

## Women in the Frontline: Radical Protest in Post Swadeshi Days

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**Abstract:** *Women proved their moral strength to the Swadeshi movement. After the Swadeshi phase, many women came up to the armed revolutionary movement. They joined the Gandhian movement, the armed revolutionary movement, later on, the Communist movement. From the 1920s onwards middle-class Bengali women joined the radical protest movement. They not only faced opposition within the family but society was also skeptical about their character. Mostly they were called 'meyechele'. It shows their degraded position in society. Swadeshi movement marked the formation of women organizations. They became a strong part of the national movement. It was Gandhiji who understood the strength of the women's power. The revolutionaries realized the importance of women's participation much later.*

**Keywords:** Swadeshi, women, radical, protest, Gandhiji, revolutionaries

Women's emergence in the public sphere in the Swadeshi movement and beyond is of concern in this article. The writing revolves around the participation of Bengali Hindu Women in the national movement specially armed revolutionary movement <sup>1</sup> and the author restricts the writing between the Swadeshi movement to Gandhian Non-cooperation movement. The term "radical" is used to designate individuals, parties, movements that wish to alter drastically any existing social system. Geraldine Forbes and Barbara Southard have written on the interconnections between Colonial Politics and the women's movement in Bengal. Bharati Roy has mentioned the growing 'feminist consciousness' of middle-class Hindu Women during the time of the Swadeshi Movement in Bengal till the third decade of twentieth century <sup>2</sup>. The exploration of how the Gandhian movement, the armed revolutionary movement, the communist movement politicized the different section of the women in Bengal in different ways and how much politicization fashioned the subjective of women and inflated the discourse on gender roles at home and in the public domain are the subjects needs to be researched. Tanika Sarkar <sup>3</sup> in her early works engaged with these concerns.

A handful of upper-caste Hindu women were sent to school braving immense hostility and social ostracism in mid-nineteenth-century Bengal. They started emerging as social actors in the public sphere around the 1920s.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, very few women wrote about their deplorable condition describing their daily chores. Like RasaSundari Devi, a few women writers identified some of the social evils like Sati, early marriage, female infanticide, polygamy, women education, purdah system.

The present article focuses on women's participation and their heroic role in the political movement from the Swadeshi period till the Non-Cooperation movement. The women were the victims of colonial policy or nationalist betrayal <sup>4</sup>. The nationalist leaders were not eager to discuss the women's question as an issue of political negotiation with the colonial state as identified by Partha Chatterjee in his book *Empire and Nation* <sup>5</sup>. Men were not willing to give the same status to

women. In this article, the writer tries to move away from the binary of 'agency' versus 'victimhood' and problematize it as both a history of betrayal and a history of complicity.

Men's world has been regarded as the world of reason and intellect in opposition to women's world of feelings. Between 1880-1920 upper-class Bengali women began to read and write before they were editing and publishing their writing in Journals like *Bharati*, *Indian Ladies magazine*.<sup>6</sup> Women's reading and writing have conventionally been associated with fiction especially novels, supposedly reflecting women's anti-intellectual predilections whereas non-fiction genres have been the territory of men. Jyotirmoyee Devi in her 'fierce piece of prose' questioned some of the social structures against women. Her critics refused to believe that the essay was written by women. 'This is a man writing in the guise of a woman.' They charged 'women cannot write like this'<sup>7</sup>. Radha Rani Devi also published an 'extremely powerful poem. Radha Rani wrote in a 'colloquial female tongue' in the name of Aparajita Devi. Aparajita's poem was hailed fame by male critics and was a spoof of what 'men think of women's writing'<sup>8</sup>. These writings ushered significant resistance to intellectual segregation between men and women. It also questioned the conventional categorization of non-fictional writing based on women's 'private' experiences as 'social' and tried to expand to the realm of the 'political'.

