



Toofani Satyawati

An Unsung Hero of Freedom Struggle

In the annals of Indian struggle for Independence a spirit lies buried that had once glowed fiercely, undertaken valorous deeds and sacrificed itself in India's quest for freedom. That selfless indomitable spirit belonged to Satyawati.

Born on January 26, 1907, in Ludhiana to Dhani Ram Thapar, an eminent lawyer, Satyawati went through varied influences. Her maternal grandfather, the renowned social reformer Mahatma Munshi Ram, later known as Swami Shraddhanand, was one such influence. She was barely 12 when she saw him lead an agitation against the Rowlatt Act in Delhi and expose himself to British firing at Chandni Chowk on March 30, 1919. This also inspired Satyawati's maternal uncle Professor Indra Kumar and his wife to join the Satyagraha (a non-violent movement) against the Rowlatt Act. Swarniji's daughter Ved Kumari, along with her daughters Satyawati, Usha and Kaushalya, too followed suit. Satyawati was married at 16 to Balbhadra Vidyalkar, who was a dyeing master in a Birla mill in Gwalior where Satyawati made her first foray into the labour movement by working for the upliftment of the millhands and their families. In fact, it was Vidyalkar who moulded her in the socialist way of thinking, which led to her involvement in the labour movement.

One of her better known missions in later years was the formation of a union of tongawallas and cart-pullers in Delhi who were harassed by animal welfare societies. At that time there was a vast population of horses, bullocks

and donkeys in the city—in fact, they were quite a lifeline. Satyawati led their strike for eight days, till a compromise was reached. She also organised the stone workers in Delhi to fight for their rights. Political freedom, Satyawati believed, was the first step towards the economic emancipation of the poverty-stricken masses. In the late 1920s, her husband was transferred to the Birla mill in Delhi. Thus after several years Satyawati, who was a mother of two, returned to the city where her family played an active role in the events of those turbulent times. Soon the civil disobedience movement began which gave her an opportunity to take a plunge in the freedom struggle. Her involvement encompassed a vast range of activities. She addressed public meetings, spearheaded demonstrations, advocated and practised swadeshi (economic nationalism), as she became totally involved in the boycott of foreign goods. Not content only to picket shops that sold foreign goods, she took the movement even to the banks of the river Jamuna, mobilising support against the Marwari ladies who came there to bathe dressed in foreign clothes.

Satyawati practised what she believed. Her younger sister Kaushalya recalls how after hearing Gandhiji's call to discard foreign cloth, Satyawati collected all clothes of foreign-made fabric in their house and set fire to them without considering to whom they belonged and how costly they were. For herself, Satyawati kept only three or four coarse khadi

Even during the freedom movement, most of the women who got active in the political domain did so through and in the footsteps of men of their families and tended to play a supplementary role to male politics. Satyawati is one of the rare examples of a woman who chartered her own independent course, far more radical than that of the male members of her politicised family, including her well-known grandfather Swami Shraddhanand, a leading light of the Arya Samaj Movement. Likewise she went far ahead of her husband who played an influential role in giving her the initial push. This article has been put together by Sunaina Sharma and Madhu Kishwar from primary and secondary source material provided by Satyawati College, Delhi University. Her rich life merits far more in depth study. We hope this article will stimulate interest and motivate some of our readers to do a fuller biography.

—Editor

(home-spun cotton cloth) saris. If she happened to somehow acquire more than that she would give them away to the poor and needy.

Kaushalya said in an article that once Sarojini Naidu, a mother-figure to them, who loved Satyawati very much, presented her a very fine khadi sari from Hyderabad. After a week Kaushalya found the sari missing.

When she asked her sister, Satyawati said that a poor village woman had come to see her in a torn and worn out dhoti (a type of sari made of coarse cotton cloth), and she gave away the sari to her. A sari which Kaushalya had painstakingly embroidered for her also met the same fate. Such details serve to emphasise Satyawati's commitment to the poor and to the swadeshi movement which was an integral part of the Indian freedom struggle.

