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Role of Latika Ghosh and Mahila Rashtriya Sangha (MRS) in the Freedom Movement of India: A Study

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Abstract

Generally, it is presumed that the pages of history books dealing with the freedom movement of India are filled with the heroics of men. But it is not so. Indian women have significantly contributed in the freedom struggle against the British yoke and never lagged behind their male counterparts. Though their total numbers were small, their involvement was extremely important. Women's participation called into question the British right to rule, legitimized the nationalist movement of India and won for women activist the approval of Indian men. Women's early contribution to the Indian freedom struggle started in the last quarter of the 19th century with their involvement in the Indian National Congress, which remained continued till India achieved independence. As far as Bengal was concerned, it produced a series of women freedom fighters, who sacrificed their lives for the sake of their motherland. Latika Ghosh and Mahila Rashtriya Sangha (MRS), an association established by her played an important role to mobilize women for political work in Bengal.

Key-words – Freedom, Movement, Boycott, Protest, Swaraj.

Introduction: The history of freedom movement in India is full with the saga of sacrifices made not only by its men-folk but by its women-folk also. The contributions made by the women during the freedom struggle have earned them a great place in the pages of history. The participation of women against the British regime actively started from the Revolt of 1857, wherein, Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi wielded swords against the British armies. Women's contribution to the Indian freedom movement found a new pace in the late 19th century with their active involvement and participation in the Indian National Congress. In 1890, Swarna Kumari Ghosal, a noted woman novelist and Kadambani Ganguly, the first woman graduate of the British period attended the annual general meetings of the Indian National Congress as delegates. In 1905, after the partition of Bengal by the British, women joined men in protesting this division by boycotting foreign goods and buying only

swadeshi goods, that is, goods produced in the province of Bengal. A general hartal was announced in Bengal on October 16, 1905 and people fasted and went bare footed to take bath in the Ganga¹. There, Swaraj, Swadeshi and National Education became the slogans of the nationalist². Meetings were organized by the women in the streets and spinning wheels were introduced within the zenana³.

The entry of Mohandas Karamchanda Gandhi (1869-1948) into the Indian politics added a new dimension to the freedom struggle. It was only with the advent of Gandhi that we see a major rupture in this story of women's involvement. It was in South Africa that he had realized the power of self-less sacrifice that women could offer and decided to harness it in the service of the nation⁴. He returned to India in 1915 as the hero of the South African struggle. With his experience of Republic of South Africa behind him, he was tuned in to the potentialities of girls as passive resisters⁵. Soon, he familiarized with the Bombay society and met women belonging to women's social reform organizations. He was invited to discuss with one of these organizations, which was composed of middle-class women, about the poverty of the masses. He told his audience India needed women leaders who were "pure, firm and self-controlled" like the ancient heroines: Sita, Damayanti, and Draupadi. In 1920, the non-cooperation movement began with members of the reformed councils withdrawing from these councils. The next step was to boycott the law courts and schools. Congress accepted this program at a special session held on August 20, 1920. It was a victory for Mohandas K. Gandhi and promised a more active role for women than that offered by the Swadeshi row. Congress declared April 6-13, 1921 Satyagraha week, and women interested in politics held meetings to show their support. At one of the several meetings which Sarojini Naidu addressed, women decided to form their own political organization, named, Rashtriya Stree Sangha (RSS) in Bombay to join the District Congress Committee⁶.

Background: The civil disobedience launched by Gandhi in 1930 brought large numbers of women into public life. Women's participation in the civil disobedience movement of 1930-192 differed qualitatively and quantitatively from the early 1920s and won them a place in history. A note-worthy feature of this movement was the participation of teenagers and women: of the 29054 prisoners on 15 Nov. 1930, no less than 2050 were below 17, while 359 were women. Civil disobedience marked in fact a major step forward in the emancipation of Indian women- a point admitted by a U.P. police official in a note full of chauvinist over tunes: "The Indian woman is struggling for domestic and national liberty at the same time and like a woman, she is utterly unreasonable and illogical in her demands and in her methods, but like a woman, she has enormous influence over the stronger sex.....many loyal officials including police officers havesuffered more taunts and abuse from their female relatives than from any other source"⁷.

Women of Bengal came forward at this time with radical activities. Calcutta women made and sold salt, picketed cloth and liquor shops, preached the value of khaddar, and took processions into the streets. The capital city was also the heart of revolutionary struggle and women's colleges became centers for recruiting new members. Bengali nationalism had

always valorized violence and this ethos profoundly influenced the participation of Bengali women in the freedom struggle. An annual report of the Police administration stated that, “Organized attempts, seldom successful, were made to hoist the Congress flag on the government buildings in the mofussil. An increasing share of the work was taken up by the women, both because, it was becoming more difficult to find male recruits and because the presence of women-folk was calculated to prove an embarrassment to the police”⁸.