The present article also tries to understand how 'politics constructs gender and gender constructs politics'. From the 1920s onwards the politics of Bengal showed there was a 'period of transition for women as they emerged from the confines of domesticity'<sup>9</sup>. From the 1920s onwards Bengal saw a section of middle-class Bengali women publicly demanding suffrage, the abolition of child marriage, and change in the personal law of different communities that discriminated against women. A larger section of women participated in the Gandhian Non-Cooperation movement and a smaller section joined the armed revolutionary movement. The most prestigious literary journal of Bengal *Prabasi* (1901) raised the 'women question' extensively. Leading Hindu women wrote regularly here on some 'social' issues of that time. Middle-class women's work was considered to be primarily around their home and the family. Some of the women writers and readers of *Prabasi* urged to combine philanthropy with domesticity and chose the 'social' over 'political' issues at a time when the porous border between the social and political public sphere was being threatened by the nature of anti-imperialist politics in the country.

A liberal reformist Journal like *Prabasi* went about setting norms for women's participation in public life so that such participation did not make them compromise their 'femininity' and 'modesty' in any way. This resulted in depoliticizing women and demarcating<sup>10</sup> their role as improvers for a lot of women and society in general. The duty of editors of these journals was to move away from women from 'political' work and supporting their participation in the 'social' issues. These journals did not set any norms for women's participation in public life. Muslim middle-class women also emerged from their private life. It had an enlightened attitude towards religion and had taken up the task of 'raising' Muslim middle-class women from their degraded positions by emphasizing their need to lift the veil. These journals created a great impact on the minds of educated middle-class women. These journals believed that men and women had different roles to play in society. Women's specializations were 'feminine' and women were expected to think and write only on selected social issues.

1920 onwards there was a pool of women brigades who joined armed revolutionary groups in Bengal. Their history is the history of the concurrent formation of women's political fronts and the growth of the second phase of the women's movement in Bengal from 1920 onwards. Women's writing also straddled both the worlds of 'social' and 'political' as opposed to the division of domain practiced in *Prabasi*. *Jayashri* was never in favour of a separate women's movement de-linked from the anti-colonial struggle. Its editor Leela Roy, sought to enable women's participation in the public domain primarily for the cause of India's struggle for freedom. Roy's choice, once made on behalf of the new political constituency of educated Bengali women, later privileged a particular political party, even if that meant marginalizing women's voices.

From 1920 onwards there was an increase in the perseverance of women in the anti-imperialist struggle. But when women began to speak their minds particularly in the journals, their wings were clipped and a strict vigilance was enforced on their editorship. Women's writings showed that the privileging of certain identities at specific historical moments by both men and women were instrumental in shaping discoveries and determining the kind of voice given to women in distinctive spaces with different ideological underpinning<sup>11</sup>. The women started believing that it is the 'misleading familiarity' of history 'which can break open the daily naturalism of what surrounds us'.<sup>12</sup> This history of writing hopes to confront the politics of emitting histories and help understand the heterogeneity of Bengali middle-class women's identities, the range of their concerns beyond reform, revival, colonialization, the diversity of their struggle against the empire, their disparate roles in the new nation-state, as well as their fluctuating positions vis-à-vis the women's movement.

The revolutionary ideas were not only spread in Bengal but broadened their horizon by spreading in western countries like Britain, America, Canada, France, etc. Bengal revolutionary Surya Sen and his compatriots Ananta Singh, Ganesh Ghosh, Lokanath Ball, Preetilata Waddedar looked up to Irish freedom fighter Dan Breen<sup>13</sup> as their ideals.

It is the inner strength of women that came up in the armed revolutionary movement, a galaxy of young girls readily sacrificed their lives for the freedom movement and an innumerable number of women provided support to freedom fighters, looked after their families in absence of their fathers, husbands and sons. Participation in the national movement was not limited to the elite class. They did not provide the organizational base and ideas to the common women but once aroused they became a strong force in the national movement<sup>14</sup>.