Satyawati's participation in the freedom struggle was so energetic that Mahatma Gandhi affectionately named her *Too/ani* (storm-like). She was also acclaimed as the Indian Joan of Arc. Chandragupta Vidyalankar, the renowned freedom fighter, recounts in an article how Gandhiji once described her: "She is a very brave girl. You know that I had named her *Tooani*."

She is truly *too/ani*. Her whole life she has been as forceful as a storm." She was not only a freedom fighter but also a social reformer dedicated to the cause of the weaker sections of society. Such sentiments were, however, not appreciated by many leaders, who held that such beliefs would prove divisive to the freedom struggle. Her socialist leanings also led her to consider joining revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh at one point of time. She organised the first Naujawan Bharat Sabha in Delhi which attracted a large number of students to the struggle. This was Cooperation Movement had been



temporarily called off and (he Congress legislative programme failed to stimulate the young activists. In Bengal, Delhi and Punjab groups of young men and women started underground activities to collect arms, manufacture bombs and to commit acts of terrorism. Satyawati and several others were at the forefront of these activities.

J.N. Sahnı recounts an incident where her admiration for the revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh and her dare-devil courage are evident. Once Bhagat Singh and his comrades were in peril, relentlessly hounded by the British police. Motilal Nehru, who held a measure of affection for the revolutionaries even while considering them misguided, gave Rs 1,000 to Sahnı to help the One of Satyawati's better known missions was the formation of a union of tongawallas and cart-pullers. She also organised the stone workers in Delhi.

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revolutionaries. As Satyawati was closely associated with the revolutionaries Sahnı gave the money to her. One day Satyawati invited him to her house. There he met a young woman named Durga Behn, the wife of Bhagwati Charan, one of the revolutionaries wanted by the British police. He saw that she was sitting in an awkward fashion. On Satyawati motioning to her she loosened her waist band and took out two revolvers which she had smuggled from the frontier. Pointing to them Satyawati said: "Now you can tell Motilalji how the money he sent has been utilised." On his protesting that the money was intended for food and clothes she explained that what he saw before him was more important to their cause than food and clothes.

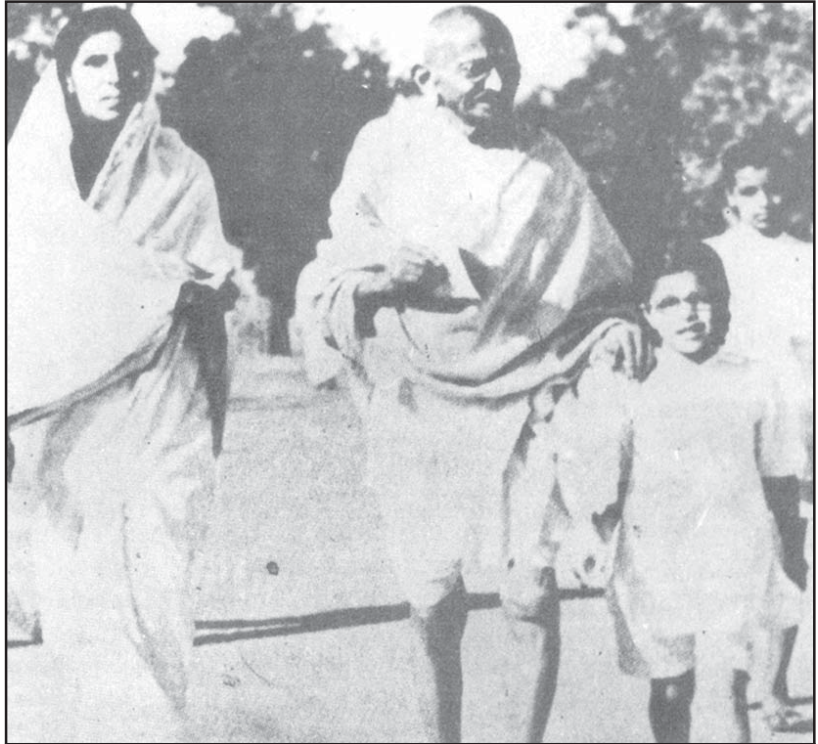
Yet Satyawati soon came to prefer larger non-violent mobilisation of public opinion rather than isolated acts of terrorism. By 1930, she began to support Gandhi's nonviolent movement and plunged into it wholeheartedly. It was at this time that she was influenced by Gandhi who urged women to be *sabala* (strong) and arbiters of their own destiny. Satyawati exhorted women to come out of their homes and join the freedom struggle. Her younger sister writes that Satyawati often used songs as a means of mobilising women in various neighbourhoods.

