

BENGALI WOMEN IN SWADESHI MOVEMENT

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Abstract

We must feel proud of our women folk of Bengal for their active part in the Swadeshi movement at the threshold of the twentieth century. On the question of the breaking up of Bengal, the whole nation rose against the reactionary measure of British rule. The Bengali women naturally felt the pangs to do something for their motherland. The two renowned ladies – Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Sister Nivedita were the embodiment of the new spirit. The duo believed that the first step towards freedom was to remove cowardice and weakness. Sarala Devi organized Physical cultural movement for the Bengali youth and Nivedita involved herself in increasing revolutionary movement. The Bengali women made wonderful advances during this day in the field of literature. Sarala Devi and her sister Hiranmoyee Devi edited 'Bharati', Kumudini Mitra's journal "Supravat", Mira Dasgupta's quarterly journal "Benu" created a patriotic spirit among the educated womanhood. Common women also joined the movement by boycotting British goods and by using Swadesi Goods. They crushed their glass bangles (During the meeting of Kaliprasanna Kavya Visharad), promised to wear saffron sari (Kalaskathi village of Barishal), observed "Arandhan" as a ritual protest. Muslim women being very conservative had no share in the political upheaval of this day. But Kharumnira was remarkable exception. Women were transcended impediment of traditional patriarchal circumstances by taking active part in Swadeshi movement and moved towards emancipation and politicization.

Key words-Women, Swadeshi, patriotism, self-esteem, boycott, patriarchal, political awareness

It is certainly doubtless that amongst all the rebellions which took place in India during the British period, Swadeshi movement reflects indications of various metamorphosis. According to historian Jagadish. N. Sinha, this movement 'proved to be a great trend-setter for the future'. The most significant point of the movement was the growing political awareness among the women of Bengal. In this regard, Rashtraguru Surendranath Banerjee rightly observed, 'The Swadeshi movement invaded our homes and captured the hearts of our women folk, who were even more enthusiastic than men'.

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During Swadeshi movement the women who became the embodiment of the new spirit that pervaded the country was Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, the youngest daughter of SwarnaKumari Devi and Janakinath Ghosal. Sarala Devi has given patriotism an institutional establishment of various activities. On 11th May 1903, she started 'Pratapaditya festival' under the light of 'Shivaji festival' of Maharashtra. Sarala Devi showed the path to the bengalis through the ritual of 'Birashtami' also. In the year 1904, the youths offered 'Pushpanjali' in the name of Lord Rama, Sri Krishna, Praptapaditya and Sitaram by decorating their swords with flowers on the day of Mahashtami during the Durga puja festival. Different kinds of sports were arranged. In the 'Kartik' edition of 'Bharati' in the year 1311 (Bengali year); songs written by Sarala Devi on Birashtami were published. In her autobiography she herself has written, 'amar hate Bharati shudhu sukumar sahityer rangabhumi chilo na, bahan hoyechilo jatiotar.' (Devi Chowdhurani, sarala, 2007, 149). To popularize country made products she also started 'Lakshmir Bhandar'. In an exhibition at congress session (Bombay 1904) Sarala Devi exhibited some swadeshi artifacts, which was praised by all. Sarala Devi had helped different clubs and institutions economically. She helped Anushilan Samity under the leadership of Pulin Behari Das (Devi Chowdhurani, sarala, 2007, 128). In the year 1905, she gave new life to 'Suhrid Samiti'. She also helped Jatindranath Bandyopadhyay in establishing 'Gupta Samiti'.

Leelabati Mitra was another politically aware woman of the time. Leelabati, the daughter of Sri Rajnarain Bose and wife of Shri Krishna Kumar Mitra, was a strong force behind the patriotic activities of her husband. She gave shelter to Aurobindo Ghosh after he was released from jail custody, without bothering the red-eyed Britishraj. She gave the proof of her self-esteem by refusing heinously a monitorial help of two hundred rupees per month from the British government when her husband was in jail.

Daughter of Krishna Kumar Mitra, Kumodini Mitra was also a believer in the ideals of protest movement. By joining different associations, she tried to inspire common people in the spirit of nationalism through her writing of the national song. Her principle was, 'motherland needs blood'.¹ (Devi Chaudhurani, Sarala, 2007, 128). Through the journal 'Suprabhat' (1907-1912), she had spread patriotism. Mother of Kumodini Mitra Lilabati, wife of Dr. Nilratan Sarkar Nirmala, wife of Dr. Prankrishna Acharya Subala, wife of Dr. Sundarimohan Das Hemangini had helped to make Swadeshi movement successful from indoor. Mira Dasgupta, the editor of 'Benu' quarterly magazine was the most eminent person amongst them.² (Rakhitroy. B.K., 137 I Part 213).

The flood of nationalism aroused by through the writings of the women of the time is abided by all. Amongst these the names of Sarala Devi, SwaranaKumari Devi,

Kumodini Mitra have already been mentioned before. Besides these was Kamini Roy, GiririndraMohini Dasi, ManKumari Basu, Hironmoyee Devi and other poets and literary artists. Ashalata Sen had written poem on nationalism in 'Antahpur' monthly journal at a tender age of ten. Inspired by maternal grandmother she started spreading Swadeshi in the year 1905.

