

Women's Participation In The National Movement In The United Provinces, 1937-47

by Poonam Saxena

Before the Home Rule agitation, UP was politically a fairly quiet province. Congress activity had died down after an initial spurt in the late 1880s.

With the Home Rule agitation, UP entered the political arena again, and so did its women, though in a small way. The significance of the Home Rule agitation lay in the extension of political activity to new areas, groups and something like a new generation. The activities of the Home Rule League, founded soon after World War I, consisted in organising discussion groups and reading rooms in cities, mass sale of pamphlets and lecture tours, but it was significantly different from older moderate politics in intensity and extent. In UP, Annie Besant's League had found its main support from the urban professional groups like Kayasthas, Kashmiri Brahmins and some Muslims. At this stage, UP was without strongly established political traditions, whether extremist or moderate.

Annie Besant, as Home Rule president and Congress president, made special appeals to women. She even established a women's branch of the Home Rule League to enable women to meet and discuss political issues without the inhibiting presence of men. She claimed that the League's "best recruits and recruiters" were to be found among women. She commented: "The strength of the Home Rule movement is rendered ten-fold greater by the adherence to it of large numbers of women, the endurance, the self-sacrifice of the feminine nature."

With the advent of Gandhi, agitational

politics in UP—as elsewhere in the country—changed drastically. Gandhi had evolved his political style while fighting racial discrimination affecting Indians in South Africa. It involved careful training of disciplined cadres, nonviolent *satyagraha* involving peaceful violation of specific laws, mass courting of arrests,



Annie Besant

occasional *hartals* and spectacular marches.

There was meticulous attention to organisational, particularly financial, details, and a readiness for negotiations and compromise, on occasions leading to abrupt unilateral withdrawals which were by no means always popular. These tactics were successful in the drawing in of masses while at the same time keeping

mass activity strictly pegged down to certain forms pre-determined by the leader, and above all, to the methods of non-violence.

Gandhi's placing of women at the centre of his movements since his South Africa days typified his method and his goal. Indian women epitomised the plight of Indians as a whole, and exemplified the technique of turning apparent liabilities into assets which Gandhi recommended to Indians.

For Gandhi, the nationalist movement was not merely a political struggle but a means of regenerating and rejuvenating society. The evils in Indian society which needed reform included the treatment of women (along with untouchability and Hindu-Muslim hatred). All this was incorporated in Gandhi's vision of a new society.

He encouraged women to participate in all aspects and phases of nationalist activity, particularly in the constructive programme and the nonviolent *satyagrahas* initiated by him. Constructive work included relief work in emergencies like floods, the founding of national schools, the promotion of *khadi* and other cottage crafts, anti-liquor propaganda, and social work

Women demonstrators confronting the police among low castes and untouchables.

Gandhi believed that a woman's nature was particularly suited to nonviolent *satyagraha*, for it required not physical strength but moral courage and spiritual

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determination. Gandhi liberally used religious concepts and terminology to mobilise women in the freedom struggle as an integral part of women's *dharma* and their personal salvation. Political activity was *desk seva* and a part of every woman's *dharma*.

The first time Gandhi launched an all-India *satyagraha* was in 1919 against the provocative enactment of the Rowlatt Act. The Act attempted to make wartime restrictions on civil rights permanent through a system of special courts and detention without trial for a maximum of two years. It affected only active politicians but any attempt to intensify the powers of the police was bound to evoke much more widespread alarm, considering the latter's notoriety everywhere as petty oppressors.

All sections of Indian political opinion deeply resented the Act but it was Gandhi who ultimately suggested a practicable form of an all-India mass protest, going beyond petitioning but not intended to be unrestrained or violent. The plan initially was a rather modest one of volunteers courting arrest by public sale of prohibited works; it was extended by Gandhi to include the novel and far more radical idea of an all-India *hartal*.

Though UP women may not have participated extensively or very visibly in the Rowlatt *satyagraha*, Gandhi undoubtedly gained considerable tacit support from them. Among those who demonstrated their anger over the Act by attending his meetings in Allahabad were a large number of women, many of whom were in *parda*. At the end of his speeches, Gandhi often sent around volunteers to collect money for a fund to help the families of those who would be arrested while offering *satyagraha*. He made a special appeal to the women present to donate whatever jewellery they were wearing.

The noncooperation and Khilafat movement of the early twenties saw a much wider participation of women. With rumours of a harsh peace treaty to be imposed on the defeated Ottoman Empire

fast becoming a certainty, the Khilafat movement rapidly gained momentum in 1919-20. The apparently distant and unreal Khilafat issue acquired new dimensions through the diverse interpretations given to it at local levels. Lower class Muslims in UP are said to have related Khilafat to the Urdu word *khilaf* (against), and used it as a symbol of general revolt against authority. The Allahabad meeting of the Central Khilafat Committee in June 1920 announced a programme of four stage non-cooperation (boycott of titles, civil services, police and army and finally nonpayment of taxes).