She would cajole her mother and sisters to come out in the streets and bylanes of Delhi—Nee! Ka Katra, Billimaran, Nai Sarak—even as she went around beating drums, singing patriotic songs, raising slogans and urging women to come out of purdah. Soon women started coming out, first hesitantly and then boldly. By then Satyawati was also an active member of the Congress. Apart from leading processions and picketing shops she also took to addressing public rallies and gatherings. At one such meeting on

May 3, 1930, she urged the audience not to retrace their steps from the freedom struggle and not to be afraid of the machine guns that were parading the streets. On May 12, 1930, at the mourning procession of Amin Lal, who had died of a gun shot, she declared, "Such things do happen in attaining freedom; flames of such fire would reduce the tyrant to ashes." She was arrested and was asked to furnish security of Rs 500 and give assurance of good conduct for six months. She refused and was sent to jail. Thus began the cycle of her successive confinements, mostly in the women's jail at Lahore.

Even there she did not falter in her mission and sent out messages from the jail to the nation. The Congress Working Committee in a resolution in June 1930 gave Satyawati "respectful congratulations" for her role. By 1931, the Congress was declared unlawful. Many of its workers and leaders had been in and out of jail several times. Satyawati too had met the same fate. But she, along with countless others, continued to defy the British.

January 26, 1931 was designated as Independence Day and Congress planned to hoist the tricolour on the clock tower at Chandni Chowk, opposite the majestic Red Fort in Delhi. Thousands of volunteers gathered for the flag hoisting on the day. But when the police charged into the crowd wounding many, it dispersed. Many were arrested. The police too retired to the nearby police station. It was then that a crowd of women dressed in saffron appeared on the scene, singing lustily. Hundreds of passersby joined the procession. At the head of the procession was a lean, tall, stately lady, Satyawati, carrying the national flag. The policemen who had returned attempted to snatch the flag from her but she refused to give in even as she fell under the impact of their heavy blows.



Satyawati with Gandhiji

On revival of the civil disobedience movement in 1932, Satyawati, who had a couple of months earlier given birth to her third child, a daughter, was arrested on April 13 and sentenced to seven-and-a-half months imprisonment. She was punished for organising a procession to celebrate the national week. She was released after serving the term only to be rearrested and sentenced to a year-and-a-half imprisonment.

During her confinement she contracted pleurisy which later developed into tuberculosis. Irked by her activities the British tried to discourage Satyawati and remove her from Delhi by seeking her husband's transfer back to Gwalior. But Balbhadra stood by his wife and left his job. He continued to provide her moral support even though his loss of job brought them economic hardship. Her long stints in prison and failing health took its toll on her family life. Nevertheless, she

continued her activities.

In 1934, she became a founder member of the Congress Socialist Forum and worked along with Acharya Narendra Dev, Jai Prakash Narain, Ram Manohar Lohia and Jawaharlal Nehru. For a long time she remained an executive member of the Delhi Provincial Congress Committee and for some time was also a member of the All India Congress Committee. She continued her association with labour movements as she helped spread the ideology of socialism among the members of the trade unions with the help of Farid-ul Haq Ansari, Lala Hardhyan Singh and Bahal Singh. And as long as her health permitted and she was not incarcerated, she continued her work among the poor and toiling masses, and the farmers in the neighbouring villages of Delhi.

