

Contributions of Foreign Women to Freedom Struggle in India

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Abstract:

Some women are born great, some achieve greatness, and greatness is thrust upon some. The women included in this research paper, achieved greatness by their qualities of mind and heart, their capacity for love, sincerity, purity, sacrifice, devotion to God, determination and courage. The profiles of these great women are presented here with a view to motivating the young women of our nation to discover their glorious heritage and fortify themselves to face the challenges of modern times. The list of foreign women's contribution in India is an endless and ever growing one.

When the history of India's fight for independence comes to be written the sacrifice made by the women will occupy the first and the foremost place. Women's participation in India's freedom struggle. Foreign women also played a significant role for the Indian freedom struggle. This research paper aims to throw light on the contributions of foreign women in freedom struggle.

Key words: Contribution, Leadership, Dedicated, Custom, Participated and Heartedly.

Contributions of Foreign Women

Besides the hundreds and thousands of Indian women who dedicated their lives for the cause of their motherland, there were a number of noble and courageous women who contributed much for the freedom struggle movement in India. They were following:

1. Dr. Annie Besant (1847-1933)
2. Sister Nivedita (1867-1911)
3. Mira Behn (1892-1982) and Sarala Behn

Dr. Annie Besant (1847-1933)

An Irish lady by birth and an adopted and dedicated daughter of Mother India. She was born 1847 and came to India in 1893 and rest of her life she served the country for political fields. Annie Besant admired all the Hindu customs whole heartedly, but tried to remove the evils in them. She was one of the greatest admirer of Hindu system of marriage.

In 1904, she and her followers established the 'Madras Hindu Association' through which she wished to promote education to girls and widows. She established the Central Hindu College at Benares, which later formed the nucleus of the Benares Hindu University founded a weekly newspaper; commonwealth owned New India (formerly Madras Standard) which she used to propagate the Home Rule Movement and started the Women's Indian Association. ¹

Annie Besant joined the Theosophical Society in May 1889 and became Madame Blavatsky's devoted pupil and helper. She became a prominent worker in the Society and after the death of Col. Olcott in 1907 ², was elected president of the Society, which position she held till her death on 21st September 1933.

Annie Besant also participated in freedom struggle. In 1914, she had joined the Indian National Congress. "She was the first woman president of the Indian National Congress and gave a powerful lead to Women's movement in India.

The idea of the Home Rule League was first discussed by her. She launched the Home Rule League in 1916 ³. By then she had tried and achieved unification of the Congress and the Muslim League: Moderates and Extremists in 1916. She with the radical Congress leader Bala Gangadhar Tilak presented a memorial to Montague on December 18, 1917, which gave equal rights to women in the matters of political franchise. She had done ample work to formulate favourable opinion about the Indian question in outside world. The August Declaration of 1917 is attributed to her efforts.

She fittingly became the President of Indian National Congress in 1917.⁴ Gokhale considered her a true daughter of Mother India. Subhas Chandra Bose considered her a doughty fighter for Indian freedom. "Had it not been for her and her enthusiasm one could not have seen Mr. Gandhi leading the cause of Indian freedom today. It was Mrs. Besant who laid the foundation of modern India. Dr. Besant was a combination of Parvathi, Lakshmi and Saraswati."⁵

Mrs. Margaret Cousins

Stri Dharma, journal of the Women's Indian Association, was edited for many years by Margaret Cousins. A tireless organiser, she succeeded in establishing more than forty branches of the Association, sentenced to a year's imprisonment in 1932 during the Civil Disobedience Movement for protesting against rule by ordinance, she used to sing with other prisoners the song "God Save Our Motherland", composed by Annie Besant as a patriotic substitute for "God Save the King".

Sister Nivedita (1867-1911)

Sister Nivedita was one among the host of foreign women who were attracted towards Swami Vivekananda and Hindu Philosophy. She arrived in India in January 1898, in search of truth. She was impressed by the ideals of womanhood in India." She once remarked that India was the land of great women. She, however, felt that Indian women needed to cultivate among themselves a wider and broader concept of the nation; so that they could participate along with men in building a free and strong nation.