The noncooperation programme

(including public bonfires) and boycott of the coming visit of the prince of Wales in Nov-ember. Gandhi gave a call for flooding the prisons with volunteers and the organising of volunteer bands was now given top priority.

UP during noncooperation became one of the strongest bases of the Congress with 328,966 members in July 1921 (a figure exceeded only in Bihar) and UP won from this time a leading position in national politics which it has retained till today.

An astounding 900,000 volunteers had been enrolled by the Congress by the beginning of 1922 and there was a massive growth also in Khilafat volunteer



Women demonstrators confronting the police

included students leaving government controlled schools and colleges and lawyers giving up practice. Students and educated people were also urged to take up spinning on a voluntary basis, as a symbol of identification with the rural masses and as a quick road to *swadeshi*. By April 1921, the emphasis had shifted to raising one crore of rupees for the Tilak Swaraj Fund, enrolling one crore Congress members, and installing 20 lakh *charkhas* by June 30. By July, Congress took on a more militant stance, concentrating on boycott of foreign cloth

associations. Organised noncooperation in UP was mainly an affair of cities and small towns; as elsewhere, however, more elemental movements in the countryside were perhaps equally significant.

Women were a powerful opinion group within the Khilafat movement, supporting it with their religious faith and financially with their ornaments. One of the most active and outspoken of them was the indefatigable AH matriarch, Bi Amman. After appearing before the 1917 Muslim League where she spoke veiled, she later toured with her sons for the Khilafat cause.

She advanced to the point where she would appear on a public platform veiled but would then lift her veil to speak to the crowd, explaining that all those present were like her sons and daughters and thus there was no reason to observe *parda* before them.

Women In Khilafat

The Central Khilafat Committee began a women's branch in 1921 which held women's meetings throughout the country during the Khilafat and Tilak Swaraj fundraising campaigns. These meetings were addressed by Bi Amman, Begum Mohammed Ali and Begum Hasrat Mohani (wife of Muslim League and Khilafat leader Hasrat Mohani). The women were exhorted to do their duty to god by supporting the men and imbuing their children with religious faith and patriotism. They were asked to economise on household expenses to support the cause and give up wearing of foreign cloth. The women responded with enthusiasm—gifts of gold bangles, anklets and earrings were made for the funds, and quantities of foreign cloth for the bonfires.

When the Ali brothers were arrested in 1921, the Ali women showed their determination to persevere by replacing their men on their tours, promoting *swadeshi* and also fund collecting. Begum Mohammed AH continued the tour after her husband was arrested. Bi Amman wired Gandhi that she was ready to work till her last breath, and that her sons' arrest should not be allowed to slow down the efforts to attain freedom. She told her sons to be brave, telling them that god was always with them. She stopped off in Lahore en route to Karachi and addressed a mass meeting, saying passionately that for every worker imprisoned hundreds would spring up and asked how the government could imprison them all. She herself was ready to go to jail or even the gallows for the sake of her country and religion.

At a meeting in Allahabad in November 1923, Gandhi told the women that under Ravana's rule even Sita wore rough clothes made of tree bark for 14 years. So



Bi Amman

they, who knew that wearing *swadeshi* was an important step towards liberating the country, should look upon spinning of *khadi* as a pious duty. He made the same appeal in Kanpur too.

The boycott of foreign cloth shops was intimately linked to production of *khadi*—one could not exist without the other. The strategy of picketing foreign cloth and liquor shops was that batches of 20 to 25 women would plant

Women picketing a shop selling foreign cloth themselves near the shops and make

appeals to all visitors. If reasoning and pleas failed, the women would lie down in front of the shops, so that the visitors would have to walk over them in order to reach the shop. A few volunteers sometimes dramatised the movement, On coming across a particularly resistant merchant or customer, they would lie down in front of the trucks until the prohibited merchandise was returned to the stores.

The response by women in UP, though limited, was fairly remarkable. Magazines and journals of the age took up Gandhi's

refrain of *swadeshi*, *charkha* and *khadi*. Women's journals like *Stri Darpan*, *Prabha* and *Grihalakshmi* published poems and songs in praise of the *charkha* and *swadeshi*.

Meetings and processions were organised in politically important cities like Allahabad and Lucknow. Lucknow was a centre of activity at this time. Meetings were prohibited under section 144 but such weapons of the government did not put off nationalist minded persons. They held their meetings in the Congress Committee's office which was presided over by Mrs Abdul Qadir. Women were urged to take up *khadi* and to exhort men to join the national movement. A committee was formed, with Mrs. Abdul Qadir as president, to carry out the work among women.