In those days, recalls one of her co-workers, Congress had very little money and there were only a couple

of cars between all the local leaders put together. The ever resourceful Satyawati would make sure to invite at least one of the leaders each time a long journey had to be taken outside the city, so that several people could at once pile into the car.

The authorities' decided once again to put curbs on her. She was asked to confine herself within the municipal limits of Delhi and to refrain from any anti-government activity. She, however, defied them and was once again sent to jail.

By 1938 her life had become one big round of jails and hospitals interspersed with periods of release, during which she pursued her many political activities. She attended the Punjab conference held at Madina in April 1938. The Punjab government, however, asked her to leave the city immediately and not to re-enter the province for a year without its permission. Satyawati, as was her wont, never took such notices seriously. She was arrested and sent back to Delhi. There she was once again arrested on the charge of an earlier seditious speech she gave in a Delhi village. She was out of jail in September 1939 but was once again asked to give surety for good conduct or serve another term. She once again chose to go to jail.

During her incarceration her health deteriorated and prominent political leaders demanded her release. Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur wrote in her letter to the chief commissioner of Delhi: "I can say that she is too courageous a woman of too deep convictions to avail herself of the opportunity of giving a bond of good behaviour at her disposal." The commissioner of police also stated to Aruna Asaf Ali that though Satyawati was imprisoned, she could easily be released, but for her refusal to give

such an undertaking. The jail authorities were also of the opinion that "her treatment in a sanatorium is more likely to result in a cure than her treatment in jail".

The commissioner in his letter to the government remarked that despite her poor health "on her return to Delhi she always seems capable of quite remarkable exertion and is able to address three or four public meetings a day". Yet he recommended her release, provided she was immediately admitted to a suitable sanatorium in the hills, and she desisted from political activities for the unexpired portion of her detention. Satyawati, even at the expense of her failing health, refused to concede.

Shortly after Satyawati came out of jail, she took part in the Satyagraha of 1940 and was sentenced to one year imprisonment. She took an active part in the 1942 Quit India movement and also exhorted the students to become a vanguard of the movement. For this not only she but her son Krishna Kumar and her elder daughter Kusum, her mother Ved Kumari and sister Kaushalya, were all taken into custody by the British police.

Back in jail she maintained her contact with the leading lights of the

freedom movement, including Gandhiji, to whom she wrote regularly. Gandhiji would reply personally to her letters assuring her that he had full faith in her and whatever course of action she undertook would be right. She undertook to hoist the national flag over the jail building for which she was belaboured mercilessly and kept in solitary confinement, which literally broke her backbone leaving her permanently bedridden.

In 1943, she was transferred to Mayo Hospital at Lahore. Meanwhile her youngest daughter Vma fell seriously ill. She was offered release on parole. Even though she greatly loved her daughter, Satyawati was unwilling to bow down before the British authorities and declined parole. The news of Vma's death shattered an ailing Satyawati and her condition worsened. She was shifted to the TB sanatorium at Kasauli. On her release she was prohibited from taking part in political activities and entering Delhi.

Manifesting a familiar courage, she defied and dodged the police guard at the hospital, to address the



Women demonstrators confronting mounted police

Students Congress at Lahore. Satyawati donned the burqa of her Muslim maid, who served her till she breathed her last, and made it to the rally. But she was so weak that she had to make her speech from a makeshift stretcher. Even in that condition she spoke for almost an hour till the police arrived and rearrested her. The authorities registered a case against her but wiser counsel prevailed and the case was dropped.

