

Subhas Chandra Bose, The Crusader for Equal Rights for Women

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Abstract

The paper highlights the works done by Subhas Chandra Bose, the famous freedom fighter of India for giving equal rights to women. He did not compartmentalize men and women. He was in favour of giving same jobs and opportunities to both as women had same talent, intelligence, caliber and capacity. He did that when no such term like 'Gender Equality' was minted by different societies of the world.

Keywords – Gender Equality, Equal Rights, Caliber, Sacrifice, Motherland, Independence, India

Introduction: The paper highlights the works done by Subhas Chandra Bose, the famous freedom fighter of India for giving equal rights to women. He did not compartmentalize men and women. He was in favour of giving same jobs and opportunities to both as women had same talent, intelligence, caliber and capacity. He did that when no such term like 'Gender Equality' was minted by different societies of the world.

The 'Indian Pilgrim' Subhas Chandra Bose was born on 13th January 1897 in late nineteenth century of change and awakening in India. The socio-religious and political organizations were forming in all over India.

The Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, Young Bengal movement, Poona Sarvajanik Sabha, Ramkrishna Mission etc. were raising their voices against social and religious evils. They were against sati-system, parda- system, early marriage, devdasi –system and pitiable condition of women. These movements wanted to uplift the status of women and this could be done by providing education to them. The political consciousness was also emerging in the society and Indians wanted to free themselves from the shackles of British servitude. Many local and provincial organizations were forming for demanding rights for Indians but a drastic change came in the political lives of Indians with the

formation of national level organization, Indian National Congress in 1885.

Subhas Chandra Bose was born in this atmosphere in Bengali family of Janakinath Bose and Prabhavati Devi. He was ninth child and had 6 sisters¹ and 7 brothers. His family was influenced by the leader of Brahma Samaj's Keshav Chandra Sen and Ramkrishna Paramhansa. Keshav Chandra Sen was very vocal about women's rights but this influence of him was not at Subhas' family as his sisters were married without showing much concern for their education.

The idea of equal rights for women did not come naturally to him but with time his outlook towards women got changed. He must have observed an equal status of men and women in his school as in his early schooling days in missionary school², he was taught by both male and female teachers. Moreover, in his school both boys and girls studied together. This must have made some impression on his mind. After completing his B.A from Calcutta he went to London to sit for I.C.S examination. Subhas Chandra Bose

though stayed for short period in London yet he must have witnessed the social and cultural changes in both Indian and Western societies. The studying of Psychology and his contact with political leaders who had broader views for women must have impacted his mind.

The much-needed change towards his attitude for women came with his acquaintance with Political leader like C.R. Dass and his wife Basanti Devi, student of Loreto College, freedom fighter and social worker and Subhas Chandra's adopted mother to whom he always looked as his confidant, support and encouragement whenever he was depressed. In one of his letters to Basanti Devi he wrote that, "Whenever I feel mentally tired out, your love and blessings bring me new life. It is indeed true that in my life there is no other treasure or refuse³." The other women to whom he was close was his mother Prabhavati, his sister –in-law Biva (elder brother Sarat's wife) and his wife Emilie Schenkl. Emilie Schenkl helped him in

¹ Bose Subhas Chandra, Indian Pilgrim, New Delhi, 1997, p.13

² Bose Subhas Chandra, Indian Pilgrim, New Delhi 1997, p.21

³ Gordon Leonard A., Brothers Against The Raj, A Biography of Sarat and Subhas Chandra Bose, New Delhi 1989, p.217

writing his books 'Indian Struggle' and 'Indian Pilgrim'. These women must have influenced him to change his perspective towards women as they were not only managing their household but also doing work in public.

Subhas Chandra Bose was very much pained to see slavery of India. He had experienced discriminated behaviour of whites towards Indians in school and college. This affected his mind immensely and the hurt can be sensed through the letter which he wrote to his mother at the age of 15 and questioned her, "will not any son of Mother India in distress –dedicate his whole life to the cause of the mother"⁴. Later he himself became saviour for his country and people and dedicated all his life for the same. Subhas did not want only freedom for Motherland but for him "freedom means all-round freedom i.e., freedom for the individual as well as for society; freedom for men as well as for women--"⁵.