Swadeshi movements marked the formation of women organizations. These organizations became the medium of expression of women's opinions. They were a training ground for the women, who could later take up leadership on the social and political front. Geraldine Forbes had pointed out that these institutions played an important role in the formation of Nation<sup>15</sup>. The first women's organization was founded by a Man. Some important organizations of the period are Mahila Shilpa Samiti (1906-08), Bharat Shree Mahamandal, the Hindu Ladies, Social and Literary cell, etc. The Bharat Mahila Parisad organized some educational programs in which notable women like Ramabai, Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu and others gave their speeches. Local Muslim women's organization was found in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by upper-class Muslim women. The associations were urban and were organized by upper-class elite women. The main aim of these organizations was to serve all sections

of women. Gradually its' members were drawn to the nationalist movement by nationalist leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru.

In the Swadeshi movement, the Bengali men sought the help of women to strengthen it. The Nationalists gave religious colour to the movement by comparing them with 'Shakti'. It is the hidden strength in every woman which comes in front of a period of crisis. This touched the heart of the Bengali Hindu women who could effortlessly relate themselves as a part of 'Shakti'. Women took part in 'Aradhana' (No-cooking Day), 'Raksha Bandhan' with great valour as a form of protest. Between 1905-08, a huge number of women took part in the Swadeshi movement. On 24<sup>th</sup> August 1905, five hundred women were present for the foundation of federation Hall, Calcutta. On the same day, Ramendra Sundar Trivedi was invited to an all-women meeting held at Kandi, Murshidabad where he recited 'Bangalaxmi Bratakatha'. Through these activities, the Swadeshi message spread all over the villages, especially in the women's minds. Women were immensely motivated by these messages. Women came out with a new role. They broke the shackle of bondage and took a more promising role. They broke all the stereotypes of women's so-called roles like mothers, daughters, wives, sisters and came out much more aggressively. Nirod Choudhuri<sup>16</sup> recollected that his mother broke all the foreign utensils for cooking. Swarna Kumar Debi, Kumudini Mitra, Banalata Debi actively propagated the use of Swadeshi goods. Daughter of Krishna Kumar Mitra, Kumudini formed a women revolutionary group for helping educated Brahmin women. Kumudini was the only women representative from India for the International Women's Suffrage Alliance held in Budapest. She also presented a paper over there on women's activities in India<sup>17</sup>. Swarnakumari Debi formed the Sakhi Samiti (women's Friendly Samiti, 1886) one of the first voluntary associations in Bengal. Her daughter Sarala Debi Choudhurani played an important role. She established a physical training centre at her father's residence (Ballygunge Circular Road) in 1902<sup>18</sup>. She also started Birastami Brata in 1904. This Birastami Brata was dedicated to the memory of martyrs of the soil. It was all about the spread of self-consciousness and self-dependence. She was keen to use Swadeshi goods and for that, she established 'Lakshmi Bhandar'. It was a huge success. She started 'Pratapaditya Brata' in the memory of Maharaja Pratapaditya of Jessore. She wrote many songs like 'satagan', 'Geetitringshati'<sup>19</sup>. Her relation with Suhrid Samiti was deep<sup>20</sup>. She became the president of Suhrid Samiti, Mymensingh in 1905. She advocated women's rights and self-dependence in 1910 at Allahabad in the Annual conference of Congress. In the first phase of the revolutionary movement, we have seen women participating in making bombs like Radharani Roy, wife of Motilal Roy, Netrakshi Ghosh, niece of Sagarkali Ghosh. Their houses became the centres for making bombs. They were experts in mixing and powdering chemicals for manufacturing crude explosives. Between 1906-08, few women came forward for making bombs. Some women indirectly helped the revolutionaries to fight against colonial rule. In 1922, Ambika Debi of Faridpur and 1923, Snehalata Basu of Dhaka helped financially the revolutionaries. Many women donated their ornaments to the revolutionaries, not only that they also collected cash, ornaments from the other members of their families. Many aged women also rendered their financial help to the revolutionaries. In many ways, women strengthened the revolutionary organizations. The money was spent for purchasing arms and annulations, fees of the lawyers (who fought for the arrested revolutionaries), expenses of fugitives, etc. Between 1929 – 34, Sushila Mitra of Noakhali, Charubala Kanjilal, Sushma Dasgupta of Barisal, Surama Majumdar of Mymensingh, Nagendrapala Debi of Dhaka came forward to help the revolutionaries. Between 1929 – 33 women were the secret message bearers, namely Mira Dasgupta, Uma Sen (a member of Bengal volunteer), Arti Rakshit of Chittagong Armoury Force, Pramila Das,

