

## WOMEN AND NATIONALISM IN COLONIAL INDIA: A CASE STUDY OF SARALA DEVI

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### ABSTRACT:

To date, numerous works have been done on the national freedom movement of India. Many books have been published too on the role of eminent leaders of our country and some of them have been done on the contribution of women in our freedom struggle. But there is still dearth of studies on women leaders and their specific roles. The reason for selecting Sarala Devi's role and contribution in the nationalist movement, because that serves three fold of objectives – to highlight her activities would mean reviewing a radical woman of her time, analysing the contemporary scenario and stress the dynamic role of the members of *Thakurbari*. Sarala Devi was able to inspire the whole nation through her radical activities. She was known as the 'Joan of Arc' of India and was very much associated with popular leaders like Lokmanya Tilak, M.G.Gandhi, Aurobindo etc. With Sister Nivedita and Swami Vivekananda she was acquainted. Sarala Devi a multi-faceted and analysing her leads one to an evaluation of all those spheres. However all aspects have not been focused in this study, only her concern over nationalism and how she instilled the craze for nationalism into the Indian youth is the main arena which the paper have tried to scrutinise.

**Keywords:** radical; *Thakurbari*; nationalism; Bengali society; festival.

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**Introduction:**

There is an ongoing academic endeavour, called 'interdisciplinary' in the absence of a better term, that involves multi-leveled study of intellectual, social and political history around an individual or a group of individuals in order to highlight certain areas of social consciousness during a particular social order, where history, politics, biography and gender-studies either overlap or come very close to each other. The present style has emerged out of such a strong urge to bring into sharp focus the nationalistic thoughts and activities of Sarala Devi, as representing the apex of penetration of nationalistic ideas not only into the House of Tagore's but also the women residing inside it. It must be remembered in this context that this House represented the height of achievement in the socio-political, socio-economic and socio-cultural spheres attained by the small section of the enlightened minority among the conflict-ridden cross-sections of the people of Bengal. It was inevitable that side by side with cooperation, a growing threat of challenge to British authoritative domination and the consequent hegemony should grow from within. It is interesting to note and analyse the role of the House of the Tagore's, financially among the socially privileged few to accept/modify/follow the rising waves of nationalism or the demands for self-determination dominating the rest of India. In today's context such a socio-political juncture is not only interesting in it but doubly thought provoking because of the need to evaluate women's rising consciousness in such a context. While quite a few books have been written explaining the role of the Tagore's in the contemporary political scenario, and just few only unveiling the women's sphere within it, there is need to sharpen the focus on how its women, conventionally circumscribed within the orbit of the home and the hearth, gradually not only stepped out of it but how some of them jumped into public domain. In such a context both Swarnakumari Devi and Sarala Devi proved to be challenging pioneers at least among women in Bengal. For both of them, challenging the private sphere of living and merging themselves with the public spheres required great determination. While Swarnakumari Devi's activities were more literary in endeavour, Sarala grew more directly and more politically militant. Hence the need to scrutinise her life, ideas and activities vis-à-vis the challenging times. The lady who deliberately negated or defied conventional proposals of marriage in favour of socio-political activities definitely deserves a rigorous study.

