

Role of Women in India's Independence

Rajinder Kaur

Mata Sahib Kaur Girls College, Talwandi Sabo-151302, Punjab, India

***Corresponding Author:**

Dr Rajinder Kaur

Email: rajchahal4@gmail.com

Abstract: In this paper, the contribution of women so far the independence of the country has been presented. It has been found in literature that a huge number of Marathi women openly took part in the Swadeshi Movement in 1906. The Women play an important role when Mahatma Gandhi ji launched countrywide movement against the Rowlett Act (1918). The contribution of Shanta Tilak, Yamuna Bai Savarkar, Satyabhama Tilak Avantika Bai Gokhale, Renu Bai Savarkar, Sarojini Naidu, Durgabai, Asha Devi, Sewagram, Meera Ben, Bhima Bai and R. Sushila Nayar have been cited for various movement launched for the independence of India..

Keywords: independence, women, Shanta Tilak, Yamuna Bai Savarkar, Satyabhama Tilak

INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with the contribution of women so far the independence of the country is concerned. The women of almost all parts of the country participated in the ongoing freedom struggle in the country, Historians have generally overlooked the political awakening among the women, whereas political awareness among the men has been discussed at length. Undoubtedly, the various regions provided leadership both of women and men to the national movement [1]. In this article the roles of various women e.g Shanta Tilak, Yamuna Bai Savarkar, Satyabhama Tilak Avantika Bai Gokhale, Renu Bai Savarkar, Sarojini Naidu, Durgabai, Asha Devi, Sewagram, Meera Ben, Bhima Bai and R. Sushila Nayar have been presented who take part in different movements launched for the independence of India.

DISCUSSION

In 1918, when for the first time, women of middle classes got an opportunity to take up political leadership during the period under review. Women who mostly lived in cities took up this responsibility [2]. Here, it will not be out of place if it is stated that the wives of the various leaders were also taking keen interest in the day to day political and economic activities of the country. They were supporting their better halves in their efforts of organizing political associations, meetings and processions against the atrocities and wrong policies of the British. At the same time they were helping them financially from their own savings. For instance, in 1906, a large number of Marathi women openly took part in the *Swadeshi* Movement. Chief among them were: Shanta Tilak,

Yamuna Bai Savarkar, Satyabhama Tilak Avantika Bai Gokhale, Renu Bai Savarkar, etc . They had their own views on the political issues of the country. The credit for this political awareness went to the life style of the women of middle-classes in the various provinces of the country [3].

When Gandhi ji launched countrywide movement against the Rowlett Act (1918), a call for a strike was given in various parts of the country on 6th April, 1919. This strike was very successful. During the Satyagraha at various District Headquarters, the question of Hindu Muslim unity was raised and supported which was quite successful at most places [4]. For Hindu-Muslim unity, Sarojini Naidu gave a speech in a mosque and led the Satyagraha movement in the Central Provinces. On 21st April, the women's *Satyagrahi Jatha* was led by Mrs. Durgabai Joshi [5]. Asha Devi ran a school. Sewagram was another important institution run by Meera Ben and R. Sushila Nayar. It was a central point for political leaders, thinkers and newspapers. It was visited by people from all over India and from other countries as well. As a result the women of this region were highly influenced by their speeches and ideas [6]. During the Satyagraha movement Bhukka Lohar was arrested. Hearing about their leader's arrest about 500 villagers- both men and women reached near the police camp. The police was just waiting for this. Seeing the crowd advancing, they started firing. Three women were killed and about 30 were injured [7].

In 1930, the next step of the *Satyagrahis* was to boycott the elections. When polling was going on, on

10th November, 1930, *Satyagrahis* started looting the polling centre. In Nagpur, 400 men and 200 women along with 500 *Satyagrahis* boys and girls flocked around at the polling centre and appealed to the people not to cast their votes. These persons were arrested. Anusuya Bai Kale was arrested at the Town Hall where she was trying to block the election process. The *Satyagrahis* were very successful in their mission because only 1,137 out of the total 25,000 voters could cast their votes. The *Satyagrahis* held *dharnas* at wine shop. Men, particularly women lay down before the trucks carrying wine and blocked road. They were *lathi* charged and many of them got injured [8]. Women *Satyagrahis* were posing a big problem before the government of Central Provinces. They were participating in boycott movement and demonstrations in large numbers. The government decided to impose fines on the affluent women leading the boycott movement. Even those arrested were kept in jails for a short period. They were punished mainly through fines. The government wondered and was in fix, how to tackle the Indian women who used *Purdah* and still participated in the boycott movement. They enjoyed full support of the Congress which made the problem all the more difficult to handle [9].