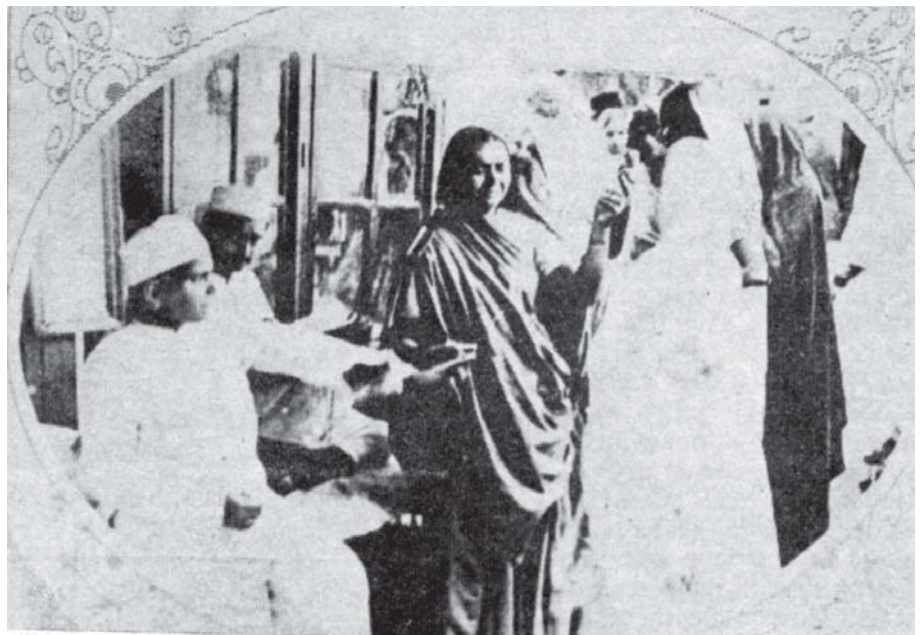
Political gatherings of women took place in smaller towns too like Bijnor, Moradabad, Gonda, Gorakhpur and Bareilly. In Bijnor, for example, Mrs Gyanvati Vishwamitra, who was from an Arya Samaj background, came out of her home after her husband's arrest in 1922 to join in spreading the doctrine of *swadeshi*. At the time of her marriage itself, she had taken to wearing only *khadi*. According to her, in Bijnor there was only a small group of 40 to 50 middle class women which actively worked to spread Gandhi's message. Nevertheless, the creed of *swadeshi* was gaining in popularity.

Meerut also saw the active participation of women in popularising *khadi*. Parvati Devi, also from an Arya Samaj background, and educated up to the middle level, was arrested and given two years imprisonment for a fiery speech. She had married out of her caste but lost her husband a couple of years after her marriage. She took to teaching and became a head-mistress of Arya Kanya Pathshalas in Delhi and elsewhere. While giving evidence before the magistrate who sentenced her, she addressed the women of India: "The destiny of the Indian people" she said, "rests with its womenfolk. Unless we, the women can be

moved by the distress, poverty and enslavement of *Bharatmata* as Gandhiji is, the day of freedom will remain far, far off. A great duty and responsibility has been given to us. Let us be willing to take upon our shoulders the responsibility which is ours and to hear with fortitude all the suffering and the pain and thereby move nearer to the freedom of our motherland."

In Jhansi, the mother of the president of the City Congress Committee came out to organise a demonstration of 500 women. Another active worker, Rani Rajendra Kumari, belonged to the landed aristocracy. She had received no formal education though she had been taught at

in UP, it is significant that they responded to Gandhi's call at all. At the same time, the movement probably contributed to building up awareness among these women, of themselves, as individuals and as a group. It is not a coincidence that around this time, various women's organisations were formed. For example, the Manila Swarajya Sabha at Kanpur, Stree Samaj at Aligarh and Meerut, Stree Mandal at Lucknow and Prantiya Mahila Parishad at Jhansi. These organisations held weekly or monthly meetings, and deliberated upon the popularising of *swadeshi*, eradication of social evils, reforms and education. Many of them still talked in terms of exerting their influence



Women picketing a shop selling foreign cloth

home. She was married at 13, but her liberal minded husband encouraged her to go out and join the national movement. She took to *khadi* in 1921 and began addressing meetings of women, encouraging them to come forth and join the movement. She served a prison sentence in this and later movements.

Comparatively few women participated actively in the non-cooperation movement. But given the backward social conditions

best from the home but they all preached the general upliftment of women and emphasised the adoption of *swadeshi*.

