

## SAROJINI NAIDU – EMANCIPATOR OF INDIAN WOMEN

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### ABSTRACT

*Sarojini Naidu, born in 1879 in Hyderabad, emerged as a pivotal figure in India's struggle for independence, seamlessly blending her poetic brilliance with fervent activism for anti-imperialism, women's emancipation, and civil rights. Educated in England and inspired by global cultural encounters, she championed the education and empowerment of Indian women, viewing their upliftment as essential to national progress. Her powerful oratory and leadership in movements such as the Women's Indian Association and the Indian National Congress amplified women's roles in the freedom struggle. Naidu's participation in key political events, including deputations to British authorities and the Round Table Conferences, underscored her commitment to securing political rights for women and justice for India. Her poetic legacy, though limited by her dedication to activism post-Jallianwala Bagh, earned her the title "Nightingale of India." This article explores her multifaceted contributions to India's freedom movement and women's empowerment, highlighting her enduring vision for a united and equitable nation.*

**Keywords:** *Sarojini Naidu; women's emancipation; civil rights; empowerment of Indian women; freedom struggle etc.*

### INTRODUCTION

Renowned poet Sarojini Naidu played a significant role in India's fight for freedom. She promoted anti-imperialism, women's liberation, and civil rights. On February 13, 1879, Sarojini Naidu—a poetess, statesman, and peacemaker—was born in Hyderabad. Her father, the distinguished Bengali physician Dr. Aghornath Chattopadhyaya, founded the Nizam College and dedicated his life to the teaching profession till his passing. He was a well-known scientist. Following her graduation from Hyderabad, Sarojini was sent on a Nizams' scholarship to England in 1895 to pursue further education<sup>1</sup>. She first attended Girton College at Cambridge University after attending King's College in London. When her health failed, she had to return to India in 1898 and was unable to continue her education. She traveled to Switzerland and Italy for several months before heading back to India. Her desire for independence appears to have been sparked by Italy's rich historical history.

Struggle for freedom from British rule was a heady thing in those days. There were underground movements. In fact, there was revolution in the air. Mrs. Naidu made herself champion of every cause—from literature to education, women's emancipation and social reform. She plunged headlong in the fiercer political arena. She held on her own with indomitable courage. Many a time she quelled violent crowds. Her voice was not loud and tinkled more often than not with laughter; that throaty chuckle we all know so well. Nonetheless it could command. Many a time people were carried away by her oratory and afterwards would remark what a marvelous speech<sup>2</sup>.

Two women had left a lasting impression on Indian women's minds before Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) emerged as the movement's unquestioned leader: Annie Besant (1847–1933) and Sarojini Naidu (1879–1949). By increasing the participation of women in India's national movement, they did a huge contribution to the country<sup>3</sup>. Sarojini Naidu a delicate poetess who had spent her days rhyming tender verse, with same ease she fought very tough for the right of Indian women<sup>4</sup>.

We know that Sarojini Naidu is a great freedom fighter. Along with fighting for getting independence to India, she put equal effort for the development of Indian Women. In 1906, on the dias of 'Indian Social Conference', Calcutta, she gave a lecture on the subject of 'The Education of Indian Women'. clearly explain her empathy for the plight of Indian Women. On this dais she said that Indian men reduced the status of Indian women for luscious 'halwa' and the savoury 'omelette'<sup>5</sup>. I strongly advocated Indian men to restore to your women their ancient rights, without Indian women's active co-operation at all points of progress all your Congresses and Conferences are in vain. If we educate our women our nation would take care of itself<sup>6</sup>. Her speech evoked widespread interest in the minds of educated Indians. She could understand the reason behind the backwardness of Indian women during her stay in England by a comparative study of England and Indian cultures. Mrs. Naidu opined 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<sup>7</sup>.

