Women’s Organization of I.N.A. and Women Emancipation

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Abstract

Present paper explore the contribution of Netaji Bose and Indian National Army in terms of women empowerment and the role of Rani Jhansi Regiment in mobilizing women power in freedom struggle. Chandra Bose was a man who advocated and supported women’s empowerment and women’s movement in late twenties to emancipate them from all shackles and disabilities and to enable them to attain equality with men. Bose's ideas on women and their empowerment can be gleaned in several of his writings and speeches. Most of them deal with his contemporary society. Major concern of all political leaders of the time was freedom of the country from British imperialism.

Among the nationalist movements of India, Subhash Chandra Bose led Indian National Army (INA) had a clear vision regarding women's rights and their status as citizens of free India. Though not a socio-religious reformer he was a political thinker on his own right and had a deep insight into the social problems prevalent in colonial India. Bose was one of the few of his times who advocated women's movements in their fullest dimensions. Many in the then conservative India raised eyebrows when he advocated an all India political organization for women, women in army, women as nation builders and finally a separate women's department in free India. An analysis has to be made to understand INA ideologies, its role in supporting and encouraging women empowerment in India and the relevance in the present day context. Women's empowerment movement during the freedom struggle had limited goals and activities like reform of society, education, etc. It was undoubtedly Gandhi who aimed at bringing nationalist politics to into the Indian household without breaking the domestic circle, but he attached greater importance to women's constructive role from inside. Bose, however, was more radical when he assigned them different roles. Empowerment of women can be brought about to its fullest extend only with Governmental support. In his speech at the Independence League of India, London in 1933, Bose pointed out the areas which require immediate attention. These included freeing women from the veil of purdah, providing compulsory primary education (including spiritual, moral and physical training) and immediate legislation to procure equal rights and privileges to men and women in all spheres of life. Bose encouraged the formation of the first political organization for women; the Mahila Rastriya Sangha was formed in 1928. The Mahila Rastriya Sangha recruited members and set up a network of Shakti Mandirs. It was intended to develop as a national women's
organization connected with the Congress. It followed a radical ideology and placed the social, economic and political emancipation of women as its goal. They organized the All India Women's Social Conference along with along with the regular session of the Congress in 1928, which was presided over by the Junior Maharani of Travancore. The conference passed resolutions condemning dowry system and legitimising divorce. It also advocated equal education for all irrespective of caste, sex or religion (Dubey, 1988).

Bose's ideas on women and their empowerment can be gleaned in several of his writings and speeches. Most of them deal with his contemporary society. Major concern of all political leaders of the time was freedom of the country from British imperialism. It was but natural that most of them including Bose, concentrated on utilising women, as a united force for against colonialism. Still certain ideas that Bose placed before us has relevance in the contemporary Indian society and polity.

- **Empowerment of women should be taken up as a state policy.** Incentives and devolution of power should not be from above but from below. Planning and state policy making is necessary to help reforms reach the larger section of the society.

- **Education of women should not be restricted to mere primary education but should include vocational training for empowering them economically.** Women should be made conscious of social and legal remedies that seek to mitigate women distress.

- **Women should themselves champion the cause of women's empowerment.** The government should constitute a team of welfare workers who would concentrate in educating women in rural areas and remote urban areas like slums.

- **Women organizations should shed their non-political character, thus making their voice heard in the legislators.**

- **Separate women department should be constituted which will research into the problems of women and suggest remedies**

The Indian National Army (INA) was born of defeat, intrigue, nationalism and ambition. The Indian National Army was a military organization conceptualized, organized and equipped by the Japanese with the advent of the fall of Malaya and Singapore in 1942. Lebra (1971) remarked that INA was an organization which had several aims. It was meant to support and flesh out Japanese claims of setting up a Greater Asia co-prosperity sphere. The INA was also established to encourage the growth of armed Indian nationalism. Lastly, the INA was conceived to undermine the British Indian Army, that cornerstone of British Imperial control in the Far East. The INA was staffed by no fewer than 40 000 Indian soldiers. It was led initially by Mohan Singh and then by Subhas Chandra Bose. Ghosh (1969) observed that the INA’s military contribution was minor. The army fought one major engagement at the Battle of Imphal-Kohima on the Burma-India frontier but was defeated piecemeal. Its contribution to the cause of Indian Nationalism, was, however, by no means minute. Following the surrender of thousands of INA personnel, trials were held at the Red Fort to decide the
fate of these men. The trials placed the British in nothing less than an imperial quandary.