Peasant Women

The early twenties also saw the rise of a strong peasant movement in certain districts of the Awadh region of UP. The movement was headed by Jhinguri Singh, a disgruntled underproprietor of Pratapgarh, and Baba Ram Chandra, a *sanyasi* who had come to that district after

a spell as an indentured labourer in Fiji. Baba Ram Chandra's movement characteristically combined appeals for peasant solidarity with considerable use of the *Ramayana*, and caste slogans. The demands and methods were fairly moderate—abolition or reduction of cesses and *begar*; refusal to cultivate *bedakhli* land, social boycott of oppressive landlords (*nai-dhobi bundh*), organisation through *panchayats*. But the strength of the *kisan* movement was vividly revealed in September 1920, when a peaceful but massive peasant demonstration at Pratapgarh obtained the release of Baba Ram Chandra, who had been arrested on a trumped up theft charge a few days before.

In the recently discovered papers of Baba Ram Chandra there is some interesting material pertaining specifically to women. It reveals that his work extended to peasant women—*kisanins*—too. The issues dealt with included marriage, education and the right to property. Apparently, a meeting of some *kisanins* was held under one Jaikumari Ji where some rules were made. It was stated that if a woman's marriage was proved, she should get full property rights after her husband's death. This was a fairly radical demand, given the state of property law in the province at the time. Every woman was also required to give one anna, annually, as subscription, and it was resolved that women would hold meetings in every village and ask the government to make necessary laws for the redress of their grievances.

Also among the papers is a draft of a leaflet on child marriage. It points out that people show wisdom in dealing with their animals.

A bull is taken to his mate for "marriage" only when he is a young adult. If one were to show the same wisdom in relation to little girls, the custom of child marriage would disappear.

Baba Ram Chandra's use of religious idiom was directed at women also. He drew the attention of the *kisanins* to the role Kaikeyi played as a mother. The whole web

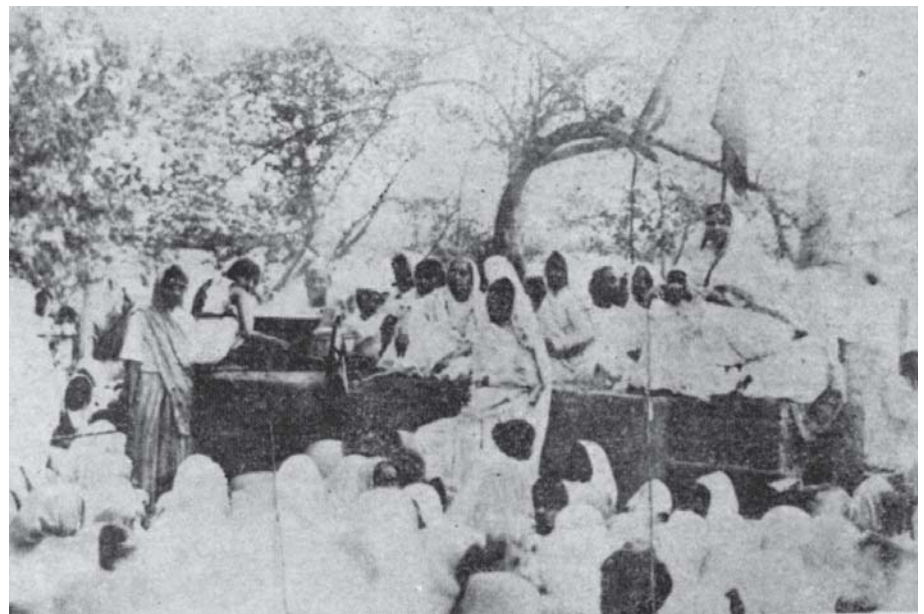
of intrigue was woven so as to send Ram away to fight and destroy the evil of Ravana. He exhorted them to play the same role and send their sons to fight the evil of alien rule.

In the face of a lack of more substantial information, it is difficult to draw any conclusions regarding women's participation in such peasant movements. But it seems safe to assume that the mobilisation of women did play a role in Baba Ram Chandra's scheme of peasant struggle.

Meanwhile, a pulsating atmosphere of nationalist fervour coupled with growing awareness of women's rights built up during much of the twenties. In the small

For Complete Independence

The stated objective was now complete independence, and the methods from the beginning involved deliberate violation of the law, not merely noncooperation with foreign rule. The number of jailgoers was consequently at least three times the 1921-22 figure. Participation now involved much greater danger than in 1921, for a frightened government from May onwards adopted a policy of senseless brutality even towards absolutely peaceful *satyagrahis*. Civil disobedience primarily involved urban participation and controlled peasant mobilisation on issues selected by Gandhian leadership—breaking of salt law, no revenue, picketing of liquor shops and



Kamala Nehru, Swaroop Rani Nehru and other women preparing salt in defiance of the law, Allahabad, 1930

town of Saharanpur, Surya Prabha Devi organised the biggest demonstration against the Simon Commission. In Meerut, Parvati Devi told women that their fight for freedom was on two fronts—against the alien government and against the narrowmindedness of Indian men. But it was with the civil disobedience movement that women's participation seemed, to contemporaries, to become truly revolutionary.

non-payment of *chaukidari* taxes.