**Prelude:**

Colonial domination in pre-independent India had a subtlety which was not only imbued in the administrative practices but rendered deep into the psyche of its subjects.<sup>i</sup> The effect was to a certain extent contritely observed in the various phases of movement that were connived as 'national'. The debate can be argued in some other space, except for the part, that this 'nationalism' was 'extended' to a certain section of the Indian intelligentsia and social activists. They form the 'source' of knowledge-formation in the South Asian society that was supposed to be in the midst of ubiquitous, befuddling constellation of social practices; a constellation whose cornerstone is the belief human beings are not equal<sup>ii</sup>. Hence power relationship syndrome constituted not only among the sovereign and the subjects but also among those who were being dominated. Instances of 'moderate/extremists' dichotomy of political genre, 'brahmin/non-brahmin' dichotomy of social genre and 'congress/ communists' dichotomy of ideological genre galore in that period. In other terms struggle for power was multifaceted and diverse. Interestingly, enough, among this conundrum of power struggle, participation<sup>iii</sup> of women-folk were not only few, but rare. It is not the intention to invite a further dichotomy between men/women but rather an attempt to seek the role and mapping of an individual who tried to 'manifest the effect of strategic positions'. Any attempt to configure the present study as 'biographical' is nullified on the basis of the fact that there is a singularity of focus of the study. The sense of nationalism, the strong undercurrent of anti-imperialistic movements, realisation of palpable politico-economy of one's society that had permeated into the consciousness of women of 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal is the focus of the study; the role of Sarala Devi in context to nationalism is the point to be noted. Hence, any further discussion on Sarala Devi, entails a schematic presentation of socio-economic and political condition of Bengal during and under the colonial administration of 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal.

British imperialistic designs were met with some stubborn resistances in some of the pockets of native Indian princely states in Bengal. 1757 was the landmark in the sense that in this year Nawab Siraz-ud- Dawla of Bengal fought against the mercenaries of East India Company. Later, in this century, only poor peasants of Bengal participated in the *Sanyasi* Rebellion which was led by religious monks and Zamindars. Again in this century *Chuar* Rebellion took place in major parts of Bengal. There were several other uprisings which took place in Bengal and in various

corners of India but the culmination of those struggles could be found in the *Sepoy* Mutiny, which had some decisive effects both on natives of Bengal and East India Company vis-à-vis British Crown. With the inauguration of British regime the strategy devised were never simply intellectual exercises, nor was they meant only in some general way to justify British rule over the subcontinent. Those approaches were not wholly driven by political motives but “it was also part of the larger Enlightenment endeavour, by observation and study, to understand the world outside Europe, as Europeans came to know it more fully. A relentless need to count and classify everything they encountered defined much Victorian intellectual activity.”<sup>iv</sup> Inherent dialectics and contradictions were knitted together to achieve a certain political objective of a coherent administrative set-up in a ‘different’ social order. For very reason of their own, colonial administration introduced various social reforms buoyed by liberal vision of ‘Individual’ as a free agent. Prohibition of practising *Sati*, The 1891 Age of Consent Act and Widow Remarriage Act were some of its major administrative policy decisions taken by the colonial authority. It was done to “demonstrate their liberal intentions in the face of the uncivilized and unmanly practices of the Bengalis”.<sup>v</sup> Western education was introduced following in the wake of these reforms. The British kept the local customs as mere Indian categories through which to make sense of Indian society but in order to emphasise the ‘different’ regimes, than those of the earlier ones, it promoted Western education in order to define themselves as ‘modern’ and therefore superior, and thus not ‘primitive’ or ‘Indian’. Hence an image of ‘secular’ order was put into motion with an increasing involvement in Indian education system. In British India the idea of ‘education’ was shifted from belief and dogma to experience, expression and history. Indeed, somewhat paradoxically, the ‘difference’ had to be sustained with a constant infusion of ‘modern’ ideas in order to reassure themselves of their mastery of India.

For early 20<sup>th</sup> century Bengal, in pre-independent days, was not as dissimilar as rest of the Indian sub continent. Mass discontent over colonial subjugation was the principal source for various political and social movements. Causes for the discontent was common to any colonial domination, i.e. prolonged economic exploitation driving towards near poverty type situation<sup>vi</sup>, political inefficacy (may be efficient modulation of administrative set-up) steering to nearby misrule<sup>vii</sup> and social anxiety because of transformation of Congress’s internal power structure.<sup>viii</sup> Bengal did not remain as a capital of India, literally. What was more significant was that politics