Pratibha Bhadra, Parul Mukherjee, Nirmala and Nirupama Kahali of Anushilan Samiti, Helena Gan of Shree Sangha, Kalyani Das of Yugantar. Maya Dutt Choudhuri donated worth one thousand rupees ornament to the revolutionaries. Nagendra Bala Debi mortgaged her ornaments and donated two hundred rupees to the revolutionaries. Many women kept arms and ammunition with them as they were less suspicious in the eyes of the police. Between 1922 – 23 women volunteered their homes as secret centres for keeping arms and ammunition. Between 1906 – 16 Labanya Prabha Dutt, Soudamini Debi, Brahmamsoyee Sen, Chinmaya Sen, Bindubasini Som, Sarojini Debi, Priyabala Dasgupta, Mrinalini Dasgupta of Barisal were the few who kept arms with them.

The political participation of women in the Swadeshi Movement was an extension of their domestic work. Tanika Sarkar <sup>21</sup> pointed out that during the Non-Cooperation movement women in different parts of India joined processions, propagated the use of Khadi and charka, some of them left the Government jobs and joined hands with the agitators, like Renuka Roy, Vijaylaxmi Pandit, etc. Some women left Government schools, colleges and joined the movement. Basanti Debi, wife of C.R. Das asked women to boycott foreign goods. In Bengal, women joined in large numbers. Women of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri took the idea of spinning wheels. Helen Lepcha joined the Ahmedabad Session of Indian National congress <sup>22</sup>. In the salt Satyagraha, Sarojini Naidu joined with a group of women following Gandhi. Women in large numbers joined her where Gandhi had given her the leadership. Not only women supported Salt Satyagraha, they offered their houses as the shelter of the Congress workers.

Besides the nationalist movements led by Gandhiji, some women did not believe in the path of non-violence. They were active in Bengal Dhaka, Comilla, Chittagong. Kalpana Dutt, Preetilata Waddedar were the members of the Chittagong Armoury Force. Preetilata committed suicide. Shanti Ghosh, Suniti Choudhuri, the young girls from Comilla shot the District Magistrate of Comilla, Stephens dead on 14<sup>th</sup> December 1931, they were sentenced to life imprisonment. Bina Das tried to shoot Governor Jackson on 6<sup>th</sup> February 1932 at the Senate Hall on the convocation Day of Calcutta University. She failed and was arrested. There were many others whose life needs to be reconstructed. In nationalist disclosure, there is a tendency of omitting the involvement of women from the non-elite background. The women with their long secluded life came out in large numbers. Their political participation came out with their collective aspirations along with their nationalistic demand.

Women shouldered critical responsibilities in India's struggle for freedom. They held public meetings, organized picketing of shops, prevented selling of foreign alcohol and article, sold Khadi and actively participated in the national movement. They faced the baton of police and went behind the bars. People from all over the country supported the national movements. Khadi and boycott of foreign goods were the weapons in the Indian Freedom Struggle in 1905 after the partition of Bengal.

The performance of Nanibala Debi, a Brahmin child widow, daughter of Surya Kanta Banerjee of Bally, Howrah was noteworthy. While pretending to be a wife of condemned activist, Ramachandra Majumdar of Jugantar, lodged at Presidency Jail, she gathered information successfully about Mouser Pistols from him at Presidency jail. She gave shelter to fugitives in Chandannagar. As a result, she had to become an absconder but she was arrested later at Peshawar and was convicted as the first and only women State Prisoner under regulation III of 1818 <sup>23</sup> (1917).

The credit for becoming the first women rebel who was sentenced to two year's rigorous imprisonment under the Arms Act (1917) goes to Dukaribala Debi, wife of Phanibhusan Chakraborty of Jhaupara, Birbhum. Despite being the mother of two infants, she became involved in Atmannati Samiti's Rodda Operation owing to which she was convicted <sup>24</sup>.

