

# **Sarala Devi Chaudhurani: A Woman Political Organiser as reflected in her autobiography Jibaner Jharapata**

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## **Abstract**

The introduction of western culture, science and education brought political consciousness among the intellectuals of Bengal. In Bengal from this time Tagore family was very much renowned for their contribution towards social and religious reformation, literature, art and music. From her childhood Sarala Devi Chaudhurani had grown up in the atmosphere of cultural excellence of Tagore family. During her school days she participated in politics and later she joined congress and took active part in freedom struggle. She became the editor of the periodical Bharati and through this periodical she influenced younger generation of Bengal to participate in freedom struggle. She started encouraging revolutionary activities through writings and went on to organise martial training programme for young Bengali men to inspire their spirit of bravery. For women she organised educational and vocational training. Sarala Devi Choudhurani was an individualist, a reserved private person, a dynamic public person, nationalist, exceptionally intelligent and talented women, a singer and social activist and a spiritual person. She formed the Bharat Stree Mahamandal or the All India Women's Association in 1910. It was marked as the beginning of Women's organisation as well as women movement by women leaders and set the trend for many later organizations. Sarala said that women of India must recite the magic word 'I exist', 'We exist' . But she is not remembered in the way it should be remembered. She dreamt of educated Bengali women equipped with modern idea and thought.

**Keywords:** *Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, Tagore family, women organisation, political movement, Renaissance, Bharat Stree Mahamandal, National freedom movement,*

## **Introduction**

Sarala Devi Choudhurani lived and worked in twentieth century colonial Bengal. She belonged from educated family and got engaged with politics from her school days. Throughout her life, she continued to be associated with the nationalist movement in one form or another. She wrote profusely, strove for women's education, advocated advancing the social position of women and built women's organisations. In spite of her fascinating personality with many contributions she became the part of past and is kept in a corner in history.

In 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, political consciousness was seen among the intellectuals of Bengal due to the introduction of Western culture, science and education. In this regard contemporary historians had appreciated the growth of political awareness among the intellectuals of Bengal.

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During this period political agitation was developed and organised by the different political groups which was marked as the beginning of the freedom movement in India and was also considered as the commencement of Bengal Renaissance. “But not a single historical monograph was written on the so-called ‘Bengal Renaissance’ traces the beginning of women’s political consciousness in Bengal, in proper perspective” [1]. Although there were conscious patriotic motivations prevailing in Bengal, but entry of women in politics was possible due to motivated action of “Urban Bhadrals”, especially elitist Brahmo-family groups. The second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century would not see the political awakening in Bengal society regarding participation of women in politics except the continuous patronage of Brahmo-family members to make the women’s entry in political movement. Gautam Neogi writes, “The rapid spread of higher education among the women in Bengal in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the key factor of women’s emancipation. The spread of education and growth of political consciousness are interdependent variables. Educated Bengali women also plunged themselves into politics when the occasion arose.” [2]

To begin discussion on various social and political issues of women in colonial Bengal the role of “Sakhi Samiti” founded by Swarnakumari Debi (b. 1856), elder sister of Rabindranath Tagore, could be considered as the commencement of women’s movement in India. She had provided assistance to poor widows and helpless women and organised Mahila Shilpa Mela where handicraft products made by women were displayed, organised some societies and fairs for the Bengali women, which attempted some political and social reforms. Trying to organise the women folk at that time was a very tough task. In 1882 Swarnakumari Debi organised women’s theosophical society at her home, but as sufficient number of women were not found, so she had close down the society in 1886.

As the Tagore family had been regarded as one of the leading families of Bengal and was also regarded as one of the key influencers during the Bengali Renaissance, the members of this family had contributed substantially in the fields of business, social and religious reformation, literature, art and music. Sarala was born on 9th September, 1872. Her father was Janakinath Ghosal, one of the first secretaries of the Bengal Congress and her mother was Swarnakumari Devi, a noted woman personality. In this atmosphere of cultural excellence Sarala Devi had grown up. She had got the opportunity to spend the years of her childhood in the ambience of Jorasanko. In addition to that her family encouraged her to opt for institutional education. Her

parents had been involved with the congress from its early days and later Sarala came under the influence of Gandhi and was attracted towards the Gandhian mode of political agitation.