When the Correspondence between Gandhiji and the Viceroy produced no results, he planned the Salt Satyagraha. He announced the programme of the historic *Dandi* March. The march was to begin from *Sabarmati* on 12th March, 1930 and to reach *Dandi* on 6th April to violate the Salt Law there. Covering a distance of 200 miles in 24 days, Gandhi reached the seacoast where the law was violated by preparing salt and thousands of people started courting arrests. On 5th May, Gandhi was arrested because he had directed the *Satyagrahis* to take possession of the Government Salt Godown. After Gandhi's arrest, Sarojini Naidu took over the leadership and she was also arrested. The *Satyagrahis* were beaten by *lathis* and trampled over by horsemen. Volunteers took the injured *Satyagrahis* to a nearby medical and camp which was organized by Mrs. Janaki Devi Bajaj [10]. In Madhya Pradesh, Anusuya Bai Kale was acknowledged as a great leader. Durgabai Joshi, Anusuya Bai Kale was acknowledged as a great leaders. Durgabai Joshi, Suman Keshkar, Subhadra Kumari Chauhan, Kasturi Bai Upadhyaye and Janaki Devi Bajaj of Wardha were also among the prominent leaders in the movement [11].

On 21st April, many women led by Durgabai Joshi broke the Salt Law. They sang the following lines to awaken the people.

***Rise up o Indians; the dear Children of
Rishis.
Lay down your lives in this great war of
freedom.***

***He alone is a man of valour, who enters this
field of battle.
Listen to the Clarion Call, and don thy
Saffron vesture [12].***

Anusuya Bai was providing leadership in the CP while Suman Keshkar and Durga Joshi were active in Nagpur and Barar regions respectively. Under them women were holding Satyagraha at various places. In Wardha, Jannalal Bajaj's wife Janaki Devi Bajaj and his sister Kesarbai Poddar organized groups of women volunteers. In Khandwa, Makhnallal Chaturvedi's sister Kasturibai, and in Jabalpur, the poetess Subhadra Kumari Chauhan, etc. were leading the *Satyagrahis*. Simple village women were in way, less active. In Chhindwara, Adivasi women had fallen to police bullets taking part in the Satyagraha movement by violating the jungle law. There were two labourer women Pradelu Bai Turiya who were very active in the Satyagraha movement [13]. Both men and women participated in violating the jungle law. Both went to the jungle and tried to cut the trees and their limbs with knives and with axes. Mrs. Mudra Bai was the wife of the Sh. Shukul Gaur and Remobai was the wife of Mr. Fakoor Holiya who belonged to Madhya Pradesh. They took part in the jungle *Satyagraha*. Both of them were killed in police firing on 9th October 1930 [14].

Jawahar Divas was celebrated in Jabalpur. A huge meeting consisting of about 10,000 men and 300 women was held. Processions were taken out and demonstrations were held. A young girl got injured in police firing. Five women were arrested at Wardha [15]. On the other hand those from middle classes who participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement included a large number of women. Their participation spoke of their awareness due to their association with the Congress. It also showed that the awareness was brought about by social development transformation and a change in their thinking. A large number of women took part in the movement. The most prominent among them was Anusuya Bai Kale who continuously worked for removing social evils and bringing about a political awakening among women [16]. Anusuya Bai Kale was a teacher and a social worker. She came to Nagpur with her husband and became a member of the first Vidhan Sabha in 1926. During 1929-30, she was also a member of the Whitley Labour Commission. Due to Abhayankar and Khare, she resigned her Vidhan Sabha seat and joined the Bar Council. Thus, she became a source of inspiration for other women and demonstration that women could not only join politics but also had the courage and strength to go against the government. Later on Durgabai Joshi of Akola and Parvati Patwardhan of Amravati encouraged the women to take part in the movement [17].

The Urban women raised funds for the Congress during the Civil Disobedience Movement of

1931. They spun yarn for *Khadi* and held *dharnas* at wine shops. Along with women, boys and girls students took part in '*Prabhat Pheris*' and held *Satyagraha* at schools, colleges and shops to boycott of wine and foreign goods. They held joint processions in front of the State Vidhan Sabha, took part in public meetings and broke the Salt Law [18]. Ruikar took women into the Trade Union Congress. Mrs. Kale continued to inspire the working women for participating in the movement [19].