in India was acquiring a different dimension in which Bengal (to be specific, Calcutta) would no longer have a leadership. Political leaders from western and northern India would become national leaders marginalising their peers from Bengal. India would no longer echo tomorrow what Bengal thought today.<sup>ix</sup> Naturally, colonial regime became the power centre. 'Freedom struggle' was seen as the only weapon which could emancipate the masses from the 'colonial' yoke. Irrespective of their position in the power relationship, masses were determined to bring some changes in their daily lifestyle. Change in the society was also in vogue as the people were becoming more concerned about their 'identity'. Gender 'identity' was one of them. In this context, during the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century, Bengali middle class intelligentsia took positive momentum to establish basic rights and freedom for women. Leaders like Ananda Mohan Bose, Surendranath Banerjee and various other prominent nationalist leaders carried out some of the reforms introduced that took place in the arena of education. Apart from them, there were several others who promoted the idea of 'swadeshi'. The concept of 'swadeshi' generated the enthusiasm among the Bengalis to produce basic commodities under the control of Indian industrial set-up. Many stores were opened, people started to wear hand-spun, traditional *khadi* dresses. Women were especially encouraged to participate in this kind of movement.

A crucial juncture came after the partition of Bengal when a rift between the moderate and the extremist leaders among the Indian National Congress came out as a reflection of reality. Bengali intellectuals came forward with their newer ideologies. Individuals like, Rajnarain Bose, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee tried to augur the sense of nationalism by identifying nation with mother.<sup>x</sup> Swami Vivekananda's call to his nation also bordered on that line of expression where he addressed fellow-countrymen to work for human welfare, especially for the improvement of the condition of women folk. According to Akshay Kumar Dutta, the first social scientist of Bengal, the down-trodden and the women who were neglected so far were in need of importance and to understand those social needs some kind of theorisation was important which should be done with much clarity and logic. He wanted to have a harmony between society and religion and attempted to provide it with a theoretical framework.<sup>xi</sup>



Notably, each one had its own mental set-up which took them for the cause of the women. The colonial authority saw this process of development of women as rooting out the evils of Indian 'barbarism' with a reinforced notion of Indian women as helpless victim of religion and social customs. On the other hand, for the Bengali intelligentsia British rule was a mere catalyst wherein moral, cultural and social progression of the women marked the notions of Bengal as 'different' from the alien authority. The authority might have possessed the public sphere of the society as whole but its morality and private sphere was safeguarded by those 'vanguard' of the society. For this they chose western education as a system of secular and literary education keeping the 'inner essence' of the Indian or Bengali 'value system' intact. The larger transformation of character and morality was envisaged upon the native education system and not upon British or western education system.

**SARALA DEVI HER LIFE & NATIONALISM:** Sarala Devi Choudhurani was born at *Jorasanko hakurbari* in 1872. Her Father Janakinath Ghoshal was a person of repute whose contribution as a member of Brahma Samaj was significant and at the same his role as General-Secretary of the Indian National Congress cannot be forgotten very easily. Her Mother Swarnakumari Devi's illustrious career was dealt at length in the previous chapter. Sarala Devi was a brilliant student and was admitted to Bethune school and passed the entrance examination at the age of 14 years. After her entrance examination she was admitted to Bethune College. At the age of 18 she took her B.Ed degree from University of Calcutta and got Padmavati Medal. She learnt Sanskrit, Persian and Urdu. Her interest in Violin and Piano showed her passion towards music. Her ability in music was demonstrated when she composed music for many of the songs of her world famous uncle Rabindranath Tagore. She was a good painter. Her paintings were published in the journal *Bharati* with the title '*Ekal Shekal*'. Sarla took up the job as a teacher in Mysore's Maharani Girl's School. It was a brief stay, she returned to Kolkata after a year or so. After returning to Kolkata she joined *Bharati* as editor in 1895 at the request of her uncle Rabindranath.<sup>xii</sup> During his tenure as an editor she contributed to *Bharati* with her short-stories, novels, poems, articles and essays. Through her writing she tried to inspire Bengali youths and also started several festivals like *Pratpaditya Utsav*, *Udayaditya Utsav*, *Birashatami*. She took several measures to inspire Bengali youths. In due course she joined revolutionary

