

SAROJININAIIDUANDEMANCIPATIONOFWOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Nightingale of India, Sarojini Naidu, was a remarkable political figure, a valiant warrior for independence, and a gifted multilingual speaker. In addition, she was widely recognized as a brilliant poet, the first Indian woman to lead the Indian National Congress as its President, the first Indian woman to hold the office of Governor of Independent India's Uttar Pradesh, the first Indian woman to chair an international Asian Relation Conference, the President of the All-India Women's Educational Conference, the President of the Indian Women's Association, and a trailblazing advocate for women's rights.

As India was under the clutches of British rule, Sarojini Naidu along with other national leaders fought for our independence and through her writings also she set the background for Indian independence. She was a great leader who inspired many, particularly women. She worked for Indian women not only in India but also abroad. Through this study, an attempt was made to analyze the multifaceted personality of Sarojini Naidu in the emancipation of women.

Keywords: Nightingale of India, Sarojini Naidu, independence, national movement, women's association, women's emancipation

Introduction

Sarojini Naidu was born in Hyderabad on 13th February 1879 as the eldest of the eight children of Aghorenath Chattopadhyay and Varada Sundari Devi. Both of them belonged to Bengali Brahmin families. She grew up in an atmosphere of complete freedom and in the lap of luxury. She was graduated from the Madras University and because of her literary skills, got Nizam's scholarship to study in England. In England, even though she did not complete her studies, she became a more reformed poet. She came back to India and married Govindarajulu Naidu after completing her education.

Sarojini Naidu joined National Movement as a public speaker against colonial

regime and dedicated her whole life not only for the freedom of India but also for the emancipation of women. She was the first woman in Indian freedom struggle who believed that the freedom of India is a distant dream until the pitiable state of women would not be recovered by everyone. Therefore, the fight for women right became a matter of concern for Sarojini Naidu. Through her speeches, she exhorted Indians to work for the betterment of women. She did not start any kind of movement in the field of women's emancipation but delivered lectures all over India to remove the social disabilities of women on education of women, purdah system, enforced widowhood, widow remarriage, divorce, emancipation of women, equal qualification between men and women, a vision of India's future women, etc.

Condition of Women

During the colonial period, women suffered from social evils such as: child marriage, polygamy, enforced widowhood, female infanticide, purdah system and prejudices against women's education. They had been subordinated to men and were socially oppressed and marginalized. Their participation in national movement is much low and were confined to the four walls of their homes. They were restricted in almost all aspects.

Sarojini Naidu and Women's Emancipation

Sarojini Naidu entered into what may be termed as feminist movement when it was in an embryonic form and dedicated all the time of her life to remove all these social disabilities. She said "Does one man dare to deprive another of his birthright to God's pure air which nourishes his body? How then, shall a man dare to deprive a human soul of its immemorial inheritance of liberty and life? But man had so dared in the case of Indian women. That is why, you men of India, are today what you are, because your fathers, in depriving your mothers of that immemorial birthright, have robbed you, their sons, of your just inheritance. Therefore, I charge you to restore to your women's ancient right and against she said that it is we, and not you, who are the real nation-builders and without active co-operation at all point so progress, all your congresses and conferences are in vain.

Speeches of Sarojini Naidu for Women Emancipation

When the Swadeshi Movement was at its height in 1906, Sarojini spoke at the Indian Social Conference in Calcutta on the subject "The Education of Indian Women." Sarojini Naidu felt that there should be no distinction of caste, community or creed. So at

her instance the word ‘Hindu’ was changed into Indian in the amendment which she brought urging ‘every effort of the government of India in the direction of female education’

On the subject of ‘Female education’, she said, India, at the beginning of the first century was already a great civilization. It had contributed to the world’s progress. She again said that there is also a radiant example of women of the highest genius and widest culture but unfortunately, we could not go ahead. It is time for us to consider how we can achieve something more fruitful than the passing of empty resolution in favour of female education from year to year? She felt that the whole movement of striving for a common national ideal should be centered round the “Women question”. She regretted the fact that there is not even “unanimous acceptance” of the fact that the education of women is an essential factor in the process of nation-building.

Back in Hyderabad, Sarojini Naidu presided over a meeting of Hindu Social Reform Association held in the Mahboob College Hall, Secunderabad. An American lady Mrs. Ida Fye Levering spoke on the condition of Indian women. At this meeting Sarojini Naidu fearlessly condemned evil custom, such as infant marriage, *vara sulkam*, *kanya sulkam*, *nautches*, extra vagant expenditure on social and religious occasions and the wide disparity of age between girls and men when marriages were arranged.