Durgamani Paine, mother of Nishikanta Paine of Chabipur, Barisal. Sheltered Anushilan Samiti's 'absconder' at Dhaka without her son's knowledge. She was interrogated by the police and fled to her native place where she died as a social outcast <sup>25</sup>.

In the nineteenth century the worship of Durga, Kali was a common feature. It was believed that Goddess Kali protected from all evils and was believed that Bengal was the epitome of the mother cult.

It has been argued that the English educated professional class did not want women to enter into public life and demanding the same or equal status with men. The main aim was to keep them confined in traditional roles of mothers, wives who would lend their menfolk social support in the colonial structure. In the twentieth century, a good number of educated women began to question these social norms.

Western women like Margaret Cousins, Annie Besant inspired Indian women to build organizational networks such as the All India women's Conference in 1927. Many top-ranking women's journals like *Bangalaxmi*, *Jayashree* carried photographs, biographs of western women being successful in public life, which offered a new role model to Bengali women. The call of resurgence came from the west. It created growing awareness among Indian women. Western influence penetrated the minds of Indian women.

Gandhi was not a radical thinker as far as women's liberation is concerned. But he understood the usefulness of involving women in a movement, much before the revolutionaries did. He was against the women's gainful employment, preferred to be moral other than an economic force. His call to women who could 'out-distance' men by 'many a miles' in his non-violent struggle removed the stigma of their inferiority and imparted to them new confidence. He also advocated Social Justice for women. Gandhian ideology retained the conventional notion of 'feminine' qualities, arguing women's participation in the freedom movement was the extension of their traditional role <sup>26</sup>. The conversion of the male leaders of the struggle against the Raj into Deshpuja (worship of the motherland) brought the movement within women's domain, religion being a culturally decreed female concern. Woman's started coming out of the cocoon of the home to take part in the extra-familial activities.

The new development among young women, especially students was their incarnation towards politics. This was feasible by the freedom struggle. Bina Das, Kalpana Dutt opted for armed conflict <sup>27</sup>. If we take the example of Kamala Dasgupta, we can realize Dasgupta at first was impressed by the ideology of Gandhiji. She even visited Sabarmati Ashram. But later on, she joined the armed movement. The student members of Dipali Sangha of Dacca founded by Lila Nag (Roy) prompted the same cause. They conducted debates, seminars on issues, such as women's rights, social rehabilitation of raped women and worked for promoting primary education <sup>28</sup>. There were other

politically active student bodies like Chatri Bhavan which housed Biplabi women and acted as a linkage between students and biplanes, the all India Students Federation, etc. The *Mahila Rashtriya Sangha* (Women's political Association 1927), formed by Latika Ghosh provided effective student support. A large number of college students in her 'female volunteer corps' organized youth forums and women's conference<sup>29</sup>. A result of the women's growing awareness of their individualities was their desire to seek fulfillment in the public terrain. Apart from participating in the freedom movement which brought them outside their homes, they organized on their own national, provincial and district associations for bringing women out of their subjugated position. Abala Bose established Nari Siksha Samiti (Association for Women's Education 1919). Its main aim was to open primary schools, maternity and child welfare clinics and vocational training for women.

In the first phase of the movement, the women were not allowed by 'dadas' to participate directly in the revolutionary activities, their role remained limited as 'grihi-sabyas' on the periphery of the revolutionary<sup>30</sup> organizations. They were merely allowed to perform the role of mothers, aunts, sisters, sister-in-law in a compartmentalized social structure to be maintained in the strong male-female demarcated atmosphere.

Most of the revolutionary women made their level best effort to inspire and create the feeling of patriotism within or outside the kinship nexus. Sarojini Devi, widowed sister of Satish Chandra Mukherjee (later Swami Prajananda Saraswati) preceptors of Charankavi Mukundadas inculcated patriotism in youth of both sexes in Barisal<sup>31</sup>.