Subhas Chandra Bose not only cleared I.C.S. examination but also secured fourth position

but he did not join the services as his calling was the freedom of motherland and her people. He returned to India in 1921 and joined Congress. He was well aware that for freedom of Motherland not only courage of men is required but also the strength of other half of society i.e. women also needed. He wanted to give women equal rights at that time when no such term like 'gender equality' was coined in Indian society of late nineteenth and early twentieth century. They were confined to their four walls of houses and were deprived of their social, religious, political, economic, educational, and cultural rights. Subhas Chandra Bose considered that lives of women are valuable and have their own worth. He mentioned this in his autograph to his niece Geeta that "the lives of women are no less valuable than the lives of men"⁶. "The purposes of the lives of women do not merely consist in cooking and having children. Women can also have a life of

⁴ Bose Subhas Chandra, Indian Pilgrim ,p.xiv

⁵ Gordon Leonard A., Brothers Against The Raj, A Biography of Sarat and Subhas Chandra Bose, New Delhi 1989, p.211

⁶ Ibid, p.161

fulfillment--⁷. He wants them to live a life of fulfillment by knowing and realizing their worth.

Subhas Chandra Bose knew that women can understand their caliber, capacity, strength, potential, power and worth through education. He wanted them to get good education. If they have caliber and talent, they must pursue college and university education. Moreover, he believed that to live life of fulfillment, “it will be desirable to give up stereotyped ways of living and adopt new ways”⁸. He was further of the view that ‘if women can accept an ideal and follow that, there will be full justification of their birth as human beings’.

Subhas Chandra Bose had quite liberal views regarding their marriage. He was of the view that women had right to choose their life partners. He even helped his friend Dharmavir’s daughter Sita to get married to the person of her choice. He himself married to a foreigner Emilie Schenkl which was unthinkable⁹ at that time he believed in

marriage of self choice rather than the choice of others (arrange one).

Subhas Chandra Bose did not think that death of a husband is an end to the life of a woman. Though he understood this fact very well that for an Indian wife husband’s death is a severe blow and life becomes unbearable for her in his absence¹⁰ as he himself was testimony of his mother after his father’s death. But life in western countries was somewhat different which he himself witnessed. He insisted Basanti Devi wife of C.R. Dass to remain active in politics as death of her husband was not end of her life. She remained active in social causes till her death in 1974¹¹.

Subhas Chandra Bose wanted that women should take part in public affairs and they should be trained for this. Moreover, he wanted that more and more women should be engaged for the life of nation¹². His concern for this context can be observed from his address to the women of Nadia district in one of his tours, “that women had not only duties to their family, but they had also a greater duty to their country. —The country was in a

⁷ Ibid, p.161

⁸Ibid, p.161

⁹ Johar, K.L., Relevance of Subhas Bose Today, Yamunanagar 2016, p.70

¹⁰ Gorden, loc.sit., p.290

¹¹ Johar, K.L., Eminent Women Freedom Fighters Of India, Noida 2022, p.75

¹² Gorden, loc.sit., p. 168

sad plight, therefore looked up to the mothers to come forward and inspire the whole nation”¹³. In one of his speeches, he addressed the political organizations that their primary object should be to carry on political propaganda among women and to help the work of the – congress. He even insisted his sister-in-law Biva to join politics. The change in society was started visible as women were coming out from their secured territories of their houses with Mahatma Gandhi’s mass movements. The number of women were kept increasing with each mass movement namely Non-Cooperation movement (1920), Civil-Disobedience movement (1930) and Quit-India movement (1942). Women not only took part in picketing shops, burning of foreign goods but also led marches, bore atrocities of Britishers and sacrificed their lives for the nation. Some of the women were actively participating in revolutionary movements. This must have encouraged Subhas Chandra Bose to consider women can also be trained as soldiers as they have proved in their mantle in mass movements and revolutionary

activities. Women for him were not meek or weak but courage, stamina, valour, forbearance, endurance, tolerance, determination, caliber, capacity, power and sacrifice.