The role of Sister Nivedita in spreading Swadeshi and revolutionary movement was memorable. Her view regarding 'Swaraj' was, 'Swaraj does not mean an attempt to plant English democracy in India. It means the human right of Indian democracy to find self-expression in its own country and amongst its own people its own way'. She wholeheartedly supported the Swadeshi movement both in principal and practice. She supported the economic justification for the boycott and Swadeshi. We observe her enthusiasm in organizing Swadeshi Mela in Calcutta in 1906, girls of her school showed their embroidery work in this mela. She introduced "Charkha" in her school before the advent of Gandhi's thought. To her, Swadeshi was not only a political principle, but a realization of self. Nivedita influenced Bengali youth by her inflammatory orations and pens. She was one of the principal contributor to Bhupendranath Datta's edited revolutionary patrika "Yugantar" and Bipin Chandra Pal's "New India". Moderate leader Ramesh Chandra Dutta, Gokhle and Surendranath Banerjee was great admirer of her. In his autobiography "A nation in making" Surendranath describes Nivedita as "Beneficent lady who had consecrated her life to, an ideal in, the service of India". Swami Vivekananda wanted that the nation might awake. Inspired by the ideal of her teacher Sister Nivedita devoted her whole life to arise such 'sleeping leviathan'.

Women naturally became the part of the anti-partition movement of Bengal when the movement took the shape of 'Swadeshi Andolon'. When the date 16th October 1905 was declared as the day of Bengal partition, women spontaneously responded to Rabindranath Tagore in celebrating the day as the day of unity through the festival of 'Rakhi' or 'Rakshabandhan'. Besides the women kept off from cooking when RamendraSundar Trivedi declared of the day as 'AradhanDibas'. To imply 'aradhan' as the weapon for protest, was observed to encourage the women participation in the movement under the supervision of queen of Nator, one thousand women assembled in Mary Carpenter Hall and voiced against partitioning the country.

During 1907 to 1909 women started 'Swadeshi Bhandar' and 'Mahila Samiti' at different places. These associations encouraged boycotting of British goods and promoted swadeshi articles. Women arranged for fairs of Indian made goods at various places. In this regard the active role was played by SaralaDevi Chaudhurani. A small art exhibition took place at Mazilpur in 24 Parganas. Two women were the main sponsors of this exhibition, Basantabla Home and GirindramohiniDasi. They

assembled different items of handicrafts from various places to make this exhibition successful.³ (Bengal, Jogeshchandra, 1361 : 10). Sushila Sundari Devi (daughter of Dinanath Sen) organized meeting and preached the idea of Swadeshi in Dhaka. Muktakeshi Devi (sister-in-law of Bijaykrishna Goswami) also joined in swadeshi movement. Women of Outshahi village were influenced to work for the country by Priyabala Gupta, Girija Gupta and Surama Sen. Another storm center of East Bengal was Barishal, women were present in numerous meetings and processions. Manorama Basu organized Swadeshi campaigns in Barishal. At a assembly of Midnapore district Hemangini Das delivered a touchy speech where many people broke into tears. VandeMataram patrika (24th Aug 1907) reported this ardently. Thus common women of Bengal also organized meetings to discuss means for helping present Swadeshi movement, conducted huge processions to support boycott and Swadeshi.

During anti-partition movement of Bengal, women took various way of protest. Women of Kalaskathi village of Barishal, promised to wear saffron garments till the partitioning of Bengal is terminated. SnehalataChaudhurani (1886) who later became the leader of women in Khulna, gathered women and inspired them by delivering patriotic speeches during the movement, which touched the hearts of every women. She also encouraged the women to stop wearing foreign-made bangles and to use country made bangles instead. In Khulna, at the assembly of KaliprasannaKavyaVisharad, many women showed their support in boycott by breaking their glass bangles as symbol of foreign goods. In April, 1906 at least 200 women joined in Bengal Provincial Congress.⁴ (SanjivaniPatrika, 19th Apr, 1906).

However, hardly any record is observed regarding the participation of contemporary Muslim women in the movement.

Actually at that time 'modern women' were not found amongst the Muslim women unlike the Hindu women. Yet, amidst such oddities, came up powerful gifted author Kherunnisa. We get to know about her political awareness regarding Swadeshi also. The sufferings of Indians under the economic oppression of British are evoked in the writings of kherunnisa. Through her patriotic writings, she contributed much to rouse the patriotic feelings amongst the Bengali women. In her article Swadeshanurag she urged the Muslim women in inflammatory language to join Swadeshi. She was not only a gifted author, but a celebrated social worker for the uplift of the women in Bengal. She had chosen the rural sector for her social works. Her working place Siraajganj was a strong support base of congress movement – it helped to stimulate her patriotism. During that time when bulk of the Muslim gave their support to the Bengal partition, participation of Muslim women in the movement was hardly

possible, but with strong determination and advanced attitudes, Kherunnisa had made it possible.

Although political awareness increased among women in Swadeshi movement, the orthodox patriarchal mentality was like a thorn-bed for the women to come into the path of political activity. At this time home was thought to be the 'rightful arena for activities' for the women ⁵ (Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar, 2006:388). Celebration of Hindu mythical women like Sita, Savitri, Dayamanti were established as ideals to attack Western materialistic white-skinned women. By highlighting cultural concept of motherhood and by drawing a line of limit between the home and outer world, personal life and mass were tried to be confined them exclusively to their reproductive role and thus deprived them of access to education and occupation. Women were participated in the Swadeshi movement within this accepted gender ideology that took away from women their active participation in politics. Valorization of 'Democracy' for Indian women did not stop them to participate in Swadeshi movement. They transcended their limitation and moved towards a future of brighter prospect of independent thought, political awareness, self-dependence.

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