this common platform for women to voice out their grievances and demand their rights. Margaret Cousins persisted that there should be equality between men and women and an "equipoise of male and female cooperation."¹³ And thus the struggle was started with Sarojini Naidu at the helm.

On December 1917, Sarojini Naidu led a delegation of fourteen women and met the Viceroy and Secretary of State for India Edwin Montague to press for women franchise. In 1919 Sarojini Naidu led a deputation which waited on the Southborough Commission on Franchise Reform. However the report stated that granting the franchise would be premature. "Lord Southborough decided Indian women did not want the vote and even if they did, social customs would impede its implementations."¹⁴ Nevertheless, under the guidance of Sarojini and other capable leaders, the women's movement gradually gathered force. In 1926, women were made eligible for membership of legislatures, but only by nomination, not by election.

In October 1926 the All India Women's Conference (A.I.W.C) came into existence which became the centre of women's activities in India and right from its inception Sarojini Naidu was its friend, philosopher and guide. Initially the activities of the A.I.W.C. was confined to the field of education and discussions of political questions were carefully avoided. However, it was soon realized that in a country growling under British rule it was impossible to isolate important social work from the basic question of national freedom. In this context it was Sarojini Naidu who played a significant role and was the first woman in Indian history to reconcile the struggle of

women into one united effort with the fight for freedom.¹⁵ The policies and activities of the Women's Conference under Sarojini's leadership began to reflect the deepening political consciousness of the women of India.¹⁶ By and large it was Sarojini who linked up the women's movement with the national struggle.

During the years 1928-29, Sarojini Naidu went to America primarily to counteract the effects of Katherine Mayo's book *Mother India* where Mayo had portrayed a dark and bleak state of Indian society, particularly the condition of Indian women. Therefore, Sarojini's mission was to acquaint the people in America with the Indian affairs, especially those of the Indian women.¹⁷ She was successful in clearing many misconceptions about India. She repeatedly asserted that: "The women of India are returning to their old consciousness of their proper place. They had been justly out of it and cajoled out of it in the last 150 to 200 years... Indian women have always been cultured despite the fact that the present appalling illiteracy might tend to make something otherwise."¹⁸ Therefore America acknowledged her as a symbol of Indian womanhood and the *New York Times* quoted: "Her sex in the new role will do more for the emancipation of Indian women..... Her coming to this country emphasized the great strides which the women of India have made towards equality and social freedom."¹⁹

Throughout her career, Sarojini's concern for women's welfare and progress remained uppermost in her mind. Though she could not always engage herself actively in campaign for reform of Hindu law relating to marriage and property rights of women because of her preoccupation with the freedom movement, yet she was vocal on the subject. Speaking on divorce she stated: "Why should men have the right to polygamy, to neglect one wife for another; and women to be bound to men with unbreakable bonds."²⁰

In 1933, Sarojini Naidu played an important part in the opening of the Lady Irwin College for Women. The initiative of its set up was taken by the All- India Women's Conference and was guided by a special committee of women who were educational experts.²⁴ At a meeting of the Women's Indian Association held in Madras on August 11, 1934, which she presided, Sarojini pointed out the great strides the women's movement had made. She appealed to women:

"to specialize in some line of work and become an indispensable unit in the progress of India. She appealed to them to become fitted with a pride that was progressive and dynamic and to cast off stupid humility. Every woman should say to herself that in her lifetime she would see that the women of India suffered no longer from legal or social disabilities.... Every woman must be faithful to her trust for she was not merely the guardian of yesterday's ideals, but the creator of tomorrow's ideas as well."²²

By and large, it can be seen that Sarojini Naidu laboured extensively for the women's movement in India. She was forthright in expressing her views about the various handicaps through which the women of India suffered. She stirred and awakened the Indian women to realize their own latent powers and make them rise above their inferior position in society to which they had reconciled themselves to. In her view, women were 'the vessels of liberty and unity of future India' and that they could play a significant role in the national movement and influence the destiny of the country.

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