During the Swadeshi period, women were more conscious about politics, even village women took part in rallies, picketing, observed no-cooking programs, rejected foreign goods, etc<sup>32</sup>. During the colonial rule as a nation, they lost self-confidence but slowly after participating in the Swadeshi program, they regained their lost courage. Through the entire period, worshipping female God-like Durga, Kali, Jagatdhatri was a primal force to motivate the female folk<sup>33</sup>. For them, religion and patriotism<sup>34</sup> were the two sides of the same coin. Bengal became the worshipper of a mother cult. Many revolutionaries went to Kashi in this period. In 1908 they established Anushilan Samiti and Tarun Sangha. In Kashi, Sachindra Nath Sanyal was the young leader of this newly formed revolutionary group<sup>35</sup>. He was educated at Bengali Tala higher secondary school in Kashi. This armed movement was mostly limited to the 'aristocratic Hindu Movement'<sup>36</sup>.

Some literature like *Anandamath* written by Bankim Chandra played an important role in evoking patriotism in the minds of youths. This book gave impetus to the Indians to rebuild their inner strength to fight back against Britishers. This book taught worshipping humans as well as the motherland. Bankim Chandra worshipped motherland as 'Devi'. Imposing motherhood in a country was also a way to attract women to the movement. It was not idol worship; it was all about worshipping everything that belongs to your very own motherland. By this unique way of worshipping the motherland, there was an immense responsibility on the part of the countrymen, which is a special feature of Swadeshi discourse.

It was the British conspiracy to divide and rule the Bengal Presidency. In 1905 there was a mass upheaval against this conspiracy. The movement came out of despair grange against the British. To uproot the British rule there was an exigency of associations in the guise of physical training camps.

The main function of these groups was to make the bomb, explosive and also to train drill, stick playing, sword playing<sup>37</sup>, etc. Young members of these associations were also avid readers of the writing of Sakharam Ganesh Dewskar. His *Deshar Katha* was an example where the importance of freedom was acknowledged.

Women participated in the freedom movement mainly in three ways. Firstly, they joined Gandhiji's Satyagraha movement. Secondly, some women joined the movement for the social upliftment of the country. They engaged for flourishing the Swadeshi goods or Khadi, cottage industries, the programs initiated for the upliftment of the Harijans. Thirdly, some other women though somewhat limited joined the armed revolutionary movement<sup>38</sup> varied sects and classes of women were attracted to the anti-British movement. These women gave a new dimension to the movement. Not only Hindu but also Muslim women though in limited number joined the movement. Swami Vivekananda, Aurobindo wanted women to participate actively in the movement. They advocated the worship of Devi Kali. Aurobindo in his *Bhavani Mandir* sketched mothers as a symbol of strength. Bankim Chandra also depicted Goddess Kali as a symbol of *Shakti*. By Shaktipuja, these leaders meant nationalism, patriotism, motherland, etc. The nationalist movement gave a chance to mix politics with religion, take an example of the life of sister Nibedita. Her relation with the revolutionaries was there from long before. Her Baghbazar home was a safe 'address' to the fugitives<sup>39</sup>. She was not on the police suspect list. Though her political ideology did not choose either side of politics and religion. Vivekananda's disciples accepted his Hindutwa in political anger. Nibedita also utilized religion as a tool for political involvement.

Women largely participated in the national movement in 1920. In 1923 Lila Nag established Deepali Sangha with only eleven women as their founding members. The main aim of this association was to spread nationalism among women<sup>40</sup>. Women who joined Chittagong Revolutionary Association in 1919 mostly left the association during 1923's because many women were attracted to Gandhi's ideology and joined the non-cooperation movement<sup>41</sup>. Most women joined Gandhi's constructive program, and the rest of them joined secret groups. They joined without taking the permission of their families. At first, there was no leadership whom they had trust upon. They had to lead. Many secret groups were formed during the Swadeshi movement in 1905. There were almost three thousand members of these groups (we could not know the exact number of female members). There was an influx of women's participation in the freedom movement. Even Congress was eager to accept women's membership. Between 1920–30 there was huge participation of women in the freedom movement. Women were interested to join Congress-led National movement though limited but few women also joined as a member of the revolutionary groups. This was a beginning of a new chapter. Women were eager to join as full-fledged members of either Congress or armed revolutionary associations. Take the example of Jyotirmoyee Ganguly; she associated herself with the Nationalist movement<sup>42</sup>. She visited the entire Bengal Presidency. She gave a lecture in front of the women's meetings. They were inspired by the lecture of Ganguly. Jyotirmoyee started a women association. Many women gave their ornaments for the sake of the country's freedom. In remote villages women left their inhibition, came forward, and joined the Congress party as members. They also took part in *Sabha-Samities*.