politics. Her apathy towards moderate brand of politics was clearly manifested through writings like, 'Congress O Shaiwoto Shashon', 'jatiyo Mahashabha O jatiyo lojja'. She got married at the age of 33 in the year 1905 with the editor of 'Hindusthan', Ram Bhojo Datta Chowdhury. She was actively involved towards the educational upliftment of women and founded 'Bharat Stree Mohamandalam' in 1910 after she shifted to Punjab. She carried on her political activities in Punjab also in co-operation with her husband. After the incident of massacre in Jallianwalla Bagh, her husband was arrested and the property of the newspaper was confiscated. In her later life, Sarala Devi became a follower of Gandhi and supported Non-Cooperation Movement and got actively engaged in the spread of Gandhi's Khadi Movement. According to Jogesh Chandra Bagol, "she was the first woman martyr of India, as she participated in the Non-Cooperation movement whole heartedly."<sup>xiii</sup> (Translation mine).

After the death of her husband in 1923 at Mussouri, she returned to Bengal in order to shoulder the responsibility of editorship of *Bharati* and remained at Kolkata till her death. In the last few years of her life she was attracted towards the spiritual world. In 1935 she accepted Vijay Krishna Dev Sharma as her spiritual leader or guru. Most of her life after this was devoid of any major incident and ultimately she passed away from this earthly existence in 1945.<sup>xiv</sup> Sarala Devi's devotion towards her motherland could be seen from the very tender age of about ten years. In her memoirs she stated that as a child she used to collect books and journals, mainly *Bharati*, from her mother's shelf for reading and saw some nationalistic poetry which used to inspire her a lot.<sup>xv</sup> It was several years before she heard Bande Mataram; Sarala Devi got inspiration from other poems also which influenced her a lot in developing a nationalistic sense within her. Later, when she took over *Bharati* as its editor, she wrote several articles which were based on the feeling of patriotism. In an article, Sarala Devi quoted, which was taken from a book 'National life and Character' by an English writer which stated that "patriotism is now the feeling that binds together people who are of the same race, or who at least inhabit the same country, so that they shall try to preserve the body politic as it exists and recover for it, what it has lost or acquire what seems naturally to belong to it. It seeks within the country to procure the establishment of the best possible order. It enjoins the sacrifice of property, liberty or life for the attainment of these objects. *It favours the existence of whatever is peculiar and local, of a distinctive literature, manners, dress and character.* When it conceives the common country to

be weak, it tries to discard every foreign element as dangerous; and when it is conscious of its strength, it tries to assimilate what is based from abroad.”<sup>xvi</sup> She thought that the feeling of patriotism must come from within. One must come along and never fear to die. In her first article ‘*Mrityucharcha*’,<sup>xvii</sup> she invited the Bengali youths to must come forward to fight against all odds. They should come out from their sphere of docility and empower themselves for a nationalist cause. In her second article ‘*Byamcharcha*’ (the utility of physical exercise), she asserted that the Bengali youth must come out from their prevailing notion of being ‘physically weak’ and ‘effeminate’ and they should become strong courageous enough to fight against the insolence of the British. Her third article, ‘*Bilati ghushi bonam deshi kil*’ (The Conflict of Might between the East and the West) emphasized on cultivating physical strength. For her a healthy and strong body is needed to prepare a strong mind. One must be courageous enough to retaliate against humiliation and for that a strong body vis-à-vis a strong mind is necessary.