Formation and objectives: The Mahila Rashtriya Sangha (MRS), begun in 1928, was the first formal organization to mobilize women for political work. Latika Ghosh, an Oxford-educated teacher, founded this organization in 1928 at Chittagong, Bengal Presidency. The MRS had goals similar to the RSS (Rashtriya Stree Sangha) in Bombay; they wanted to achieve swaraj and improve women’s status. MRS leaders argued that these goals were inseparable: until women’s lives improved, the nation could never be free; and until the nation was free, women’s condition would not improve. The first step to swaraj was the education of women to their double oppression as colonial subjects and inferior sex⁹.

Latika Ghosh was born in Purulia in 1902. She studied at Loreto House of Calcutta. After that she went to England and obtained the B.Litt. Research degree from Oxford University. She returned to India in 1926. On the request of Bidhanchandra Ray, Latika Ghosh joined the Chittaranjan Seva Sadan, which provided the junior nursing training to the widows and other women separated from their husbands¹⁰. Here, she also created political awareness among these trainees. In 1928, the Congress had called a meeting at Wellington Square to boycott the Simon Commission. Various students of Latika Ghosh assembled in the meeting along with their male counterparts. Latika Ghosh, a niece of Aurobindo Ghosh¹¹, had impressed Subhas Chandra Bose with her marshalling of the women’s protest against the Simon Commission, following which the latter asked her to organize the MRS in 1928¹². The name, Mahila Rashtriya Sangha (MRS) translates as the Women’s Political Association¹³. Latika, a supporter of Gandhi’s satyagraha, recruited and led around 300 women from colleges and academic departments as part of the protest by the Bengal Volunteers at the 1928 session of the Indian National Congress¹⁴. She balked at Subhas’s command that all involved in this event should wear military uniform, deciding instead that the women would wear red-bordered dark green saris and white blouses. This and other decisions, such as ensuring that the women did not stay in the protesters’ camp overnight, together with a threat to withdraw their aid in matters such as selling tickets and supplying tea, ensured that she overcame the opposition of Sarat Bose, who had been concerned that the presence of women might offend conservative supporters of the Congress¹⁵.

Latika was expert at mobilizing people and staging spectacles that would fire their imaginations and inspire them to fight for the cause. She vetoed the idea of having, Basanti Devi, a veteran of the non-cooperation movement, as president of the MRS, preferring Subhas Bose’s mother, Prabhavati as a figurehead as she would appeal to ordinary housewives and lend prestige to the organization as the mother of Bengal’s best known activist. Latika herself took the role of secretary. The MRS, which was founded in Chittagong, aimed to improve the status of women and achieve the swaraj (self-

governance). Education of women was a key to this and the MRS involved ten existing local educational groups from the outset. The MRS leaders argued the nation could never be free unless women's lives improved and improving women's lives depended on freedom from foreign domination.

MRS espoused a radical ideology but followed a mobilization strategy that constructed women as innately religious. Latika Ghosh wrote articles calling on women to wake up and take a good look at their country. India had been rich, now it was dominated by a foreign country, infamous for its poverty, and led by weaklings. "Recall the tales of our grandmothers," she instructed her readers, and asked them to think back to the battles between the *devis* (goddesses) and *asuras* (demons). They should remember that just as the *devis* were losing, the fearsome goddess, Durga appeared as *shakti* (divine energy) and the *asuras* were defeated. Then there were the examples set by Rajput queens who first sent their husbands and sons into battle and then prepared for their own death. Latika told her readers they were the *shaktis* of the nation and she issued this directive: "Every one of you must be like a spark which will burn down all selfishness, all petty dreams-purified by fire, only the bright, golden love of the Motherland will remain".

In 1928, Subhas Bose decided to have uniformed women volunteers march with men in the procession to inaugurate the annual Congress meetings in Calcutta. He made Latika Ghosh a colonel and charged her with recruiting her own company for the parade. Latika enlisted 300 women: students from Bethune College and Victoria Institution, two of the most important institutions of higher education for women, and teachers employed by Calcutta Corporation. Their uniforms consisted of dark green saris with red borders worn over white blouses- the colours of the congress flag. A number of sensitive issues arose during the training period: Would women march with men? Should the young women wear trousers? Would they stay in camp at night? Colonel Latika argued for the trappings of modesty, saris instead of trousers and no females in camp at night, but she stood her ground on the issue of women marching in the regular procession. She confessed she made a poor colonel, unable to stay in step or salute properly, but she wanted her female volunteers to appear as the equals of men in the struggle for freedom ¹⁶.

Conclusion: The list of great women, whose names have been written in golden letters in the pages of history for their dedication and undying devotion to the cause of mother India, is a long one. When most of the male freedom fighters were in prison, the women came forward and took charge of the struggle. The nationalist discourse of the 19th and 20th centuries has thus given a new shape to the traditional role of Indian women as mothers and wives in a modernized form with a patriotic flavor. Latika Ghosh was, in this regard, a good example. She not only played an important role in the nationalist movement but also tried to establish a separate identity of women community.

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