Subhas Chandra Bose wanted that organizations were made for women where they could be trained in activities of nation’s service. He was instrumental in setting up of the ‘Mahila Rashtriya Sangha’ by Latika Ghosh and ‘Chattri Sangha’ by Kalyani Das in 1928 at Calcutta. He himself being General- Officer- Commanding in congress session of Calcutta in 1928 organized a volunteer corps in uniform for maintaining discipline in the session. The corps was consisted of men and women who were trained and clad in semi-military uniforms¹⁴. He showed full faith in women and proved that they can also take part in hard tasks or jobs considered suited only for men.

Subhas Chandra Bose left congress in 1939 and afterwards he tried to free India with the help of axis powers. Japan promised to give full support through their army as they had occupied many places in South –East Asia

¹³ Ibid , p. 28¹⁴ Bhardwaj , R.C., Netaji and The I.N.A., New Delhi, 1994, p.11

from Britishers. Subhas Chandra Bose was called to take over the charge of Indian National Army (I.N.A.) in July 1943 at Singapore. He called 5th July 1943 “the proudest day of his life” as he being Supreme Commander of Indian National Army or Azad Hind Fauj to take his course of action regarding independence of India. He wanted to form a women contingent besides men to contribute in the last war for freedom of India. He also felt that men would fight more fiercely after seeing women on their side. He talked to Lakshmi Swaminathan (nee Saighal) Indian doctor at Singapore that “his ambition and dream was to form a regiment of women who would take up arms and fight just as the men” and asked “Would you volunteer yourself for such a fighting unit¹⁵. ‘Rani of Jhansi’ brigade of about 1,000 women among five brigades of Azad Hind Fauj was formed in the name of famous warrior of 1857 Rani Lakshmi Bai. Subhas Chandra Bose in one of his addresses to them on 12 July 1943 said that, “many brave women like the Rani of Jhansi are required in our Last War of Independence as it is not

important how many guns you can carry or how many cartridges you can fire. It is the spiritual force which will be generated by your heroic example that is important. Indians –both common people and members of the British Indian army- who are on the border areas of India, will, on seeing you march with guns on your shoulders, voluntarily come forward to receive the guns from you and carry on the struggle started by you--. Your task is the same as ours. In this common task, in this struggle, in this suffering and sacrifice, all of us-without any distinction of man and woman, boy or girl – should stand shoulder to shoulder” --¹⁶. These women were given training in combating, handling of arms, went to long marches, learnt map reading and nursing care to wounded persons. Those women who were capable of fighting were chosen for war and those less suited for war were chosen for nursing and support duties. They were all sent to Burma front¹⁷. Their commanding officer was made Lakshmi Swaminathan long before the independent government of

¹⁵ Gorden, loc.sit., p.496

¹⁶ Bhardwaj, R.C., Netaji and The I.N.A., New Delhi, 1994, p.75

¹⁷ Ibid ,p.497

India thought of inducing women officers in armed forces.

The I.N.A. forces freed Moirang¹⁸ in India and moved towards Imphal but had to retreat from there due to bad weather, heavy rains and shortage of supplies. Further Japanese forces started losing to allied powers. Subhas Chandra Bose had to give orders to forces for retreating from Burma front also. There aroused the question of women soldiers of Rani Brigade as some of them had been sent to their houses in the middle of 1944 when the campaign in Imphal was in bad shape and some afterwards. Some of them including Lakshmi Swaminathan remained in Burma as there was no transportation for them as trains were full. Subhas Chandra Bose accompanied them on long and hazardous trek which they had to cover to reach Moulmein from there they boarded on trains to Bangkok from there to their homes. Subhas Chandra Bose took sigh of relief when they safely reach to their homes. Some of them were killed during war or at the time of retreat. Subhas Chandra Bose before saying them final adieu praised them for

setting an example of courage and facing all dangers bravely.

Subhas Chandra Bose made Lakshmi Swaminathan Minister of Women's affair¹⁹ in his interim government which was formed in 21 October 1943. Even today the presence of women in ministerial post is not up to the mark in independent India and Subhas Chandra Bose gave women place in running of government in way back in 1943 judging their qualities and caliber.

Thus, Subhas Chandra Bose did not consider women weak, inferior or second rate to men. They are equally capable, hardworking, efficient, talented, intelligent, and courageous as men. They have all rights to live their lives to the fullest as for him men and women, boys and girls both are equal or at par.

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¹⁸ Johar, K.L., Relevance of Subhas Bose Today, Yamunanagar 2016, p.43

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