All these aspects of her showed that she was fully dedicated towards her motherland. In an article she had repeatedly invited the youths to be fearless because the motherland is enchained by the foreign yoke.<sup>xviii</sup> Sarala Devi was fearless by heart. She was never afraid of anything. She made her public appearance during the seventeenth Congress session which took place from 26th December to 28th December, 1901 under the chairmanship of Dinshaw Edulji Wacha at Beadon square, Calcutta. Maharaja Suryakanto Acharya Chowdhury of Mayamansingha could not turn up due to his illness and thus the national exhibition was inaugurated by Maharaja Manindra Chandra Nandi on 24th December. The session started with the inaugural song by Atul Prosad Sen ‘*Otho Go Bharat Laxmi*’ (Arise, Mother India). This chorus was led by Sarala Devi herself.<sup>xix</sup> On 28th December about 50 singers from various provinces sang Sarala Devi’s song – “Sing Hindusthan”, under the direction of Bharat Sangeet Samaj. A journal made a statement on the previous day – “Sing Hindusthan...the patriotic song to be sung to the opening of the Congress processing is being actively rehearsed by about 50 musicians, representing all classes and creeds of vast continent of India...especially composed for the occasion by that gifted lady, Miss Sarala Ghosal.”<sup>xx</sup> She was a gifted musician and to her credit she composed a number of nationalistic songs. It is not generally known that only the first two lines of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay’s ‘*Bande mataram*’ was tuned by Rabindranath Tagore but the rest was set to



music by Sarala Devi herself.<sup>xxi</sup> Benares session of the Congress in 1905<sup>xxii</sup> she sang this inspiring song which later on went to become the National Anthem of India.

Sarala Devi's effort to usher the sentiment of nationalism was not only confined within music and literary works, she inaugurated several festivals through which she tried to inspire the young generation who she felt, must come out from fear and prove it to be wrong. Earlier several literary works of Sarala Devi have been mentioned through which she influenced Bengali youths. She formed several *akhras* (gymnasium) or clubs to teach boxing, sword fighting, games with knives and rods for the youths. She even appointed the Muslim master (*ustad*), Professor Murtaza to teach those defensive actions. These gained a huge publicity throughout Bengal. Members from other clubs also started to come and join in this venture. To make this effort more successful she planned to organize a day of 'muscle' celebration. There was an analogy which she took upon; it was of Muhharam and Ramlila Utsav. Her analogy was filled with strong passion. She stated that if Muslims could exhibit their prowess during Muhharam or the other non-Bengali community could do so during the Ramlila Utsav then why should not be there one for the Bengali community?<sup>xxiii</sup> In 1902, Sarala Devi inaugurated *Birastami Utsav* (festival of Heroes) on the 2nd day of Durga Puja i.e. *Durgastami*. Bharati Roy noted "...to gather around a sword and chant a poem composed by Ashutosh Ghosh which contained the names of a number of heroic men, starting with Krishna as each name was pronounced, the participants were to shower the sword with flowers. After the rituals are over, there were demonstrations of various forms of physical training and competitive games."<sup>xxiv</sup> After the festival each of the participants were rewarded with '*Birashtami*' medal which was inscribed with a word *Birobhavo* (Be Brave) on one side and on the other side it was *Debah Durbaloghatoka* (destroy the weakness). In the next year, 1903, Sarala Devi started another festival in the memory of national heroes. It was named *Pratapaditya Utsav*. A number of young men participated from various parts of Kolkata.<sup>xxv</sup> She argued that while the Rajputs, the Marathas, and the Sikhs were recognised as the heroic people of India, Bengalis were deprived of the memory of their legacy, and consequently they lacked a sense of pride. According to Sarala, Bengal had produced brave heroes and martyrs. Pratapaditya, the last independent Bengali Hindu zamindar of Jessore had defeated the king of Orissa, who ventured to resist Mughal arms, and met the challenge from the Portuguese pirates, should be a role model in order to cherish the heritage and develop national