This scale of the response to Gandhi's call in January 1932 can be gauged in part from the statistics for convictions and reports by local government. In the period ending April 1933, nearly 75,000 people were convicted, of whom about 70,000 were jailed. The provinces with the highest number of convicts were Bihar and Orissa followed by UP (14,659).

A sizeable block of women (3,630) were

among the civil disobedience convicts. UP had a large number, and Meerut's commissioner reported from his part of the province :

"A feature, which is very difficult to estimate but which is becoming more and more important, is the position taken up by women. All women are now becoming politicians, only a few are ready to take part in picketing or processions but all the younger women whether Hindus or Muhammadans, who have received any form of education, are full of 'nationalist' sympathy. Being possessed of less sober judgement they are more and more led away by what they see in the papers and are ready to believe any state-ment which is circulated in the English or Vernacular press." In Allahabad, it was Mrs Motilal Nehru who inaugurated the salt campaign by preparing salt in front of the police station. In an incident in Allahabad during National Week (April 6-13, 1932) police *lathi* charged a procession led by her, and she received many *lathi* blows, as a result of which she became unconscious.

Not a single district in the province was left untouched—women's participation in the movement was everywhere on a large scale. In Aligarh, women took out processions and *prabhat pheris* and picketed foreign cloth and liquor shops. A number of women were arrested and imprisoned, one of whom, Ganga Devi, had to bear the death of her three month old son in jail. In Agra, too, the boycott of foreign cloth and picketing of shops selling such cloth were the main tasks of women. Mrs Sukhdevi Paliwal and over 35 other women worked at securing pledges from businessmen that they would not sell foreign cloth for the next six months. On the first day itself, they secured 150 pledges. The shops of those businessmen who refused to sign the pledge were subjected to *dharna*, and ultimately many of them had to submit to the pressure. In a speech in Agra, Motilal Nehru declared that in all of India, Agra was the first place where there was a seal on foreign cloth in the entire city.

The enthusiasm for *khadi* was so great that in Ferczabad, Sukhdevi Paliwal urged priests to clothe temple deities in *khadi* and met with considerable success. Many temples put up signboards that no one wearing foreign clothes could enter. Wherever the priests of a temple resisted, their temples were subjected to *dhamas*.



Swaroop Rani, wife of Motilal Nehru

At Kiravali, a group of women under the leadership of Vidyavati Rathore, heedless of their safety in the face of police atrocities, cut through contingents of mounted police. Mrs Rathore was immediately arrested. In Dehradun, when Sharmada Tyagi went picketing foreign cloth shops, she was severely injured in a *lathi* charge. Also a Congress dictator in this period, she was arrested and sentenced to six months rigorous imprisonment. Rather than pay the fine imposed on her, she allowed the police to take away her household goods.

At the time of her arrest, she had a six month old daughter, Uma Rani, who also went to jail with her. Other activists in Dehradun included Chandravati Lakanpal, also a Congress dictator in this period, who was imprisoned for a year for

violating section 144. She had gone from village to village making women politically conscious.

In Meerut, picketing liquor, cutting toddy trees and making bonfires of foreign cloth were the special tasks of the Mahila Satyagraha Samiti. Many women abandoned the veil and came forth to join the movement. At the famous Nauchandi Mela, women successfully picketed foreign shops. A number of shopkeepers signed pledges banning foreign cloth which were duly stamped by the Samiti. While picketing, the women had often to put up with abusive, taunting remarks.

Women's Sacrifices

Congress worker Urmila Shastri even addressed a meeting of prostitutes and spoke for an hour to such purpose that the prostitutes took an oath they would only wear *khadi*. On her way to jail, which she called the *swaraj mandir*, Mrs Shastri made a very sentimental appeal to the citizens of Meerut : "You have called me sister and now as a sister taking her leave I ask something of you—let there not be a single home in Meerut from which at least one person does not come forward to cooperate in this struggle, thi& *yagna*." Meerut citizens responded equally emotionally with cries of "Let there be a sacrifice from each home."

Rajendra Kumari of Hamirpur discarded *parda* after the arrest of her husband and participated in the boycott of foreign cloth. At this time, she had a two and a half year old son with her. Subsequently, she was arrested no less than four times during the movement, and she also acted as a Congress dictator in her district. Rama Devi too, after the arrest of her husband, discarded *parda* and participated in the national movement, and was arrested. Her husband's house and husband's parents' house were confiscated, and after their release the entire family lived in the open for many months as no one was prepared to give them shelter for fear of government reprisal.