In her autobiography 'Jibaner Jharapata' she recited about her school life, At the age of seven she was admitted to Bethune School where she passed her modern day secondary examination. In the writings, she expressed her determination to study the physical science which was then somehow not offered to girls, even physics was not available as a subject in Bethune College, where she studied. She attended evening lectures at the Science Association along with male students. Her affection towards nationalist movement successively increased due to the influence of senior student leaders in school. Their views and propositions reached her through the intermediaries of her sister and her sister's classmates. She instinctively followed the instructions of these leaders without completely understanding their views. She as well as her associates wore black ribbon on their sleeve in protest against the detainment of Suren Banerjee for his association with Illbert Bill movement. But she felt pity and got encouraged on seeing the same ribbon band in the hand of young students. She apprehended that she had associated with some big issues. Sarala was very much serious in her commitment and later she participated in the freedom struggle. Her principal characteristic was patriotism. She made her first political appearance during the congress session in Calcutta. On 24<sup>th</sup> December 1901 Maharaja Manindra Chandra Nandi inaugurated a national exhibition, where Sarala sang the chorus song "Utho Go Bharatlakshmi" composed by Atulprasad Sen with the deeply stirring emotion. Sarala was exceptionally gifted musician, and composed many of Rabindranath Tagore's songs. Sarala was growing up during the nationalist phase of Bengal's history. The congress was just formed with the intellectual persons from all over India and was considered as the elitist political body. She started to write inspiring pieces for the periodical "Bharati" that would influence young generation of Bengal and motivated them to strengthen their physical and mental ability. Gradually she came into contact with revolutionary groups and provided them with accessories, financial and moral support. She organised festivals around which the Bhadrolok (gentlemen) could cohere and 'create' a martial race of men.

Sarala's another rebellion was opting to earn her own living at a time when even stepping out of the house was a taboo for most of the Bengali girls. She went to far-away Mysore state to teach at the Maharani Girl's School. However she came back home after a year and started writing for Bharati and then began her political activities. Sarala's mother Swarnakumari Devi,

belonged to the first generation of Bengali women who were allowed to have education. Sarala was unable to sustain her wish to earn her livelihood and was forced to return when an intruder broke into her Mysore home during night. After she came back to Calcutta from Mysore, she started encouraging revolutionary activities through her writings and went on to organise martial training programmes for Young Bengali men to inspire a spirit of bravery. Though these programmes did not include women, but Sarala tried to organise educational and vocational training for women. Her modernity, however, inspires her political beliefs and practices. She was firmly abstain from the timidity appreciated of women and prescribes and promotes thoughts regarded as seditions by the colonial government.

In the later part of her life she moved to the Gandhian path of non-violence, but that phase of her life is not covered in her autobiography (She died before she completed the book). Sarala was careful to create a different persona as an author and editor of 'Bharati'. She resisted marriage which was considered as the common fate for every Indian woman in spite of that she had admirers and friends. She did not follow her parents who were congress minded and decided to create a new political space. Sarala wrote about her feeling of estrangement from her mother and she described herself as an extra, unwanted daughter. In the galaxy of men and women of Tagore family, Sarala wanted to prove her own identity so she sought manifestation and affection outside the family and deliberately created a personal and public life beyond this. But the family remained important for her and she desired love and recognition from both her mother and her famous maternal family. She always wanted to be recognised as a valuable and talented member of the Tagore family where many talents born while she projected herself as a rebellious individual.

When Sarala Devi was in Mysore, she closely observed Hindu rituals, the worship of Goddess Lakshmi and attended such pujas. Later she married Rambhuj Dutt Chaudhuri, a follower of Arya Samaj. Sarala pondered about religion and spirituality through her life but did not completely embrace a spiritual life till her final years. She had seen herself as a nationalist. Throughout her life, she continued to be associated with the nationalist movement in one form or another.

She was an individualist, a reserved private person, a dynamic public person, nationalist, exceptionally intelligent and talented women, a singer and social activist and a spiritual person. According to Sarala, there were potential power within women and they needed to arise and

act, they only needed to be confident about it and exert it. In order to develop self-respect, self-confidence and self-reliance, women must continuously recite to themselves the magic words 'I exist', 'We exist'. Sarala's advice towards women of India was that they should first try to develop their own selves, and then attempt to improve their own society which in turn changes the whole world.