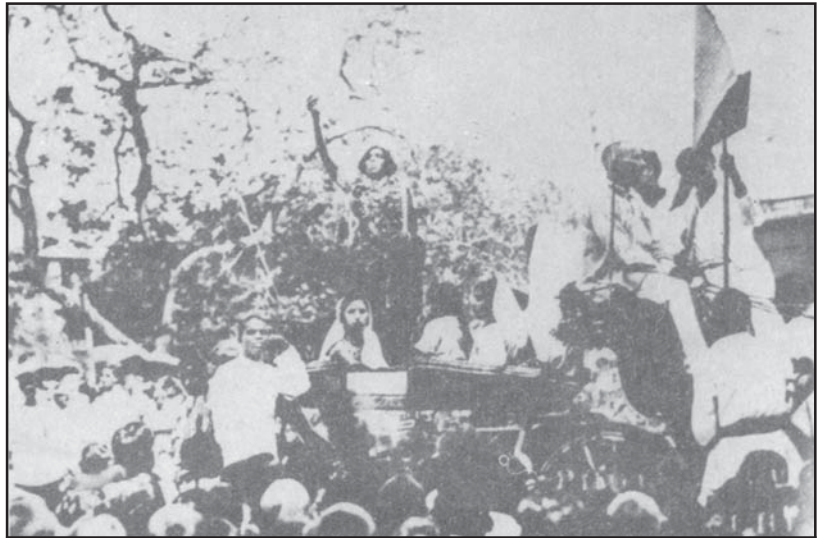
Notwithstanding her failing health, Satyawati decided to defy the unjust orders prohibiting her from entering Delhi. In this resolve Gandhiji supported her.

She left for Delhi in February 1945, but her train was stopped at Shahadra on the outskirts of Delhi.

She was apprehended, detained and taken to jail, while at Delhi multitudes were waiting to welcome her. At this time she had a temperature of 103!!F and when her condition deteriorated she was transferred to the Kingsway Camp hospital.

The police guard remained with her and was only withdrawn when the authorities were convinced that she was on her deathbed. During this period, despite her precarious condition, she managed to send messages of political importance on various occasions. For instance, in a message a few days before her death she cited the achievements of the Indian National Army-its leaders had been detained at the Red Fort and were soon to face trial-and called upon the youth to be ready to shed their last drop of blood for emancipation of the motherland.

During her confinement in the Kingsway Camp hospital, many national leaders called upon her. These included Gandhiji, who visited her twice, Maulana Azad and Mridula Sarabhai. Shortly before her death Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru came to see her. To him Satyawati said: "My only



Satyawati leading a procession

desire is India's freedom." In her last message to the nation before her death she said: "I have reached the end of my life's journey without completing the second score. Thousands like me have perished in the struggle for freedom but the process of my death has been rather more tortuous than that of martyrs who faced bullets or mounted gallows. It was my cherished ambition to see the end of British imperialism, but my end has come earlier. I am dying in harness. Do not weep for me. Preserve your tears to kindle the fire of freedom in you. The day British rule in India ends will be the fittest "Do not weep for me. Preserve your tears to kindle the fire of freedom in you. The day British rule in India ends

will be the fittest day for my shradh". day for my shradh (Hindu customary rites observed in the memory of the dead). I am grateful to the students that at my behest they changed their path in 1942. My blessings to the Students Congress and to the villagers whom I served to the best of my capacity. Alas! I will not live to see that day when power will be in your hands. To the labourers, my word is country's freedom first and your economic demands afterwards."

She died in the early hours on October 21, 1945. Her journey to the cremation ground was followed by a huge crowd, and wreaths were offered all along the route. To pay homage to her the citizens of Delhi held a prayer meeting at Gandhi grounds. Tributes were paid to her as a valiant daughter of Mother India, a rich glittering pearl in the crown of freedom, an embodiment of patriotism, valour and sacrifice.

It is sad that while many illustrious and not-so-illustrious freedom fighters have been deified and eulogised, those like Satyawati, who worked selflessly and laid their lives at the altar of the country's freedom have scarcely been recognised. □

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