

# Women's Awakening in Bengal in the Swadeshi era

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**Abstract** - As women have been seen in various revolutionary activities in colonial Bengal, the awakening of women has been reflected in these activities. As a poisonous consequence of the British rule, the British government implemented the 'Partition of Bengal' to break the backbone of the Bengali nation. But in this incident, the Bengali nation, Hindus and Muslims alike, erupted in protest, outraged by the British government's conspiracy. Breaking the traditional idea of Bengali women in the 'Andor mohal' (inner palace), the women came out in the 'Bahir mohal' (outer palace) and joined the Swadeshi movement covered with Swadeshi consciousness. By joining a large number of women, men were indirectly able to gain strength and courage. While acknowledging this obstacle, we can highlight the awakening of women in the light of the information mentioned in various papers.

**Index Terms** - colonial Bengal-Women-Swadeshi-Sarala Devi-Awakening.

## INTRODUCTION

Women are the victims of exploitation — this is a very popular topic all over the world. Although this term is applicable even in the case of Bangabhumi (Bengal), Indian women have been seen in different forms in the history of India — education, practice of scriptures, religious worship, practice of knowledge, etc. in various forms. This diverse form of woman has also been observed in Bangabhumi (Bengal). As women have been seen in various revolutionary activities in colonial Bengal, the awakening of women has been reflected in these activities. As a poisonous consequence of the British rule, the British government implemented the 'Partition of Bengal' to break the backbone of the Bengali nation. But in this incident, the Bengali nation, Hindus and Muslims alike, erupted in protest, outraged by the British government's conspiracy. Breaking the traditional idea of Bengali women in the 'Andor mohal' (inner palace), the women came out in the 'Bahir mohal' (outer palace) and joined the Swadeshi movement

covered with Swadeshi consciousness. By joining a large number of women, men were indirectly able to gain strength and courage. Due to the inconsistency of the information, it is difficult to gather proper historical evidence of various activities of women's awakening. Because, in that era, the activities of women wrapped in the atmosphere of conservatism were not made public. As a result, women's activities could not be illuminated by the light of the larger external world outside of society, remaining in the secluded corners of the inner court. While acknowledging this obstacle, we can highlight the awakening of women in the light of the information mentioned in various papers.

Although Rabindranath Tagore introduced the 'Rakhi Bandhan' festival at the beginning of the Partition of Bengal, Ramendrasundar Trivedi's 'Arandhan Utsav' was especially effective in involving women in the Partition Movement. The women of Bengal responded to Ramendrasundar's call by protesting from house to house against the partition of Bengal. The women who had been living in the inner house till now came out of the house in protest and protested. Significant evidence of women's participation in the movement at this time is found in the magazine 'Sanjivani'. It is known from this magazine that on the day of the Partition of Bengal (August 24, 1905), on the day of laying the foundation stone of the Federation Hall, the presence of women in the balcony of the Brahma Girls' School was eye-catching. Besides, on the same day, Ramendrasundar Trivedi recited the 'Bangalakshi Brat Kotha' in his village in Murshidabad district, the women present there broke the foreign bangles on their hands in response to the spirit of homeland. Similarly, it can be seen that Bipin Chandra Pal Chandra addressed a demonstration and protest meeting organized by women at Habiganj and Bhola in East Bengal in February 1906. When Surendranath Bandyopadhyay, along with Bipin Chandra, visited Mymensingh and Tangail, the women there

spontaneously greeted him. A notable incident at this time was the imprisonment of Bhupendranath Dutt in protest of the partition of Bengal. In protest, the famous doctor Nilratan Sarkar held a meeting with women at his house. There are also indications that a number of sex workers, inspired by the Swadeshi spirit, handed over their savings to the 'Swadeshi Bandhab Samiti'.<sup>1</sup>

From the beginning of the Partition of Bengal to its spread, women played an active role in the anti-Partition movement by engaging in meetings, boycotting foreign goods, picketing in front of British shops, using domestic goods, cutting spinning wheels, etc. But despite this, it was seen that the participation of women was not so promising, women did not come forward in the whole part of the movement. Perhaps because of the secrecy surrounding women's participation in contemporary conservatism or patriarchal society, not much is known about them. However, we see that at this time, two women had a special role in the awakening of Bengali women, sister Nivedita and Sarala Ghoshal. Sister Nivedita, who is not Indian, was an Irish citizen. After his arrival in India, he came in contact with Narendranath Dutt and became known as 'Sister Nivedita' and joined the movement. So, as a Bengali woman, we can talk about Sarala Ghoshal, who was an integral part of the Swadeshi movement. Until then, women have not been seen to take an active part in volunteering or meeting-committees. Because in the orthodox conservative society till then the ideal of accepting equal rights of men and women has not been born. The women's awakening was directly noticed in the later Gandhi-led movements.

