

Sarojini Naidu - The Great Social Reformer

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Abstract

This verse reflects the personality that Sarojini Naidu was a poet turned politician. However, Nissim Ezekiel, reviewing her collection of poems the feather of the dawn says, Sarojini knew nothing of the literary revolutions taking place in English poetry in the twenties and earlier. Exactly a year ago, on the date and about the same time, Mrs. Lakshmi menon delivered a talk at the Nehru memorial museum and library, at the beginning of the year long celebrations of the centenary of her birth.

Keywords : *Non Violence, Social issues, Women Association, Freedom, Social Equality, Inspiring, Struggle.*

Introduction

Humane attitude towards social problems in India, She became the bard leading and inspiring the masses in their freedom movement under Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhiji considered that in our freedom movement five things needed first attention Non-violence, Khadi, Hindu- Muslim unity, Hari-jans and, Women. In the pre-independence period, it was not possible to keep these five strands strictly separate. It was a theory expected to be realized in life in free India. Needless to say that all them five points of work for national regeneration are meant basically to improve the social life of the Indian people as a whole. During the years immediately following independence in 1947 one often heard and read about the stages in which true and complete freedom will be achieved. The first stage had just been completed with the achievement of political freedom, the decision making power now belongs to the Indian people to shape and direct the course of their destiny. The

second stage was that of economic freedom which was expected to be achieved on the basis of free India's own political decisions. Finally, the third stage of social liberation was expected to be the normal consequence of political and economic freedom.

Sarojini Naidu's Views on Social Issues

Sarojini Naidu was caught up in this movement led by Mahatma Gandhi to usher in a new India of social equality. She not only dreamed of it and worked for it in the Gandhian movement, but she lived up to everything she proposed. She talked had inspired millions to break down social barriers. She was only too conscious of the existing barriers, but being involved in the struggle to win the first stage of freedom, she had no time to concentrate on any single area of activity. However, she expressed a sincere concern for all the existing social problems of her time and lost no opportunity to point these out to those who were actively involved in removing social evils. She expressed with her eloquent power what she expected Indian society to be. Of the five points mentioned by Gandhiji, Non-violence, khadi and Hindu-Muslim unity were activities which got intermingled with and overcharged with the political issues of the first phase of the freedom movement. The question of harijans and women remained in the background as purely social issues. One other aspect of social issues, received her special attention, viz., her approach to the youth of India. In her writings and speeches referring to India's regeneration, two things stand out. The first one is that these efforts, large or small each trying to remedy one type of social problems, were like small feeders swelling the fast flowing river of the national movement the other was that her expressible to separate Mrs. Naidu's views on social issues from the national movement and/ or her poetry. I reproduce only one of these of the social issues which the leaders of the national movement gave priority to, the one of women received Mrs. Naidu's maximum attention. She symbolized those women who, in spite of a happy life plunged themselves whole heartedly in the new opportunities of work in the larger interests of the nation. In fact wherever she went she was recognized as brilliant, charming, challenging, kind and understanding in her approach to all human questions. This recognition came to her not only in India but also in other lands which she visited.

With her insight she understood the joys and sorrows, expectations and hopes of women of all categories including women vendors in cities and rural poor group. In her

poems, she reflects the whole range of moods and emotions with superb subtlety of expression. Dr. P.V. Rajyalakshmi points out that this range of moods even comprehends mystic communications, and that her reflections of folk theme show genuine understanding and appreciation of India's folk culture. She projects totality of others customs, beliefs, legends, mimicry, games, festivals. One has only to read her little poems on subjects such as festival of the sea, Gypsy girl "Banjara women" Zobida and Gulnar. Her speeches have not been recorded carefully for posterity. But some important statements which have been recorded can be said to-day-30 years after we started using our power for decision making on economic and social issues. In her speech at a meeting of the Hindu social reform association held in secunderbad in 1906, she said, "Every place has a social reforms association. But what have they done. The word to-day is not in our dictionary. Tomorrow is the watchword. There is anxiety shown everywhere for the introduction of social reform into families of others but not in one's own family.