The Women’s Organization of the INA was an important wing of the INA. A women's Regiment was raised in July, 1943 under the command of Captain Laxmi Sawaminathan. The members of this Regiment were drawn from the Indian civilian population of the South-East Asia. The Regiment was named after the famous Rani of Jhansi, who had died fighting bravely against the British forces in 1857, and consisted of 856 women trained for active service. Mrs. Laxmi as the Captain of the Regiment played a unique part in inspiring and organising the women into Red Cross units, reKef squads, ambulance workers and emergency nurses. The Rani of Jhansi Regiment served not only to generate excitement and interest in the INA but also assisted in mobilising support from a previously quiescent section of the Indian population-women. This was no doubt due to the manner by which orthodox perceptions of gender were shattered by the formation of a women’s regiment. Where men previously dominated the domain of warfare, here, in stark contrast, stood a regiment full of well trained and well-armed women who wielded rifles, bayonets, mortars and grenades (Lebra, 2008).

Subhash Chandra ideas for women emancipation were visible even before formation of INA and Rani of Jhansi Regiment. From the start of his active political career in the 1920s, Bose appealed to women to make it their duty to look after the nation and not just their families, and he also encouraged them to ‘boycott foreign cloths, carry on propaganda among women and organise “women’s societies”’ (Sengupta, 2008). In 1928, he organized a 300-strong women’s section of the Bengali Volunteers who would parade in the streets of Calcutta on the occasion of the Indian Congress’s gathering in the city. This was an early prototype of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, as evident in the section leader being referred to as ‘Colonel Latika’. When Subhas Chandra Bose formally opened the Rani of Jhansi Camp in Singapore’s Waterloo Street on 22 October 1943, he had realized a dream that arguably dated back at least to the Calcutta Congress of 1928 and the women’s section of the Bengali Volunteers. In Dr Lakshmi Swaminadhan, recently promoted to Captain Lakshmi, he had found an outstanding leader who had not only assembled the first 20 women to stand guard of honour on 12 July, but who, since her appointment on 13 July, had worked tirelessly to increase the initial nucleus to 156 women, and had also built up the Rani of Jhansi Camp to accommodate up to 500 recruits.

Together they had formed a formidable team. While Lakshmi was busy in Singapore expanding the initial nucleus of 15 women to nearly 100 who were training part-time, Bose’s touring of the mainland had roused in many more girls and women a desire to step forward in order to participate in the liberation of India, even though most of them had never set foot on Indian soil. Yet again, it was Lakshmi’s tour of the mainland in September that proved crucial
in this because it convinced anxious parents to sign the parental consent form and convinced others that the Rani of Jhansi Regiment was set on fulfilling its aims. This marked a radical departure from the past when Indian migrant fathers and husbands had called for the womenfolk to follow them to their overseas places of work, whereas now it was girls and women asking for permission to leave their families for the sake of a larger cause. The Ranis that Bose and Captain Lakshmi, who was walking to his right, were inspecting that evening also matched his ideals of a more egalitarian and noncommunal India: one where merit rather than ethnicity, religion, class, caste, language or gender were key and in which communal differences could be overcome by training, eating and living together.

Bose in an interview (Sahgal, supra note 7, p. 57) said that ‘he had great faith in women and felt that, given the opportunity, there was nothing they were not capable of doing’. Indeed, ‘men and women were two equal halves of a whole’. Therefore ‘he believed that in the fight for independence women should not remain spectators,’ and instead they ‘should play a positive role’. The benefits for women in playing such a role were twofold, as Bose linked the liberation of India with the ‘end [of] our own oppression and subjugation by men’.

Thus, Subash Chandra Bose was a man who advocated and supported women’s empowerment and women’s movement in late twenties to emancipate them from all shackles and disabilities and to enable them to attain equality with men. At that time women were kept behind purda for so many decades but they were out in the open, offering service to the nation. This was perhaps the height of empowerment made possible by the selfless leadership of Netaji. Thus the Rani Jhanshi Regiment fulfilled Netaji’s hope to preserve the moral effect of their brave example forever. This achievement remain in golden letters in History.

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