She spoke and wrote against the British Policy in India. She attacked Lord Curzon for the Universities Act of 1904 and the Partition of Bengal in 1905.⁶ She held the British responsible for disastrous state of Indian economy, she attended the Benares Congress in 1905 and supported Swadeshi Movement. She helped Nationalist groups like the Dawn Society and the Anusilan Samiti. She was a member of the Central Council of Action formed by Aurobindo Ghosh and took up the editorship of the Karma Yogin when he left for Pondicherry.

Sister Nivedita went to court in 1907 to appear as a surety for Bhupendranath Dutta, youngest brother of Swami Vivekananda. He was arrested for sedition as editor of Yugantar and subsequently convicted to one year rigorous imprisonment. She died in 1911. On memorial meeting Rash Behary Ghose said, 'If dry bones beginning to stir it is because Sister Nivedita breathed the breath of life into them.'⁷

Mira Behn (1892-1982)

Mira Behn (Madelene Slade) and Sarala Behn (Catherine Mary Heilman) popularly known as Mahatma Gandhi's two English daughters and also made significant contribution to the cause of freedom. Mira Behn was an English woman and her original name was Madelene Slade. It was Gandhiji who gave her the name Mira, for her spirit of devotion. She was an incarnation of devotion - Bhakthi. She was a Hindu at heart. She led a simple life. She wore coarse khadi, and acquired proficiency in carding and spinning, She often acted as a bridge between him and the British bureaucracy. She was known as "the Indian Lady".

She was deeply impressed in Gandhiji's teachings and had a strong urge to be his follower. Gandhiji's arrest in the course of Salt Satyagraha, she turned several other provinces for promoting spinning and khadi. She went with Gandhiji to London. When he went there for the Second Round Table Conference (1931) and became a link between Gandhiji and the English people.⁸

Mira Behn collected information about the Government's autocracy from all over the country and sent reports to foreign countries such as England, France, Germany, America and Switzerland. She was imprisoned for three months. When she came out of jail, a notice was served prohibiting her from entering Bombay. She defied the order and was again arrested and imprisoned for one year. She accompanied Gandhiji in the Orissa Harijan tour and later went on a lecture tour to England and America. She met Hallifax, Hoare, Smuts and Churchill and tried to explain Gandhi's point of view to them. She also accompanied Bapu on some of his other tours also. She took keen interest in the formation of Sevagram Ashram and organised cleanliness compaigns in the surrounding villages and taught villagers spinning and carding.

Mira Behn lived in India during a most eventful period in which she saw in 1927 the Simon Commission facing black flags everywhere, the resolve of the people for complete independence in 1929, the Dandi march and the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1930-31 and the Gandhi-Irwin Pact in 1931⁹ she accompanied Gandhi and others to the Round Table Conference in London in the Autumn of 1931: prepared the people of Orissa to resist Japanese invasion non-violently in the beginning of 1942, and was arrested and kept in detention with Gandhi in the Aga Khan Palace, Pune; in 1942 where she saw Madhev Desai and Kasturba Gandhi breathing their last. She was a witness to the Simla Conference and the Cabinet Mission, the Interim Government and the Constituent Assembly, the partition of India followed by holocaust and the assassination of Mahatma Gandhiji.

As an inmate of Gandhi Ashram she traveled far and wide for the propagation of Khadi. She wrote over a hundred articles in Young India. Without the least intention of taking part in the freedom movements, she courted imprisonment a couple times in 1932-33, and was kept first in Arthur Road Jail and later in Sabarmati Jail. In 1942, when she was in the Aga Khan Palace she expressed a desire to Gandhi that after her release from detention she would start some activities of her own at a suitable place in northern India.

Some other forms womens who participated in freedom struggle of India like Mrs. Margaret Cousin and The Mother etc.

Conclusion

History of freedom struggle in India is incomplete without mentioning the contributions of foreign women. This research paper is an attempt to bring out the role of foreign women in India and to present a kaleidoscopic perspective of their dreams and visions, hopes and aspirations. This paper presents a fascinating picture of foreign women who attained greatness in various spheres of life and culture, political and aesthetic, moral and spiritual.

References:

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- 6 Bangal partition in 1905.
- 7 Suresh Basak, Glimpses of the Past Essays on Sister Nivedita and Her Contemporaries , K. P. Bagchi Co., Kolkatta, 1985.
- 8 Participation in 1931 Second Round Table Conference in London.
- 9 Gandhi-Irwin pact- 1931.