The members of these secret groups had strong hatred against the British and an emotional patriotism was derived from the fanatical faith in the past glory of the motherland<sup>43</sup>. Aurobindo

realized that Gita had more influence on women than Chandi. Political extremism and armed revolutionary movement aimed at complete independence of the country whereas Gandhians had not asked for complete independence till 1930. The Swadeshi movement was mainly confined to the Hindus as Muslims were hostile to the Swadeshi movement. This intensified hatred of Hindus towards Muslims. This movement asserted Hindu Superiority.

During the movement, revolutionary women had temporarily suspended their womanhood and their sexuality with service to the nation. When the presence of women was described as a distraction to the male revolutionaries<sup>44</sup> many of them took the vow of celibacy as a way of disciplining themselves for militant activity. Revolutionary women stated that they behaved as 'sisters' or 'daughters' with the male revolutionaries, desexualizing their underground encounters with men and casting themselves in familial terms about their male peers. They even were described as 'dark-skinned'<sup>45</sup> unattractive and unavailable for the sexual attention of male colleagues, even unworthy of becoming mothers or wives. Kalpana Dutt recounted that she was not beautiful, but dark; she even vowed to study hard and became a scholar<sup>46</sup>.

Kalpana Dutt remembered the resistance that many of the male members of the revolutionary groups had towards allowing women to participate. The example of Ananta Lal Singh can be taken, whose elder sister Indumati wanted to join revolutionary groups but he discouraged her to do so<sup>47</sup>. However, the male members slowly realized and changed their minds once they came into contact with the fortitude of women. Dutt recounted Surja Sen informed her that "it was not easy to take this decision. It was an iron rule for the revolutionaries that they should keep aloof from women. I just could not make up my mind about letting girl revolutionaries abscond. But their bravery and steadiness made my mind up for me"<sup>48</sup>. Later on Ananta Singh's encouragement, Kalpana became involved in transporting acid on the train from Calcutta to Chittagong at the age of sixteen and Sen regretted his position on barring women from the movement<sup>49</sup>. The presumption that Kalpana and other women revolutionaries were unchaste was frequently repeated in witness statements and depositions by those who claimed to know her. After her arrest, one of Kalpana's acquaintances claimed to police that Kalpana was friendly with two other women revolutionaries and stated that 'I presume they are of loose morals'<sup>50</sup>.

On recounting what male revolutionaries thought of women who joined the movement, Kalpana described that the male revolutionaries were reluctant to admit them. She had to prove herself that she was a woman of conviction. She did not upstage her male counterparts but rather became exemplary for her ability to blend in and follow the rules.

Women suffered torture at the hands of the police, these incidents were never described as dishonourable, and suffering torture became a sign of how committed the revolutionary women were. Women who were targeted torture underscored the barbarity of the police and the colonial rule. Suhasini Ganguly, known as Putudi had fingernails broken by police, a form of punishment causing extraordinary pain. Banalata Dasgupta, a brilliant student, came from a respectable family was arrested for hiding revolvers and organizing illegal meetings. She was made to sit on a stool for three days without food and water, still, she refused to turn her companion in or confess.

Educated, unmarried middle-class women were involved in secret underground revolutionary activities in the 1920s. Revolutionary women represented themselves as historically significant figures whose unusual militant actions constituted a new kind of patriotic womanhood. Shanti Ghosh (Das)<sup>51</sup> explained their aim – ‘our mission was to rouse the women on India by our deed, defiance and courage in successful action’. The ideal woman was a good mother, good wife, chaste, modest, pious and educated. By the 1920s the ideal woman was firm in her conviction that political violence was a legitimate form of protest. The history of women's revolutionary activities demonstrates how some women departed from a middle-class social expectation, learning how to fight with a lathi, ride a bicycle, row and swim to support the revolutionary movement. They smuggled arms, went underground with men in the movement and become adept at evading police harassment. Women taking up arms became constitutive of the Indian Nationalist Movement, as much as their better-known counterparts participated in Gandhi's non-violent salt march campaigns, textile boycott.