pride and confidence. In the popular theatre hall, The Star, a play entitled '*Banger Pratapaditya*', under the direction of Khirod Prasad Bidya Binod, was enacted.<sup>xxvi</sup> The play received great adulation from all quarters of the masses. The popularity even produced a second staging of the play. "The *Pratapaditya* Festival will for the second time be celebrated tomorrow at 6 P.M. in the Classic theatre. We have no doubt that the Bengal Gymnasium, under whose auspices the *Pratapaditya* anniversary takes place will have full house."<sup>xxvii</sup> Aware of the popularity of her *Pratapaditya Utsav*, Sarala Devi went on to invent another festival *Udayaditya Utsav*, named after *Udayaditya* who, she maintained, had been the heroic son of Bengal. *Udayaditya* was a young prince of Jessore who fought valiantly against the Mughal army until his last breath. The celebration was commemorated in remembrance of *Udayaditya*, but as there was as such no photograph available of him, Sarala decided to garland a well-decorated sword. The festival was organised at Albert Hall after much deliberation with its trustees as they were initially not in favour of granting permission of holding such festivals associated with arms, like sword.<sup>xxviii</sup> These celebrations created a rift between Sarala Devi and Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore had portrayed *Pratapaditya* in an uncomplimentary and villainous role in his novel *Bouthakurrannir Haat*. Sarala maintained that a political leader had to be judged politically. She thought that a man, who though a small zamindar had the courage to resist the Mughal Emperor Akbar, and declare independence from him, was worthy of being recognised as a heroic personality.

All these efforts of Sarala Devi were trend-setter, although it was very uncommon in the urban middle class Bengali society. For instance Sarala's parents believed in the moderate brand of Congress politics. She was not was satisfied with this mode of political activity. In her article she condemned the moderate way or the mendicant policy of Indian National Congress and also suggested several ways on how to achieve provincial autonomy. Thus she started believing in revolutionary politics to counter English hegemony. Her efforts in taking the initiative to launch *Pratapaditya Utsav*, *Udayaditya Utsav* and *Birashtami* bears testimony to that. Around 1892, she went to Bombay to her uncle's house and later went to Mysore to join a service which had already been mentioned. She returned to Calcutta in 1897 and joined into active politics. In due course she once went to Baroda with her uncle, Satyendranath Tagore where she got acquainted with Aurobindo Ghosh.<sup>xxix</sup> Early in 1902 Sri Aurobindo sent Jatindranath Banerjee to Sarala Devi with a letter. Aurobindo thought Sarala Devi's *aakhra* was suitable to establish a secret

society which would set to flame the revolutionary nationalism in Bengal.<sup>xxx</sup> Sarala Devi's aakhra attracted many a people who by that time believed in extremism, for example, Pulin Das was inspired by the physical culture practice where she used to be present with a register in her hand.<sup>xxxii</sup> Pulin Das started a similar centre in Dacca known to be '*Dacca Anushilan Samity*'.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Sarala Devi also maintained a close link with *Suhrid Samity*, a revolutionary society, founded in 1900 at Maymansingha. In this connection two other such organisations can be mentioned which were established in Dacca and in Calcutta. In Dacca, Leela Nag established Deepali Sangha which worked for the upliftment of women, making women politically conscious about the need of physical strength and use of arms for self-defence.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

To Sarala Devi, the central issue of concern was anti-colonialism. Her effort to fight against the colonial authority was not only confined to physical culture only the same time she issued several journals, poems, and stories to embolden and express her ideas into reality. In an article she asked the young people to come out from the obstacle and devote oneself for the cause of the nation.<sup>xxxiv</sup> In a poem, "*Pashenar abedan*" she uttered the same tune of nationalism.<sup>xxxv</sup> In "*Bishwobnijoyee*" Sarala Devi expected the arrival of real hero who would release the mother nation from the colonial yoke.<sup>xxxvi</sup> In her articles also she spoke of nationalism. She was not only interested in political aspect of nationalism, but also had a keen interest in its economic activities. Her ideas regarding Economics and Finance could also be traced from one of the editorials titled "*Bharatiyo Krishi O shilpo shomoshya*".<sup>xxxvii</sup> In this editorial piece Sarala Devi brought out the research paper of Professor Chattorn of Madras Engineering College to her readers in simple and lucid words. *Lakshmi Bhandar* was opened at Cornwallis Street in 1903. Though the motto was to help deprived women and the shop sold products made by the widows, but Sarala Devi's political associates were also involved with this shop. One such nationalist was Kedarnath Dasgupta who was seen as the manager of *Lakshmi Bhandar* in an advertisement in Bengalee (article) published on 9th July 1904.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