Kanpur was one of the most active centres of the movement. Tara Aggarwal

and Brijrani Misra were arrested for picketing at temples and *ghats*, and sending back those who came dressed in foreign material. Tara Aggarwal, (who was encouraged by her mother-in-law and husband to join the movement) chid them, saying : “Why do you want to pollute the waters of the Ganga with these clothes ?”

In Farrukhabad, Ganga Devi, a widow, refused to pay land revenue and lost a good bit of her land in forfeit. She was a strong-minded person who had taken to teaching after her husband’s death. She was not too well educated but educated enough to teach in schools. Deeply influenced by Gandhi, she participated in the *satyagraha* movement despite the impediments her husband’s family placed in her path. In this district women were also able to win over the help of hard drinking Pathans to close down the liquor shops.

Women also egged on their menfolk to join the movement. Wrote a UP police official : “The Indian woman is struggling for domestic and national liberty at the same time and like a woman she is utterly unreasonable and illogical in her demands and in her methods but like a woman she has enormous influence over the stronger sex...many loyal officials including police officers have suffered more from taunts and abuse from their female relatives than from any other source.”

Premchand And Shivrani

Never again would the province see such extensive participation of women in activities like picketing and boycott. This was reflected vividly in the writings of Premchand. Innumerable short stories and novels of his celebrate the deep involvement of women in the civil disobedience movement. *Juloos* is about a police officer who hopes to impress his bosses by dispersing the crowds cheering a nationalist procession. Ibrahim, an old freedom fighter, is trampled under the hooves of the police mounts, and later dies. There follows a funeral procession, and the inspector is present again at the head of the police force. Among the front

rank of women processionists he sees his wife, and is deeply ashamed of himself.

Sharab Ki Dukan echoes the boycott of liquor shops by nationalist volunteers, men and women. A woman volunteer offers to picket liquor shops but a young man persuades her that liquor shops are haunted by “bad characters” and are not fit places for ladies. He himself goes there but is beaten up in the course of the picketing. The woman volunteer comes on the scene the following day and is also injured. Eventually, the liquor licence holder gives up his licence and instead opens a shop to sell *swadeshi* cloth.

Samar Yatra is about a village leader arrested by the police for harbouring *satyagrahis*, following which others come forward to take his place. The most moving example is that of a 75 year old Nehri, who, out of a sense of humiliation because she cannot make any offering, joins the crowd of younger people, and dances with joy. She joins the volunteers, feeling as though she were flying in a chariot towards heaven.

In *Patni Se Pati*, the life of an Indian government official who imitates the British, is changed when his wife, despite his instructions, goes to a public meeting arranged by the Congress and bids for the single paisa, the only earning of a blind beggar who donates it to the party funds. The story ends with the resignation of the official, much to the delight of his wife, who sees in this his liberation.

Jail is an echo of the repressive measures imposed by the British against the movement for the boycott of foreign goods. It is woven around two women greatly attached to each other in prison. One of them—a widow—is arrested and sentenced. The second one apologises, and is released but not before she has faced the jeers of her jail-mates for doing so. The woman however, returns soon, for when the movement gathers momentum, and her husband, mother-in-law and only son are all killed in a firing, she is freed from all worries and again courts arrest.

She comes back to the widow who is feeling lonely These are but some examples from Premchand’s prolific output of the early thirties which so compellingly record this remarkable phenomenon.

Premchand, the nationalist, is well known. But less known is the fact that his wife Shivrani Devi too was an ardent nationalist. In 1930, moved to tears by a fiery speech delivered by Mrs Motilal Nehru at Lucknow, Shivrani Devi joined a band of eleven women who formed a Mahila Ashram to serve the cause of national liberation through mobilising womenfolk. The Ashram soon grew into a very large body with about 700 members and an elected working committee. Shivrani Devi was among those elected to the committee.

On November 10, 1930, she was arrested along with six others on a charge of picketing the shops selling foreign clothes. According to her, she had to court arrest because she was restless to ensure that at least one person from the family sought imprisonment. “The children were too young and my husband’s health could not stand the strain.” A fortnight later, she was tried and sentenced to one and a half months’ imprisonment. Premchand visited her in jail, sent her books, and seems to have been worried about whether she would come out of jail alive or not. He took her photograph, hung it in the living room with a garland around it, and lost 14 pounds! (His wife lost only seven).