Women's meetings had been organised by men with the sessions of the Indian National Social Conference held at the time of the annual session of the Indian National Congress. In one such occasion Sarala suggested that a permanent association of Indian women to be formed. The proposal received support by the present members. The nucleus of the circle was formed at a private meeting of Indian women under the presidency of Mrs. B. N. Sen. Sarala Devi Chaudhurani was appointed as the General Secretary "with powers to take all necessary steps for the establishment of the Society on a permanent footing, to extend and enlarge it, to give it a formal shape by drafting of objects, rules and a constitution".<sup>[3]</sup> Thus, Sarala formed the Bharat Stree Mahamandal or the All India Women's Association in 1990. "The objectives of the Mahamandal were clearly stated. The chief aim was the advancement of Indian women. For this, it was necessary to unite the intellectuals with activists.

"The object of the Bharat Stree Mahamandal is the creation of an organisation by means of which women of every race, creed, class and parity in India may be brought together on the basis of their common interest in the moral and material progress of the women of India; and in and through that organisation they may work in association and in a spirit of mutual helpfulness for the progress of humanity through that of their own sex".<sup>[4]</sup>

Bharati Ray writes in her 'Early Feminists of Colonial India', "In the history of the women's movement in India, Bharat Stree Mahamandal has a special significance. It marked the beginning of women's organisations by women leaders and set the trend for many later organisations"<sup>[5]</sup> Ray further writes about the limitations of these early twentieth century women's organisations, including the Mahamandal, was their middle class character and their inability to involve the majority of Indian women living in rural Bengal. All their aims and endeavours were clearly oriented towards the fulfilment of middleclass urban aspirations"<sup>[5]</sup>. The Mahamandal or this type of association did not make any big changes in women's condition, or it did not last for the middle class members. She further writes in her book, that "In a same one could even describe the organisation as designed for social work by well-to-do ladies. It marked the beginning of the

women's movement in India under women's leadership, and it proclaimed itself as such, announcing clearly its distinction from the men-led women's organisations of the nineteenth century for the 'uplift' of women".<sup>[6]</sup>

Sarala Devi Chaudhurani emphasised on this organisation's 'secular' character. Sarala made it very clear, that it must include 'Indo-Aryan, Indo-Semitic, Indo-Mongolian and 'Ango-Indian' women from all creeds and must adopt a liberal view towards all religions. Sarala Devi wrote on 'Bharati' the Hindus should not think of themselves as the only exceptional people in the world. They needed to acknowledge that all the communities in the world had their good points and only a combination of all communities could best serve the interests of humanity. She also wrote about the aim of the organisation considering pan-Indian unity of women and took step to alliance with other similar organisations. "To join the parts, to bring the several fragments together into one moral unity, to deepen sense of sisterhood and common humanity of the women of all the races and parts of India is one of the main features of the 'Bharat Stree Mahamandal.'" <sup>[7]</sup>. Sarala Devi Chaudhurani was the first Indian women who first organised all women organisation under one umbrella.

She was directly involved in the freedom movement against the British. As Uma Chakravarty rightly remarked "boldness, bravery and physical fitness were accepted as female virtues if they served a political purpose." <sup>[8]</sup> Sarala organised the 'Pratapaditya Utsab' As necessity is the mother of invention, she found Pratapaditya to meet the necessity of finding a hero for Bengal. She invented Bengali heroes like Pratapaditya and used the old symbolism of tying rakhi which was regraded as a popular token of brotherhood. Sarala Devi started observing the vow of 'Birashtami' along with 'Pratapaditya' festival. She introduced this festival to inspire young men to participate in fearless game. She observed this festival during 'Ostumi' of Durga Puja. In every club, 'Rakhi' had been tied on the hand of player and such game was organised to promote courage in public.

If we analyze the movement of Sarala Devi regarding the condition and status of women and their advancement in contemporary colonial Bengal in term of how far the issues of women were progressed and what was the significance of her contribution in terms of women's movement, we found that due to advent of nationalist movement the women's issues were overshadowed by colonialism. Sarala's views, her intentions of an organisation of women and led by women to focus on women's issues found little favour with those who had

supported her role in nationalist movement. She was very much keen to explore Bengalis hero from our history and when there were much more male and female freedom movement leaders from Bengal, her leadership was not hard to accept.

Sarala Devi Chaudhurani was a woman of exceptional talent and came in forefront to lead the women's organisation. As a women leader, her contribution was not discussed much in history like Sarojini Naidu or Sucheta Kripalani who were very much associated with Gandhiji's freedom movement. In spite of that Sarala Devi Chaudhurani will surely be remembered as first women political organiser who was very much concerned about her own community in Bengal. She dreamt that one day educated Bengali women would equipped with modern idea and thought and would come forward to uplift the society.

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