On 3rd December 1908, Sarojini Naidu attended 22nd session of Indian National Social Conference held at Madras in the Congress pavilion. The pandal was filled with a large audience composed of all classes, and creeds, including C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya. The honourable Justice Sankaran Nair presided this session and among other speakers, Sarojini Naidu made a resolution regarding Hindu widows in these words: “This Conference invites all communities concerned to give their earnest endeavors to save Hindu widows from the customary disfigurement, to ameliorate their conditions by providing them with educational facilities and a widows’ Home after the model of professor Karve’s so that they may become better qualified than now to be sister of mercy and useful and respected members of society, and also by placing no obstacles in the way of their remarriage.”

On 16th January 1916 at the 22nd annual social gathering of Hindu Ladies, Social and Literary Club at Chanda Ramji Hindu Girls School, in Bombay, Sarojini once again held out the fundamental question of the cause of womanhood. She also presided this occasion

andsaid:“The real test of nationhood is in the womanhood. The work of nation building must begin from women unit. It should be brought to the mind of Indian woman that she is not toy, nor cattle, nor an instrument of pleasure, but the inspirer of the spirit.

In July 1918, she spoke at the “Opening of the National School for Girls” at Mylapore, Madras. In September 1918, she moved a resolution on “Equal Qualification between Men and Women,” at a Special Congress meeting in Bombay. The said resolution: “women possessing the same qualification as are laid down for men in any part of the scheme shall not be disqualified on the account of sex. In her speech in support of this resolution Sarojini Naidu said that the word “man” should include politically “woman” in all the discussion of rights of the citizen, in all the discussion of political rights and franchise, when the Congress League scheme comes into existence. She said “it is my great privilege to put this resolution before you and to ask you, gentlemen, as responsible citizens, who are demanding large franchises for years, to consider the question of women’s franchise from a national point of view. The question is whether in the reconstruction of the national life it will be possible for you to have a rich national life unless and until it is shared and supported by women who are the soul of citizenship and the life of nation?

On 1st September 1918, Sarojini Naidu again spoke on behalf of women’s suffrage at the special session of Congress held in Bombay. She said “Woman possessing the same qualifications as are laid down for man in any part of the scheme shall not be disqualified on the account of sex.” She said to her audience “that primal right which is as much hers as it is yours, because she is the co-responsible with you for the honour and prosperity of your country official function, your civic duties, your public place and power, but rather that we might lay the foundation of national character in the souls of the children that we hold upon our laps, and in still into them the ideals of national life. Five thousand delegates attended this special session and the resolution passed by a 75 percent majority. When the Southborough franchise committee toured India in 1918 to get information in their final report, the second women’s deputation waited on the South borough Commission for franchise reform. But the blow had already fallen when the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms, despite “the votes for women’s deputation,” made no mention of women and completely ignored their demands.

For Political Rights

The provincial legislatures, one after another, began enfranchising women on the same terms as men. Bombay and Madras were the first Provinces to extend the franchise to women in 1921, the united provinces followed in 1923, Punjab and Bengal in 1926 and finally Assam, the Central Provinces, and Bihar and Orissa in 1930. In December 1925 she was elected the president of the Indian National Congress at Kanpur. It seemed as Sarojini Naidu's debut as president of the Congress had opened the door to women to come forward in the politics of India. During the year of 1926-27 women conference held in all part of India.

After securing women's right to vote, women demanded the right to be elected to the legislatures, it was eventually in 1926 that they were accorded the right to be members of the legislatures, and eventhis, only by Government nomination. Muthulakshmi Reddy, the first woman legislator, was appointed to the Madras legislative council in 1927. Women had also begun to seek election in Municipal Councils. Four women were elected in Bombay city by topping the polls of four different wards. Sarojini Naidu was one of them; it is even said that she was invited actually to become Mayor of Bombay, a position which she, however, never held.

Labour Issue: Open Hooghly Jute Mill Conference

On 17th July 1938, Sarojini inaugurated the Hooghly Jute Mill Workers' Conference at Champdani. She advised laborers not to resort to strikes. Moral force was more important than strikes. Laborer should be free from all communal differences and should not possess any Hindu- Muslim prejudices. She applauded employer's efforts to help the workers. They needed food, leisure and healthy living conditions, education for their children and other facilities. Women workers should be given maternity benefits and creches. This meant food for all, for Sarojini said: 'The first principle of political liberty is that in every level there must be enough food'. She asked the laborers to join the Congress in the non-violent struggle.