Women who had joined revolutionary movements were categorized as exceptional and were labeled either as a goddess or as rebels<sup>52</sup>. When Gandhi and his followers wanted to mobilize women they spoke of ‘great Satis’ in India's past and of Sita as the ideal women<sup>53</sup>. The Indian Nationalist movement had been favourable to advancing women's status but Gandhi was the first leader to urge women to become active in the movement. He announced that certain activities were ‘meant only for women’ like organizing the boycott of foreign cloth and picketing of foreign cloth and liquor shops. Gandhi admitted that he had made a mistake in 1921 by asking men to take up these activities. Gandhiji stressed the ‘traditional’ nature of women's political work and was rarely criticized for mobilizing women to march and picket. Gandhian women, Kasturba Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu, and Sushila Nair were praised for symbolizing the ideal sacred to Hindus, the mother, the devoted wife, the loyal fellow pilgrims.

The first phase of the revolutionary movement lasted from 1907 to 1918. It was dominated by two major parties Jugantar, Anushilan. The early revolutionaries committed numerous ‘outrages’ but were not particularly successful in their attempts to assassinate officials or to obtain money through robberies.

Indian National Congress accepted Gandhi's non-cooperation proposal in 1920, several revolutionaries abandoned their violent tactics to give these methods a chance. Gandhi asked the women to donate their jewelry and wear *Khaddar*. The effect of this message was startling. ‘Traditional’ women started to be present at meetings. Women donated their ornaments, In Calcutta, Basanti Devi (wife of C.R Das) and Urmila Devi (sister of C.R. Das) were arrested for hawking *Khaddar* in the streets and encouraging people to observe strike. The arrest of Basanti Devi had an electric effect on the people. Thousands of young men offered themselves for arrest. Gandhi wrote “the women of India should have as much share in winning *Swaraj* as men. In this peaceful struggle, women can outdistance man by many a miles<sup>54</sup>. He suggested other women follow the example of their sisters from Bengal, women who illustrated the ‘silent and dignified suffering’ which is the ‘badge’ of the female sex. Gandhians began to recognize and respond to the potential of women in agitational politics.

During the 1920s women had been touched by the message that they were important to the country. Men were prepared to recognize the value of women. They obtained the right to vote in

1919 and the 1920's. Witnessed their entry into Legislative Councils. The educated women were influenced by the writings of Swami Vivekananda, Sister Nibedita, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Sri Aurobindo, Rabindra Nath Tagore, and Sarat Chandra Chatterjee. They were greatly influenced by Sarat Chandra's *Pather Dabi*.

Women had been touched by the Gandhian movement. Long before the revolutionaries were willing to recruit women, Gandhi was addressing women's meetings and telling them to take part in the freedom movement for the country. He told women they counted. Advocating non-violent revolution, Gandhi insisted women would be more suitable than men. The British were repressed to Gandhi's inspired protest with a show of force to the threat imposed by marching women. Many of the revolutionary women had pointed out the actions of the British had much to do with their decision to join groups committed to violent acts. They were concerned to prove their bravery. They realized women had been left out of much of the action and that women were half of the population, if the masses were to be mobilized, women would have to be aroused. The young girls (they were between 16-26 years) themselves often mentioned their desire to 'sacrifice' themselves for the sake of the country. Kamala Dasgupta recounted her desire to make great sacrifices and her dissatisfaction with the Gandhian movement for requiring only small sacrifices<sup>55</sup>. Sacrifices had always been culturally approved behaviour for women. Their primary aim was political freedom. Women who were dedicated to the nationalist movement could take part in activities that would have been closed to them. They would sacrifice not only material comfort, family but their own life.

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