She came out of jail in January 1931. Wrote Premchand : “My wife is back from the prison. But she is not fully satisfied yet and may go in again. She wants independence all at once—not in instalments.” Shivrani Devi’s involvement in the national movement provided her with themes for short stories. She was a talented writer herself, though allegations that many of her stories were written by her famous husband are probably bound to come up. For example, *Giraftari* is about a woman who continues her husband’s nationalist work, after he is arrested, and achieves immense popularity. When the

police come to arrest her, there is a massive public protest. Like a true *satyagrahi*, she calms down the mob and appeals to them not to stand in her way, but to let her discharge her responsibilities to the motherland. The crowd obeys her and disperses peacefully, whereas she goes to jail. There were many other stones written by Shivrani Devi, dealing with women's participation in the national movement.

Quit India

Following the civil disobedience movement the nationalists became engrossed in electoral politics, and there was no possibility of a mass movement. Only after 1939 when the Congress ministries had resigned, and the British continued to reject Congress demands, did pressures build up within the Congress for action, and there was talk of launching

by the autumn of 1941 with most prisoners released. This was by far the weakest and least effective of all the Gandhian campaigns and stands in the sharpest contrast to what would happen a year later in August 1942.

Women were arrested in large numbers in the 1951 individual *satyagraha* movement from virtually every district. Almost all were given rigorous imprisonment ranging from a few months to over a year. But the movement never really took off. People were tired and some were evading arrest.

The summer of 1942 found Gandhi in a strange and uniquely militant mood. Leave India to God or to anarchy, he repeatedly urged the British: "This orderly disciplined anarchy should go and if as a result there is complete lawlessness I would risk it."

jail going would not do", Gandhi declared in his passionate "Do or die" speech the same day.

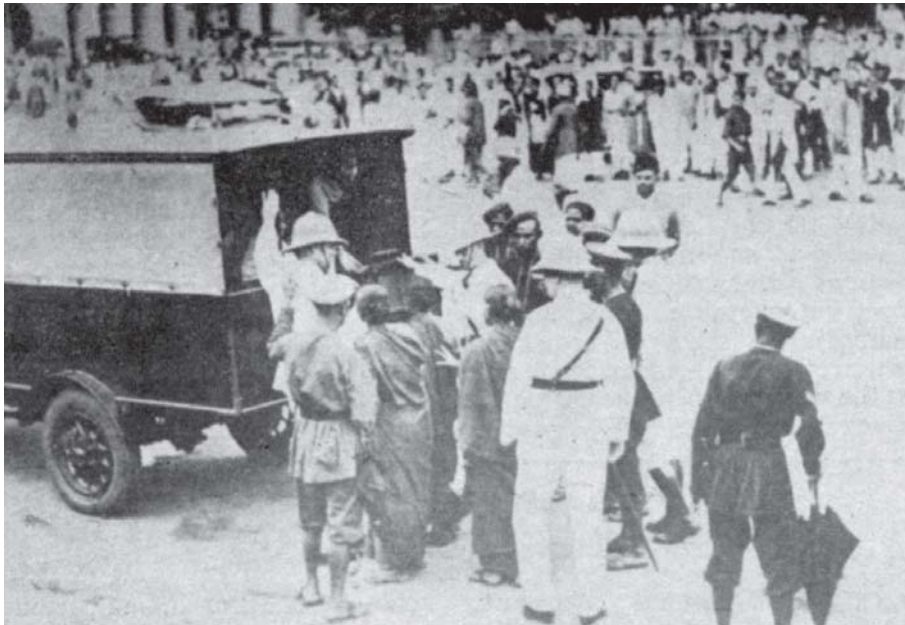
The early morning round-up of the Congress leaders on August 9 unleashed an unprecedented and countrywide wave of mass fury. Strikes took place in Lucknow, Kanpur and many other places. The urban middle class was extremely prominent in the first phase, spearheaded by students. From about the middle of August, however, the focus shifted to the countryside with militant students fanning out from centres like Banaras, destroying communications on a massive scale, and leading a veritable peasant rebellion against white authority, strongly reminiscent in some ways of 1857. Eastern UP was a major centre in this phase.

Official statistics give some indication both of the extent of the upsurge as well as of the intense repression which was unleashed to crush the movement. By the end of 1943, 91,836 people had been arrested with the second highest figures from UP (16,796).

R.H. Niblett, district magistrate of Azamgarh, in eastern UP, who was removed for being too mild, has recorded in his fascinating diary numerous instances of "bouts of official hysteria, with reprisals the rule of the day, and collective fines as a kind of official dacoity." He recalls how he tried in vain to warn his men "to remember you are neither out on *shikar*, nor on an errand of destruction." Free use was made of public flogging, as well as of torture.