Due to Shukla's influence, a large number of women from the lower and middle classes took part in the movement. Therefore, women of Raipur joined *Prabhat Pheris* and held *dharnas* and wine shops and stores of foreign clothes, at Gandhi's calls [20]. Working women jammed the traffic and held demonstrations in front of Government offices. They came forward during the *Satyagraha* and underwent rigorous imprisonment [21]. Under Mr. Mishra's leadership, middle class women also participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement. In 1923, in *Satyagraha* of Jabalpur, the patriotic poetess Mrs. Subhadra Kumari Chauhan also took part and she exhorted the Maharastrian women of Jabalpur to join the national movement [22]. Mrs. Govinddas served as a link between the Congress and the Marwari women. In 1931, she led the women in Jabalpur and was elected President of the *Maha Koshal Mahila Seva Sangh*. She had a dominating personality and she inspired women to enter public life. This Mahila Samaj compelled the business men not to sell any foreign clothes for two months. Because of their efforts sale of foreign clothes completely stopped throughout the city [23]. In August, 1942, Quit India Movement was launched with the slogan 'Do or Die'. Sarojini Naidu was arrested on the morning of 9th August. A large number of women from the *Mahila Sangathan* and Trust came out into the streets to support openly the movement.

Congress won victory in the Vidhan Sabha election of 1937. Congress was in the lead. On 61 seats women are elected from general seats and 41 from reserved seats. In terms of Vidhan Sabha seats, women enjoyed third place in the world [24]. Women became Vice President (Deputy Speaker) ministers and secretaries. Anusuya Bai Kale was elected to the offices of Vice President (Deputy Speaker) in Madhya Pradesh [25]. In this general election women posed an equal challenge to men although they were less frequently seen in public due to their smaller numbers. It may not please Chauvinistic men but it was a matter of pride for those who encouraged women's organizations and stood by them in their fight for voting rights [26]. Under the Quit India Movement, their leader Kulkarni suffered a *lathi* blow in the head and passed out. As the tricolor inclined a bit in his hands, Kamalabai who was coming behind him at once held it up. The crowd was no less than 500 strong contingents with more than 100

women. Kamala Bai also had in her lap her 10 years old child. After Kulkarni get injured she took up the leadership of the procession [27]. After the *lathi* charge, teargas shells were burst. 5 young men and 3 women affected by gas were arrested. Kamala Bai was also one of them [28]. Women of the CP were taking part in the movement openly. They adopted a novel method of putting Government officials to shame. They went to offices and courts, tied Rakhis to the officials and magistrates and urged them to leave off their work and come out. When appeals did not work, they raised slogans and courted arrests [29].

In the village Chimur of Banda district in the Central Province which had a population of 6 thousand, women had to undergo unbearable tortures. On 19th August, 1942, 200 European soldiers and 50 Indian police constables reached there. They caused havoc in the nearby villages. The women of Chimur had to bear terrible humiliation at their hands. They forcibly entered the houses, took the valuables and subjected women to rape. At some places, women were able to save themselves with their collective strength. But where ever they could lay hands on a single woman, they did not spare even young adolescent girls, pregnant mothers and those with new born infants. Such incidents were reported in Ashti village also. These two villages were not very far away from Gandhi's '*Sevagram*'. It therefore, drew the attention of the Ashram inmates. One of them, a professor, went on an indefinite hunger strike demanding an enquiry into these evil deeds. His fast continued for 63 days but the government did order an enquiry into the matter. After public pressure, later on an enquiry committee was constituted consisting of Government as well as non government members. According to the Report of the Committee, 13 women were actually raped. The sacrifices of these women were in no way less than those of the men who fell to police bullet in the freedom struggle [30]. Some other village women of the Central Province who died of police atrocities in jails for taking part in the movement were: Rukmani Bai and Ishwari of Raipur village, Rupa Bai of Latur and Bhagwati Bai of Bangoli. Mrs. Sarvarm of Nagpur fell to police bullet while hoisting the Tricolor [31].

The name that emerged most prominently in the Central Province is that of Anusuya Bai Kale, she had resigned as Deputy Speaker of the CP Vidhan Sabha and jumped into the freedom struggle in 1930. After release from Jail in 1937, she again became Deputy Speaker of the CP Vidhan Sabha. After the declaration of war she again resigned in 1939 as per Congress decision and became active in the 1942 movement. 25 persons of Cimur and Ashti villages had been beaten away from Englishmen who had committed crime against the village women. With her efforts, Anusuya Bai Kale was able to save their lives [32].