Sarojini Naidu and Women's Suffrage in Colonial India

Sarojini Naidu is credited to have pioneered the fight for women's right to be included in Indian Freedom struggle. She was committed to women's cause since it was in a pitiable condition. Improvement of the condition of women could be achieved only by taking up the question of women's suffrage, while constitutional reform was still in

progress. In 1917, Secretary of State Edwin Montagu and Lord Chelmsford, the viceroy, planned a tour of India to survey to the views of individuals and groups for constitutional reform, Saraladevi Chaudharani and Margaret Cousins mentioned some educational and social demands before them. But Margaret Cousins was informed by the officials that only political subjects were to be considered by the Secretary of State, therefore Mrs. Cousins revised her draft and included the 'Opportunities for Political Service' which had the Subject of women's franchise.

At that time women of India were not much concerned about their voting rights as much as they were interested in their educational and social rights. Sarojini Naidu wanted to remove the social disabilities of Indian women and wanted to bring them in political arena of the country. She took up the reins of responsibility when she led a delegation of fourteen women to meet Montague and Chelmsford. Among the fourteen ladies were Ramabai Ranade, Saraladevi Chaudharani, Uma Nehru, Herabai Tata, Cousins and Lady Abala Bose. The representatives of such organization as the Women's Indian Association, the Sevasadan, the Mahila Seva Samaj, the Indian Women's University, the Women's Home Rule League and other institutions and organizations were part of the deputation. The memorandum set forth the demand that A) Selection of the members of council be made on the basis of election, B) There should be no gender bias viz women and therefore they be recognized as 'people' C) Lastly significance of local self-government and women representation. The demand of women's right to vote was spread all over India. It is noteworthy that instead of militancy she adopted purely democratic means for equal right of women like that of male counterpart. She did not demand any special favours for women.

Similarly one finds in 1918, she moved a resolution on 'Women's Franchise' at the eighteenth session of the Bombay Provincial Conference held at Bijapur which stated: "This conference welcomes the requisition of the ladies of the Bombay inviting the support of this conference for the women's franchise in India, and places on record its opinion that such a franchise should be given to women, but under suitable conditions, and recommends that this resolution be forwarded to the Congress through the Provincial Congress Committee. On 1st September 1918 Sarojini re-iterated the issue of Women's Suffrage at the special session of Congress held in Bombay. She observed: "Woman possessing the same qualifications as are laid down for man in any part of the scheme shall not be

disqualified on the account of sex.” Responding to the objection that women be less feminine when in politics, she said to her audience “that primal right which is as much hers as it is yours, because she is the co- responsible with you for the honor and prosperity of your country. Never, never for we realize that men and women have their separate goals, separate destinies and that just as man can never fulfill the responsibility or the destiny of a woman, a woman cannot fulfill the responsibility of man we ask for vote, not that we might interfere with you in your official function, your civic duties, your public place and power, but rather that we might lay the foundation of national character in the souls of the children that we hold upon our laps, and in still into them the ideals of national life. The demands of the earlier ‘Vote for Women Deputation’ were also placed before the South borough Committee. Women appeared representing Bengal and Punjab Provinces.

Sarojini Naidu attended the second session of the Round Table Conference held from September 1931 to December 1931, as a representative of Indian Women. She supported the demand of Indian women to adult franchise. The Women’s organizations viz., Women’s Indian Association, National Council of Women in India and All India Women’s Conference and Sarojini Naidu presented a memorandum in support of universal adult franchise at the session of Second Round Table Conference. The memorandum demanded, among other things, joint electorate and ruled out any special favour. When she led a delegation of fourteen prominent women to meet Mr. Montagu and Lord Chelmsford for the demand of women’s suffrage, Indian men and women were not much concerned about voting right of women. It was Sarojini who made them more conscious for the voting right of women through her speeches. To support the question of Women’s suffrage she not only toured India but also abroad. She finally achieved success in getting voting right for women through her effort at last.

Other Movements

Sarojini Naidu played an important part in the opening of the Lady Irwin Collage for women affiliated to Delhi University. It was guided by a special committee of women who were educational experts. In 1932, a heated discussion on divorce took place in Allahabad. Divorce was one of the burning questions of the day, and all women’s organizations were fighting for securing their right to divorce. Here she questioned why should men have the right to polygamy and again she said if men neglected one wife for another, women had no reason to remain loyal to their husbands.

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Conclusion

Sarojini Naidu did not start any movements in the field of women's emancipation but exhorted Indians through her speeches and writings. Her speeches were the main agenda to encourage Indians to work for the emancipation of women. She was the first woman who regarded fight for women's rights as a part of India's freedom struggle and she herself became a great source of inspiration to Indian women and succeeded to make them conscious of their social and political rights. This is the reason that 13th February, the date of her birth, is celebrated as 'National Women's Day' in India.

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