Indian National social conference

At the 22nd session of the Indian National social conference, held in 1908, she inspired a resolution for providing educational facilities for widows, establishment of women's homes and removing obstacles to their remarriage. On women's education her statements in 1906 and 1908 could be repeated today by those fighting for improving the status of woman in the current international decade for women. At the Indian social conference held in Calcutta in 1906 she said, at this great moment of stress and striving, when India races are seeking the ultimate unity of a common national ideal, it is well for us to remember that the success of the whole movement lies centered in what is known as the women question But it seems to me that there is not even an unanimous acceptance of the fact that education of women is an essential factor in the process of nation building.

Latter in the same conference she referred to a controversy on women's education published in Indian ladies magazine which reflected that all women expressed themselves for education but there was division in men's camp. While some agreed, others took fright at the very idea, what they cried education for our women what then will become of the comfortable domestic ideals as exemplified by the luscious halwa and savoury omlette others again were neither for Jove nor Jehova, but for compromise bringing forward a whole syllabus of compromises, Teach this they said and not that. But my friends in the

matter of education you cannot say thus far and no further. Neither can you say to the winds of heaven, Blow not where ye list nor forbid the waves to cross their boundaries nor the human soul to soar beyond the bounds of arbitrary limitations. In 1908, Pandit Mohan Malaviya was giving a talk at the pachaiappa's college historical association. After his speech Mrs. Naidu responded that women in other advanced countries constituted a most potent factor in the political evolution of a country. In India, while men were educated and kept abreast women were lagging behind.

The women's India Association In 1936

Under her inspiration, the women's India association at its conference in 1936, published women's manifesto to the candidates standing for election to the provincial and central legislatures and all other public bodies. This could be reproduced and used today by women's organizations in emphasizing the social issues needing legislative and executive action. To the women in their own gatherings she would say the same but equally forcefully each time as she did at the Indian ladies club at Pittapwam in 1915 I say that it is time for us all women of India, to awake whatever our race or caste or creed or rank in life to awaken and grasp the urgency of the situation in the immediate need of adequate and equal co-operation and comradeship in guiding, moulding, sustaining and achieving those lofty and patriotic ideals that thrill the heart of every generation and in whose fulfillment lies the noblest destiny of man.

It was under the leadership of Sarojini Naidu and others that the all India women's conference (AIWC) was founded. One of the successful achievements of this organization was to press for non-communal representation when the British parliament was preparing for special representation in the forces in the constitution of India for minorities. True this move did not succeed against the forces in England which ultimately decided the issue at that time. However, it is on record that women of all religions, castes and creeds, through the AIWC made a strong plea for non-communal representation. Another interesting story which I am not able to authenticate yet with appropriate documentation has reference to the Hindu code bill. Before she passed away, she was addressing a meeting at the university Institute hall in Calcutta organized by some local women's organizations to express their support for the bill. The orthodox reactionary group crowded the hall in great number. Mrs. Naidu was quick enough to sense the situation. In her speech she demolished

all orthodox arguments so thoroughly that before her speech ended people were prepared to leave the hall in groups. It is needless to say how the meeting ended after this group chose not to stay. The young generation of men and women were naturally attracted to her for she could talk to each one in his or her own idiom. At the same time, she was concerned that the young men and women of her time would one day inherit the struggle for national freedom and progress and carry it forward. The point that she wanted them to understand is found in her address on time brotherhood at pachaiappa's college in 1903.

Her vision was that the young men and women of her country should grow up to be true Indians and rise above narrow local, linguistic, racial and religious identities. She was also aware of the fact that the quality of the nation did not depend on the excellence of a few outstanding person or a small group of elites. Work had to be done to uplift the masses so that the average quality of the people continue to rise higher. She expressed this in an address entitled the hope of tomorrow given at the madras students convention. She was disturbed when she found the youth callous about the state of the country and society and their own responsibility to improve the existing conditions. I witnessed one of these at the main hall of Lucknow university. Mrs. Naidu was expected to arrive any moment. The hall was hardly noticed in the crowd. She was up on the platform the gallery above. She was hardly noticed in the crowd. She was up on the platform. By then the noise on the floor of the hall had stopped but not from the gallery. After she was introduced, the first thing she did was to mimic the catcalls, perfect to the last details of sound. The first response was laughter, but Mrs. Naidu looked serious and continued to mimic the catcalls, perfect to the last details of sound. The first response was laughter, but Mrs. Naidu looked serious and continued to minimize the catcalls until the students realised that she would speak only when there was complete silence. As she began to speak she literally administered a strongly worded rebuke to students about their lack of responsibility. She reminded them of the work that the Chinese students and students elsewhere were doing for their nation, while Indian students were while away their time in futile activities.