The commendable task of recruiting 5000 volunteers and raising a fund of Rs. 5000 in the Jabalpur region was performed by the well known poetess Subhadra Kumari Chauhan. She was the first woman in Jabalpur to be arrested for participating in the Satyagraha. In the 1942 movement, she arranged a huge public meeting with the help of other women of the area. When she was making a speech, a tear gas shell was burst on the state near her. Her house was also searched. Her husband was already in jail. Even then she went to jail leaving behind her children. She was released in 1942 due to the growth of a tumour in her belly. She had been active in all the earlier movements along with her husband. But sometimes she saved herself from prison due to her ailment. Her chief contribution to the freedom movement was to infuse a spirit of bravery among the youth through her ideology and poems [33]. Some other prominent names of women who went to jail for taking part in the movement were - Radha Devi Goenka of Akola, Sahodra Rai of Sagar, Rukmani Devi and Saraswati Karve of Indore, Suman Bai Keskar, Lakshmi Bai Ramchandra and Vimla Bai Deshpande of Bhopal and Kaushallya Bai Poddar of Wardha. The famous leader of Wardha Janaki Devi Bajaj after her husband Jamna Lal Bajaj lived in an Ashram looked after the work of 'Go Seva Sangh' and lent a helping hand to Vinobha Bhawe [-34].

Bhima Bai was the daughter of Yashwant Rao son of Tukoji Rao who was the adopted son of Maharani Ahallya Bai Holkar of Indore. She had been trained in riding and use of weapons in her very childhood. Therefore, Bhima Bai was well versed in the art of warfare since her childhood. Her husband died soon; living as a widow, she one day, got news that a maid of her palace had taken possession of her state. Directing attention towards the mismanagement of the state she demanded of the Indore Resident Colonel Oakland that she be allowed to protect her father's state. The English were always looking for such opportunities. How could they tolerate the Queen's interference? Instead of giving her permission, they attacked the Holkar state [35].

CONCLUSIONS

It has been concluded that women played vital role for the freedom of India. The sacrifices of these women were in no way less than those of the men who fell to police bullet in the freedom struggle.

REFERENCES

1. DEU Baker, Changing Political Leadership in CP and Berar, p. 2. 1979
2. DEU Baker, op.cit., p. 24.
3. Hitwada, 22nd March, 1919, p. 21.
4. DEU. Baker, The Rowlett Satyagraha in the Central Province and Berar, p. 21, 1985
5. Dwarika Prasad Mishra, The History of Freedom Movement in Madhya Pradesh, p. 385. 1956.
6. Ibid., pp. 389-90.
7. Ibid., p. 389.
8. Ibid., p. 414.
9. Ibid., p. 415.
10. Asha Rani Vohra, Nari Vidroh ke Bhartiya Manch, 1991 p. 114
11. Ibid., p. 91.
12. Ibid. p.91.
13. Asha Rani Vohra, Madhilayen Our Swarajya, p. 214.
14. P.N. Chopra, Who's Who of Indian Martyrs, Vol. II, p. 204. 1972.
15. Indian Annual Register, Vol. II, 1930, p. 104.
16. DNB Vol. II, pp. 273-74.
17. Hitwada, 24th April, 1930; NAI Home Political, 181/12, CPVFP, 1 November, 1930.
18. Indian Annual Register, Calcutta, No. 11, 1930, p. 36; Hiwada, 1st June, 1931.
19. NAI Home Political, 181/12, CPVFP, 1 November, 1930.
20. Ibid.
21. MPSP and M. 175/CDM, 1930, Hammliton, September, 1930, p. 25.
22. D.P. Mishra, Jabalpur 1974 (Sakshatkar Avlokan).p 65
23. Hitwada, 5th June, 1930, p. 5.
24. Hitwada, 27th February, 1937.
25. Indian Annual Register, Vol. II, 1937.
26. Indian Annual Register, Vol. I, 1937.
27. S. Bhatnagar, August Kranti Ki Chingariyan, 1946, p. 19.
28. Ibid.
29. Asha Rani Vohra, op.cit., p. 378.
30. Ibid., p. 379.
31. Ibid.p.379
32. Ibid., p. 380.
33. Ibid,p.380
34. Ibid,p.380
35. Dr. Usha Bala, Bharat Ki Mahila Swatantarta Senani, pp. 50-51. 1970