In 1906, Sarojini addressed the Indian Social Conference in Calcutta on "The Education of Indian Women". This speech caused widespread interest. She moved an Amendment urging the Hindu community to supplement "every effort of Government in the direction of Female Education." The wording in the Amendment of "Hindu" was changed by Sarojini to "Indian", as she felt there should be "no distinction of caste, creed or province"<sup>8</sup>. In Indian National Social Conference held at Bombay on 30 December, 1915 Sarojini Naidu proposed a resolution on rights of women. She urged the Indian women to consider serving poor, responsibility, and solving greater problems of the generation. She urged the countrymen to give back a chance to develop our (Indian Women) body and spirit and mind in that evolution that will re-establish for you ideal womanhood<sup>9</sup>.

For all outwarded gaiety, Sarojini was a sad person. She had struggled in every possible field from the emancipation of women to emancipation of her country<sup>10</sup>. 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<sup>11</sup>. Sarojini Naidu addressed a meeting at the University Institute of Calcutta, organised by some local women's organisations to express their support for the Bill. The orthodox reactionary group crowded the hall in great numbers. Mrs. Naidu was quick enough to sense the situation. In her speech she demolished all orthodox arguments so thoroughly.

## **THE WOMEN'S INDIAN ASSOCIATION**

The first modern organization of women was started in 1917 by the great pioneering woman, Mrs. Margaret Cousins, in Madras under the inspiration and leadership of that magnetic personality, Mrs. Annie Besant, and her Home Rule Movement, which was then a dynamic stream giving expression to the people's restless urge for freedom. Mrs. Besant was interned by the British Indian Government as a result of this agitation, and that gave added inspiration to women. The Women's Indian Association, though functioning mainly in the South, became from its very inception a rallying point for women for action on an all-India plane. One of its first ventures was to lead a women's deputation to Mr. Montagu, then Secretary of State for India touring this country in 1919 to formulate political reforms to meet the rising demands of India. The first world war, then raging, had lent urgency to the situation. Indian women demanded the franchise and the right to participate in the political life of the country. The deputation was led by Sarojini Naidu. A decade later, the Women's Indian Association took the initiative in launching the All-India Women's Conference, the first mass Indian women's organization to come into being. At first it sought to concentrate its attention largely on the question of education, especially of women<sup>12</sup>.

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 persons or a small group of elites. Work had to be done to uplift the masses so that the average quality of the people continues to rise higher. She expressed this in an address entitled "The Hope of Tomorrow" given at the Madras Students Convention.

During her visit London, as Gokhale's emissary she was attracted by Gandhiji and for the rest of her life she remained loyal to him. Thus her role as a political worker was clearly defined. Self-government and inter communal harmony. To this she added the emancipation of women her special sphere of action. The Jallianwala Bagh tragedy wounded the nationalist heart at its deepest. India was restless and hypersensitive. Mrs. Naidu was touched to the quick by the tragedy " She felt the national disgrace much more keenly than she did at the partition of Bengal. Anglo-Indian bureaucracy at heart applauded General Dyer for his action in Jallianwala Bagh. Finding the justice

was not to be had in India, Sarojini Naidu joined a select deputation to Britain in July 1919 to protest against the severities of martial law administration and in particular seek justice for the outraged women of the Punjab. On 3rd June 1920 she made a speech at the Kingsway Hall in London on the 'agony and shame of the Punjab'. The upshot of the debate in the House of Commons left her still more disenchanted with the Raj. She wrote to the Secretary of State Edwin Montagu and impressed upon him that the Congress sub-committee's report on the Punjab atrocities was factually correct. The reply she received characterized the allegations as 'wholly untrue'.