Thus, Sarala Ghoshal or Sarala Devi Chowdhurani (1872-1945) was able to match the political arena despite the various obstacles of women and the bloodshot eyes of the patriarchal society. Sarala Devi was associated with Rabindranath Tagore, as her mother Swarnakumari Devi was the sister of Rabindranath Tagore and the fourth daughter of Maharshi Debendranath Tagore. Sarala Devi spent her childhood in Jorasanko's Thakurbari, in which the idea of Swadeshi was awakened in her mind. Courtesy of her education at the famous Bethune School, Sarala Devi was able to develop herself into a Swadeshi ideal. After passing BA with Honors in English, she joined Maharani Girls School run by the King of Mysore as a teacher for one year. But motivated by the ideology of

patriotism and due to financial well-being of the family, he left his job and returned to Calcutta. In her autobiography, Sarala Devi wrote, "The hobby of independence became widespread and took the form of hobby of national and national independence. Hobby was no longer a hobby, the cause took shape."<sup>2</sup> Along with all this, the physical weakness and cowardice of the Indians came to the notice of Sarala Devi. He strongly condemned this cowardice of the contemporary Bengali society. He said, "The greatest asset of a human being is to keep the Bengali ancestral life alive --- that is, a strong and healthy body. That is why I want Bengalis to exercise regularly like other nations in India."<sup>3</sup> Sarala Devi did not stop there, emphasizing on physical strength as well as character building and mental development. He spoke of the great wrestlers of the Punjab who, though physically strong, were terrified of the British. Indian men chanted against this cowardice, saying, "The fear of white skin must be removed."<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps it is against this background that Sarala Devi opened a physical training centre or gymnasium on 26 Baliganj Circular Road to provide exercise to the youth of Bengal. In this arena, an expert named Murtaza used to teach the practice of playing sticks and wielding swords. It was in this arena that Pulinbihari Das, who was associated with the Dhaka 'Anushilan Samiti', received basic training in the use of sticks, knife and swords. Sarala Devi later organized the 'Birastami' festival in this arena, through which various types of physical techniques, exercise skills were shown. Sarala Devi was a notable example of how women were able to involve and inspire male society in the anti-partition movement. He requested the famous lawyer Ashwini Kumar Banerjee for training in boxing, handling and firearms in this arena.<sup>5</sup>

However, there was a specialty in the celebration of 'Birastami' festival in the arena of Baliganj Circular Road, which was exclusively Sarala Devi's own invention. When he turns the page of the calendar about when the Durga Puja holiday will start, he sees that there are instructions to observe 'Birastami Vows' on the day of Durga Ashtami. It was from this guideline that he started the 'Birastami Utsav' on the day of Durga Ashtami. Through this festival, he wanted to take the country to the pinnacle of glory through the joint efforts of mother and son. Sarala Devi herself says, "How did the country that was a part

of the religious festival fall today? My soul cried. That was the beginning of the Birastami festival.”<sup>6</sup> The festival was held according to certain rules, surrounded by a sword decorated with garlands, a Sanskrit hymn to the martyrs and heroes of the country and their names were recited and a wreath of swords was given. After that, the youths used to perform weapons techniques there. The winning youths were awarded gloves, sticks, knives and Birastami medals by the widow of Sujat Ali Beg, wife of the then Nawab of Murshidabad. Needless to say, such an initiative of a virgin Hindu woman in the contemporary conservative situation certainly deserves praise. The Birastami festival was celebrated in the same way in this arena till the marriage took place in Punjab.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to building arenas for teaching physical techniques and skills, Sarala Devi applied sharp writing with her pen to protest against British rule. He edited the famous contemporary ‘Bharati’ magazine at different times. Through this magazine he exposed the Bengali youth in the light of nationalism. Sarala Devi was inviting ordinary hardworking people to stand up against the British white-skinned men without fear. He called for protests against those who had been insulted and hated by the British, especially on the roads and on the railway steamers. Needless to say, such inflammatory statements of Sarala Devi started reaching the common people in printed form through ‘Bharati’ magazine.

However, it should be remembered that long before the partition of Bengal began in 1905, Sarala Devi had set up various exhibitions and marketing centers in the 1890s to develop the Swadeshi ideology. It was from this inspiration that Rabindranath's ‘Swadeshi Bhandar’ (1897), Yogesh Chandra Chowdhury's ‘Indian Stores’ (1901) and Sarala Devi's ‘Lakshir Bhandar’ (1903) were built. At this time, when a porter named Panka died at the hands of whites in Barrackpore on 26 November, Sarala Devi herself collected the money and handed it over to the widow of the deceased.<sup>8</sup> In this way Sarala Devi protested against the colonial rule and engaged herself in various kinds of public welfare work from devotion to her homeland. Similarly, Sarala Devi, the wounded Japanese soldier in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05), advertised in the newspapers for the formation of the Bengali Red Cross for nursing. Although it was important for him to receive training from the St. John's Ambulance Association. When Sarala Devi

found out about the matter and wanted to move forward, the grateful Japanese informed Sarala Devi that there was no need to take action now. Although they are grateful to Sarala Devi for this. So the fact that Sarala Devi woke up as a woman with great interest and fearlessness, ignoring the bloody eyes of the British rule, certainly deserves credit.

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