On poverty and related national economic reconstruction her views are no less relevant in the present context. Mrs. Lakshmi Menon, in her talk given last year quotes Mrs. Naidu as having said that a few palaces, universities and modern appliances are not adequate for the advancement of a nation, "Is this the criterion of progress" She asked and

continued, no, believe me, your progress, your liberty, your achievement, will only be worth having when there is food in every village.

Congress President

In her presidential address in 1925 as Congress President she covered the need for village reconstruction and education along with the politically charged issues of non-violent non-cooperation and Hindu-Muslim unity. She emphasised that national reconstruction needed personal and collective sacrifice, and invisible faith and commitment to the cause of unity of the nation for the struggle ahead. With palms uplifted in ardent supplication, I pray that to us in our coming hour of travail may be granted in sufficient measure an invisible faith and inflexible courage, and that He in whose name we begin our labour today will in the hour of our triumph keep us humble and in the beautiful words of our ancient invocation. My own personal memory is still quite vivid about her presence and impact on every one at the 49th session of the Indian National Congress held at Lucknow in 1936. She was personally interested in the welfare of each and every volunteer in the Congress camp she met. In terms of decisions on national policy for the country's development, the focus was on rural development and improvement of the life style of agricultural labourers and cultivators. The Congress policy adopted in 1936 emphasised the freedom of organisation of agricultural labourers, their emancipation from feudal levies, substantial reduction in rent and revenue, fast and fair relief from agricultural indebtedness and safeguarding their interests vis-à-vis the state, allotment in state expenditure for economic, social and cultural amenities, freedom from oppression and harassment from government officials, protection against restrictions on utilisation of natural facilities for domestic and agricultural needs and, finally, fostering incentive for relieving rural unemployment. It was truly a revolutionary concept evolved under the leadership of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru as the then Congress President. At the end of business Pandit Nehru mentioned that, It is customary on such occasion when all business is over for someone to indulge in a funeral oration. So Mrs. Naidu has come here uninvited to deliver that oration. "Mrs. Naidu, reflecting on the far reaching decisions of that Congress said.

"In this city of old tradition we have witnessed the birth of a new vision, the coming of a new dream. I am here on your behalf, to bear testimony to the marvelous

miracles that have happened for us and for India. Out of the past has come the future not by resolution but by proper, decent evolution. For the first time has that note been sounded, has that vision been revealed, has that prophecy been made that Congress should realise that India shall be an integral part of the great world scheme of freedom and liberation. And so, if Jawaharlal thinks that it is a funeral oration it is a funeral oration to the dead yesterday but a welcome oration to tomorrow, to the dawn of which the President is the herald to be able to hold together in friendliness elements which might have been hostile to one another and irreconcilable with one another. Therefore, I end with adieu to yesterday and welcome tomorrow in which we join together in our pilgrimage towards the dawn of liberty". It was past midnight and the session ended with "Vande Mataram" rending the silence of the night.

Conclusion

In spite of her family responsibilities and frail health, she never failed to face the most difficult situations with humility, simplicity and yet conviction and was courage. Above all, she was endowed with the healing gift of a sense of humour and pen which resolved tensions within a group. Her ability to laugh at herself and others was so refined and without any malice that she carried individuals and groups with her as no other could. Some have raised the question, was she pleased with the freedom as it came dividing India and shattering the dream of united free India as dreamed by our freedom fighters. Those who know her intimately feel that she was sad but few only sensed it. Yet outwardly she was the same person, full of humour, with time to meet each one at a very personal level. That she knew that life has its setbacks and one must be ready for them is reflected also in her writing. "Conquest written in 1927 and "The Soul's Prayer" first published in India in 1943 but published elsewhere much earlier.

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