Early in 1919 when Gandhiji inaugurated the Satyagraha Movement, Mrs. Naidu was one of the first to take the pledge. After this she did not know any rest and went to Bombay, Madras and Ahmedabad etc., to propagate the cause. Mrs. Naidu made special appeals to the women of the land against the Rowlatt Act<sup>13</sup>. Even though it primarily served the South, the Women's Indian Association quickly established itself as a hub for women's activism throughout all of India. One of its initial initiatives was to travel this nation in 1919 as a women's deputation to Mr. Montagu, the Secretary of State for India at the time, in order to develop political reforms to satisfy India's growing aspirations. The situation had become more urgent as a result of the then-raging First World War. Indian women asked to be granted the right to vote and to take part in national politics. Sarojini Naidu was in charge of the delegation<sup>14</sup>.

Women felt particularly thwarted, for the Conservative British Parliament refused to give the franchise to Indian women. How could they, when they were not prepared to give it to their own women? But in India there was force behind this demand from men and women alike. Sarojini Naidu and her male colleagues spoke with one voice before the Parliamentary Committee on Reforms in London. Finally, a compromise was arrived at, and Parliament agreed to leave this issue to be decided by the new Indian legislatures which were to be set up under the constitutional reforms. One of the earliest acts of the various provincial legislatures was to grant franchise rights to women, followed by permission to enter the legislatures as members. In the elections in 1926, women participated. When the legislatures opened in 1927 after the general elections only a few women could come in as members as the franchise was restricted, being limited only to tax-payers. As such it covered only a small number of people and an even smaller percentage of women<sup>15</sup>.

It was in 1917 that the question of women's franchise was also mooted. A deputation of women, with Sarojini Naidu as spokesman, presented a Memorandum to Mr. E. S. Montagu, then British Secretary of State for India, demanding votes for women as well as increased educational and health facilities. They stood firmly and unequivocally for the open door of election. This incident marked a distinct phase in the story of India's emergent womanhood. Public meetings and local conferences were held and, two years later, another deputation of women waited on the Parliamentary Committee on the Government of India Bill. It was decided that votes for women,

being a domestic subject, should be left to the Indian legislatures to decide. Women encountered my little opposition in these legislatures and, by 1929, they were enfranchised on the same terms as men, thereby becoming a very vital unit in national life. Another factor of deep concern to women at the time was the advent of Mahatma Gandhi on the political scene. As a man of vision and an uncompromising fighter, he was India's most effective' exponent of national and individual freedom. Both in his person and in his teachings Gandhiji embodied a synthetic approach to the problems of the people. He was not merely a politician but also a constructive worker, social reformer, friend of the poor and well-wisher of women. Under his direction, the Indian National Congress, established many years earlier, became a live instrument of progress.

His loyal attachment to truth and non-violence had a wide appeal; and when he placed before the country his ideals of swadeshi, non-cooperation and civil disobedience, the people were profoundly stirred and magnificently responsive. Women accepted his leadership as eagerly as did men. National consciousness was roused as never before and the people were made aware of their duties no less than of their rights.

A deputation led by Sarojini Naidu met Mr. Montague and Lord Chelmsford on 18 December 1917. The deputation was comprised of 14 members. Smt. Sarojini Naidu asked that when the franchise was drawn up women should be allowed the same opportunities of representation as men. Mr. Montagu's recorded the key points of the meeting in his diary. He found the deputation very interesting. Sarojini Naidu asked for education for girls, more medical colleges are the most important things they asked for. He described the appearance and qualities of Mrs. Naidu, saying that "the poetess, a very attractive and clever woman, but I believe a revolutionary at heart"<sup>16</sup>.

As the memorandum which the women's representatives submitted later to Mr. Montagu pointed out, the platform of the Indian National Congress had been open since its inception in 1885 to women who spoke, voted and served as delegates at the annual meetings of the organization. The deputation which waited on Mr. Montagu and the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, on December 18, 1917, comprised 14 members led by Smt. Sarojini Naidu. In the purely political sphere they asked that when the franchise was drawn up women should be allowed the same opportunities of representation as men. Mr. Montagu's entry in his diary for that day makes piquant reading: "We had an interesting deputation from the women, asking for education for girls, more medical colleges, etc., etc. One very nice-looking doctor from Bombay, Dr. Joshi, was present, the deputation being led by Mrs. Naidu, the poetess, a very attractive and clever woman, but I believe a revolutionary at heart. She is connected by marriage with Chattopadhyay, of India House fame.