There was radical change in her political attitude after 1905. It might be after marriage or might be due to an incident which took place in 1902 when her political associate Jyotidranath Banerjee got involved with dacoities in search of money to establish secret societies.<sup>xxxix</sup> Disturbed with this incident Sarala Devi approached Tilak and enquired: "I did not meet

Lokmanya Tilak personally till September, 1902. My Lathi cult was in full swing in those days...But to my dismay stories of banded robberies and murders by *Bhadrolok* began to be heard of from certain quarters. Some of my *Lathial* boys felt- tempted to join those... For against all my reasoning was brought in the personality of Tilak and his approval as the greatest argument in favour of the dacoities. So I at once went to Poona to have a personal talk with Lokmanya Tilak and learn his views on the matter.” “Tilak told me distinctly, he did not approve of the dacoities, much less authorize the, if for nothing else simply on the score of their being practically useless for political purposes.” “But looking to differences in human nature and the varying process of evolution suited to different temperament he did not condemn them openly.”- Sarala devi B.A., widow of the Late pandit Ram Bhuj Dutta Choudhury,. Editor of the ‘Bharati’, Lahore.”<sup>xl</sup> The change was in Sarala’s attitude towards anti-colonial programmes. After her eighteen years in Punjab in 1919, just before the Amritsar session of the Indian National Congress, Sarala became a follower of Gandhi. She supported the non-cooperation movement; which caused a difference of political opinion with her husband who did not agree with the principle of non-cooperation. Her association with Gandhi was not at all a new incident. They came into contact in 1896 at Calcutta Congress session. Gandhi came to her house when her father was the General Secretary of Congress. Gandhi once said-“your laughter is a national asset, laugh away.”<sup>xli</sup> Sarala Devi actively participated in Khadi movement and worked wholeheartedly in support of non-cooperation movement which made her to be the first woman martyr of India.<sup>xlii</sup> Thus, her patriotic activities and attempts at the arousal of national identity among the masses make her a ‘woman’ among women of *Thakurbari*. Unknowingly she became the pioneer of female emancipation in contemporary Bengal. She was brought up in *Thakurbari* and was trained in its atmosphere, but ultimately she outgrew it too. She became a unique individual on the basis of her innovative experimentations in the sphere of nationalist politics, she earned a firm foothold and a gradually became almost a cult figure by herself. The refusals to marriage and to get involved in socio-political activities are some of the areas. Her contribution is multi-layered: personal, atmospheric, (as daughter of the *Thakurbari* household) as well as national. With this peculiarity she emerges as a bright young pioneer among all the women of *Thakurbari*.

### An Appraisal:

Any such study as the present one is bound to be arbitrary and incomplete by it, unless it inaugurates or unleashes other fresh enquiries. Sarala Devi's was no isolated case. Misconception would hold the sway if she is considered as a separate entity. On the other hand she should be considered at standing and working at a crucial juncture, at other crossroads of which stand Sister Nivedita and other women's consciousness in India. Perhaps, this has led to some of the posers, which are as followed:

Why did she shift her mind from revolutionary politics to non-violence?

Why was she got married to a province far away from Bengal?

Did her Marriage bring her stoppage in her revolutionary in Bengal?

Last but not the least, why at all she was forcibly married while her mother was reluctant to do earlier?

The answers to these emerging questions may be found out in a separate study which the present researcher proposes to undertake in future. The present study is not a part of repetitive idolatry. Rather it is an attempt towards reevaluation of women of early 19th and early 20th century Bengal. Time has arrived for reconsideration of socio-economic or socio-cultural achievements of such women, erstwhile a neglected or dimly lit sphere of study. The appraisal of Sarala Devi is only a modest endeavour to link our forgotten past with up-to-date political and gender-studies.

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### END NOTES & REFERENCES

<sup>i</sup> The author has consciously used the word 'subjects' instead of 'citizens' as it (subjects) render a typical relationship with the sovereign, almost a patron-client relationship as where citizenship is an agency; an agency for enjoying rights with absolute surrender of her freedom.

<sup>ii</sup> Ganguly, Debjani, 2005, Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity, Routledge, London & New York, p.2.