Reign Of Terror

The official reign of terror in UP affected women seriously and reports were received of harassment of women by officials from all parts of the province. Reports came in from a number of villages in Basti district about police harassment of women. Ever since the threat of the advance of the war upon India, Congress had been concerned with the question of the molestation of women, and with the terrorising of villagers by officials. During the Quit India movement there was a widespread preoccupation with the threat of rape. The agitators had long portrayed



Women being herded into a police van

civil disobedience again. Congress left the time and form of the movement entirely to Gandhi who at last sanctioned civil disobedience, but of a particularly limited kind. The sole issue was freedom of speech, more specifically the right to make public antiwar pronouncements. Individual Congressmen would court arrest by making antiwar speeches. At its height in June 1941, about 20,000 had gone to jail but the movement had petered out

Though the need for, nonviolence was always reiterated, the famous "Quit India" resolution passed by the Bombay session of the AICC in August, 1942, followed up its call for mass struggle on nonviolent lines on the widest possible scale, "inevitably" under Gandhi, with the significant rider that "every Indian who desires freedom and strives for it must be his own guide...." "Let every Indian consider himself to be a free man... Mere

British exploitation of India's resources in metaphors of sexual violation to suggest British contempt for all standards of civilised conduct and to induce Indians to respond to political challenge as they would to a family insult. With an added access of anger, natural British propensities would, it was feared, inevitably engender unprecedented atrocities.

Virtually all the districts of the province saw the involvement of women who were once again imprisoned. In Meerut, 80 women and girl students, participating in a procession, were arrested and given prison sentences ranging from two to six months. In a procession led by Mrs Shakuntala Goyal, village women who had no connection with politics participated and were imprisoned.

In UP, students, including girl students, were among the most active participants of the movement. In the first few days following August 9, the pattern in UP was one of urban disorder, instigated primarily by students. In Allahabad on August 12, students attacked the district offices and had to be fired on. Girl students were in the forefront of the procession.

What emerges with complete clarity is that over the years, each district of UP had developed its core of committed women workers who took part in and were imprisoned during successive Congress agitations. Apart from the well known women workers of most districts, it is a very difficult task to arrive at the social backgrounds of these women. Newspapers and official documents, when they do mention women activists, concentrate on well known names, like the women of the Nehru family. Where names of other women who went to prison are given in official publications and documents, there are no biographical details.

But it would be fairly safe to hazard the guess and there is some data to substantiate this—that these women, from cities, small district towns, villages, came from diverse backgrounds. Most of them were from ordinary, and not highly educated, affluent or liberal families. A striking fact is that a majority had male

relatives who were also deeply involved in the nationalist movement. Arya Samaj back-grounds were common to many of them.

Conclusion

Politically active women in UP saw themselves, first and foremost, purely as representatives of their parties and only then as women representatives. They were in no way inclined towards a confrontation with men. Similarly, for the male activists too, the overriding aim of ousting the British over-whelmed all else.

The Congress, as a party, recognised the usefulness of having women as an important part of its agitations, yet it seldom initiated or carried out concerted programmes to improve the social or economic position of women. It may be argued that the very act of participation in nationalist politics by women would perform improve their position, and this is no doubt true. For one, this participation created a tradition of female activity in UP which continues till today. It remains a state

that sends up relatively large number of women legislators both to parliament and to the state assembly. At the same time, there has been no radical change in the overall social or economic position of women in the province. UP remains exceedingly backward when it comes to issues like women's literacy, general political awareness, employment opportunities, social customs and so on.

Gandhi's high moral stature was responsible to a large extent for instilling confidence in men to "let" their women out and in women themselves to plunge into the movement

It is axiomatic that during times of crises, extraordinary times—as the years of the national movement were—restrictions imposed on women in the normal course of events are temporarily relaxed, only to be resumed when the crisis has passed. □

(This article consists of a series of extracts selected by Manushi from the authors MPhil dissertation)

Readers' Eye

Meaning or Interpretation?

In the book *Baby Names* by Vimla Patil, listing Indian personal names for boys and girls, with their meanings, the name Subrata for a male is said to mean "devoted to what is right" while the same name for a female is said to mean "devoted to husband." In fact the word means approximately "a good commitment" and does not inherently contain any reference to a husband.

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From a sign outside the emu enclosure, Delhi zoo, which assumes that the currently prevalent roles in human society are natural and universal, and anything different is a "reversal":

"Reversal of Roles.

Emu is the largest bird of Australia and second only to the ostrich among the world's birds. Gregarious, rapid runner and capable swimmer, the emu is flightless..... The female is very dominating. The roles of the sexes are reversed: the female initiates courtship behaviour. Its only function after the breeding season is to lay eggs. The male on its own incubates the eggs for 58-63 days and protects the 7-12 young ones as soon as they hatch. The male can only grunt: the female utters loud, echoing booms."

(sent in by Sue Darlow)

Readers are invited to send in items for this column.