They asked also for women's votes. The woman who drafted the address, Mrs. Cousins, is a well-known suffragette from London. Cousins himself is a theosophist, and one of Mrs. Besant's crowd. Mrs. Besant herself was there. They assured me that the Congress would willingly pass a unanimous request for women's suffrage." Such a resolution was in fact passed by the Calcutta

session of the Congress presided over by Mrs. Besant. It recorded its "opinion that the same tests be applied to women as to men in regard to the franchise and eligibility to all elective bodies concerned with local' government and education".

Sarojini Naidu firmly believed that for the success of freedom movement and the development of India education and development of women is a must. This firm belief was revealed by her speeches on many public platforms<sup>17</sup>. The sign of the awakening of women of India was also visible in the resolution moved by Mrs. Sarojini Naidu who demanded the right of franchise for women. But the leaders of the Congress considered it premature and persuaded her to withdraw it<sup>18</sup>. Under her inspiration, The Women's Indian 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<sup>19</sup>. It was under the leadership of Sarojini Naidu and others that the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) was founded. AIWC pressed for non-communal representation when the British Parliament was preparing for special representation in the constitution of India for minorities.

Sarojini Naidu toured England, America and Canada to bring awareness among them about the atrocities of Britishers in India. Her lectures in these countries for the major part were on "Interpretation of Hindu Womanhood."<sup>20</sup> Though she was born in a wealthy family and had studied in America, and had freedom to tour Europe and other continents, she always had great regret about the substandard life of Indian women and she always wanted to restore their lost rights. Sarojini Naidu firmly believed that the real test of nationhood is the woman. If the woman has taken her proper place in the society then the central problem is solved. The goal of society depends upon the unit of the woman. In India this problem can be solved by bringing upon the woman the sense of responsibility and impressing upon her the divinity and the conscientiousness, of her power and work of motherhood, ^he work of nation building must begin from the woman unit. It should be brought-to the mind of an Indian woman that she is not a toy, nor a chattel, nor an instrument of pleasure or amusement, but the inspirer of the spirit. No one can be greater than a good woman ; sisterhood of woman. is a nation-building work ; so also co-operation and help to suffering humanity are nation-building works<sup>21</sup>.

Mrs. Naidu was arrested on 21 May, 1930. Mrs. Naidu was released following Gandhi- Irwin pact signed on 5 March, 1931. During the year the Second Round Table Conference was convened in London. Mrs. Naidu attend the conference as an official representative of the women of India. It was in 1917 that the question of women's franchise was also mooted. A deputation of women, with Sarojini Naidu as spokesman, presented a Memorandum to Mr. E. S. Montagu, then British Secretary of State for India, demanding votes for women as well as increased educational and health facilities. They stood firmly and unequivocally for the open door of election. This incident

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In 1928, another woman— this time an Indian, Sarojini Naidu—was chosen President of the Indian National Congress. Women further consolidated their gains in 1930 when three of them—Sarojini Naidu, Jehanara Shah Nawaz and Radhabai Subbaroyan— were invited to take part in the discussions of the Round Table Conference, convened in London, to examine India's political needs and aspirations. Yet another sign of women's growing prestige was to be seen in the legislatures of the country. By 1940, there were as many as 80 women legislators, placing India third among the nations of the world in this respect. Adult franchise and complete political equality came with the independence of India and the adoption of the new Constitution in 1950. In 1929, Lord Irwin announced about Round Table Conference, Sarojini Naidu was in the first list of Women India Association to represent Indian Women. Government of India, selected her for second round table conference.