<sup>iii</sup> Participation through active involvement of the intellect is the harbinger of any form of social and political movement. Both Oriental and Occidental history suggests that.

<sup>iv</sup> Metcalf, Thomas R., 1995, Ideologies of the Raj, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 113.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid. p.99.

<sup>vi</sup> Notable herein is The Great Famine of Bengal.

<sup>vii</sup> Partitions of Bengal, Transfer of Capital from Calcutta to Delhi are of few prime examples.



<sup>viii</sup> It was not only the only reason, but perhaps early 20th Century Bengal saw how Congress as a political party was hijacked by a man called M.K.Gandhi. His arrival in the Indian political scenario evaporated all the thoughts and ideas of Bengali intelligentsia, which was supposed to be the epicenter of Indian thought-making process, before Gandhi. Some notable exceptions were there, like, Tagore, whose role in active politics were few and far after Pabna Conference.

<sup>ix</sup> The eclipse of Bengal had begun even though it would take five more decades to see the dark side of the moon in Bengal.

<sup>x</sup> Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novel Ananda Math is a case in point, where he tried to define and relocate native land from the perspective of feminine identity; especially 'motherly' overtone was imposed to instill passion among common Bengali masses.

<sup>xi</sup> Mukhopadhyay, Amal Kumar (ed.), 1979, The Bengali Intellectual Tradition, K.P.Bagchi & Co., Calcutta.

<sup>xii</sup> 'Bharati', Jaishta, 1323 B.S.

<sup>xiii</sup> Choudhurani, Sarala Devi, 2007, Jiboner Jhorapata (in Bengali), De's Publication, Kolkata, p.183.

<sup>xiv</sup> Dev, Chitra, 1984, Antapurur Aatmakatha, Ananda Publishers, Kolkata.

<sup>xv</sup> Bharati, Jaishta, 1323 B.S., p.156.

<sup>xvi</sup> Bharati, Ashar, 1304 B.S. p.194.

<sup>xvii</sup> Mrityucharcha was her first article which Sarala Devi stated in her autobiography, Jiboner Jhorapata. Mrityucharcha was first published in Bharati, Baishakh, 1318 B.S., pp.30-35.

<sup>xviii</sup> Bharati, Aswin, 1310 B.S.

<sup>xix</sup> Paul, Prashanta Kumar, 1397 B.S, Rabi Jibon, (in Bengali) Vol-5, Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, p.59.

<sup>xx</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxi</sup> n.xiii, p.53.

<sup>xxii</sup> Ray, Bharati, 2002, Early Feminists of Colonial India, OUP, New Delhi, p.10

<sup>xxiii</sup> n.vii., p.133.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Ibid., p.10.

<sup>xxv</sup> n.xxii, p.10.

<sup>xxvi</sup> n.xix, p.170

<sup>xxvii</sup> Ibid., p.227.

<sup>xxviii</sup> n.xxii., p.123-24.

<sup>xxix</sup> The year was probably in between 1895-97. For details see Girija Shankar Raychoudhury, 1956, Sri Aurobindo O Banglay Swadeshi Jug, Navabharat Publishers, Kolkata, p.297.

<sup>xxx</sup> Ibid., p.300.

<sup>xxxi</sup> n.xiii.

<sup>xxxii</sup> n.xii, p.12.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Modern review, Kolkata, July- August, 1953, p.53

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Bharati, Ashar, 1306, B.S.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Bharati, Baishak, 1309, B.S.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Bharati, Jaishita, 1312, B.S.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Bharati, Kartik, 1309, B.S.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> n.xix, p.224.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Raychoudhury, Girija Shankar, 1956, Sri Aurobindo O Banglay Swadeshi Jug, Navabharat Publishers, Kolkata, p.301.

<sup>xl</sup> Ibid. p.319-320.

<sup>xli</sup> Ghosh, Nityapriyo, Rabindranath bonam Sarala devi, (in Bengali) Amrita, p.18.

<sup>xlii</sup> Ibid.