During Civil Disobedience Movement, Gandhi suggested to confine their protest to picketing of Liquor Shoppes and foreign cloth shops. Though, Sarojini was a common rejoinder to the protests of Gandhi, her eagerness and patriotism refused to recognize any bounds. Smt. Sarojini Naidu was arrested while directing a salt raid at Dharsana. As the elections brought women into prominence, so too did they rise to positions of high office. Earlier India had seen its first woman Governor with the appointment of Sarojini Naidu as Governor of the enormous State of Uttar Pradesh. By an interesting coincidence, her daughter Padmaja Naidu was to be the second woman Governor, this time of the State of West Bengal. The Union Cabinet included a woman representative in Rajkumari Ami it Kaur, who was Minister of Health until the Cabinet was reshuffled in April 1957 following the last general elections. The Deputy Minister of Health, Smt. Chandrasekhar, was an able deputy. Women were also active in the State legislatures and ministries.

Dr. Sushila Nayar being successively the Health Minister of Delhi State and Speaker in the Delhi State Legislature while Smt. Renuka Ray, as Minister of Rehabilitation in West Bengal, was charged with the highly onerous task of coping with the refugees from East Pakistan. Since the last elections, women Ministers and Deputy Ministers have increased in number. In Assam, Usha Borthakar is Deputy Minister of Social Welfare, Rural Development and Maternity and Child Welfare. Bihar, which used to be considered a "backward province", has 32 women legislators in the State Assembly and two Deputy Ministers— Jyotirmojee Devi, in charge of Welfare and Health and Naima Khatun Haider, in charge of Jails and Transport. Nirmala Raje Bhonsle is Deputy Minister of Education in Bombay State. Kumari K. R. Gouri is Minister of Revenue and Excise in Kerala. Rani Padmavati is Minister of Health in Madhya Pradesh, where 27 women have been elected to the State Legislature. In Madras, where women have played a pioneer role in public affairs as in Bengal, Smt. Lourdammal is Minister of Local Administration and Fisheries. In

Mysore State Grace Tucker is Deputy Minister for Education while in Orissa Basanta Manjari Devi is Minister for Relief and Rehabilitation. Health claims the attention of women in the Punjab with Dr. Prakash Kaur as Deputy Minister, and in Uttar Pradesh Prakashwati Sood is Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Welfare. In Bengal, Purabi Mukharjee is a Minister of State concerned with Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation, and Kumari Maya Banerjee is Deputy Minister<sup>23</sup>. She published only three slim volumes of verse for she put aside her writing after the heinous incident of Jallianwala Bagh massacre and dedicated herself to the cause of the country's liberation. The extraordinary musical quality of her verse won her the title of the "Nightingale of India". Her imagery is picturesque and lavish.

Sarojini Naidu's life stands as a compelling blend of poetic grace and political grit. Born into a progressive family in Hyderabad, she transformed from a prodigious poet into a fearless leader in India's freedom struggle and women's emancipation. Her international education and exposure ignited in her a passion for justice and equality, especially for Indian women whose conditions deeply moved her. With unwavering resolve, she championed education, civil rights, and women's franchise, making significant contributions through her speeches, organizational efforts, and participation in major nationalist movements and international delegations. As a powerful orator and symbol of female strength, she bridged the literary and political realms, mobilizing women into the national movement and relentlessly advocating for their rightful place in society. Despite her deep love for poetry, the trauma of national tragedies like the Jallianwala Bagh massacre redirected her energy toward political activism, proving her dedication to India's liberation and upliftment of the marginalized.

Her leadership in the Indian National Congress, involvement in the Round Table Conferences, and efforts in the Women's Indian Association and the All India Women's Conference laid the groundwork for the future of Indian women in public life. Appointed as the first woman Governor of an Indian state after independence, her legacy paved the way for generations of women leaders. Sarojini Naidu not only inspired a nation through her verse and voice but also redefined the role of women in India's socio-political evolution, earning her an enduring place in history as the *Nightingale of India* and a torchbearer of freedom and equality.

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