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A Small Stream Carrying the Mighty Spirit of Ganga: Emergence of Women Organizations in Karnataka

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Abstract

It is now common knowledge that the issue of gender discrimination in India was first taken up by male reformers who were well aware that Indian image and stability depended on the status of women, Gender discrimination presented itself in varied forms, such as sati practice, widowhood at tender age, female infanticide and lack of education among women. Owing to the endeavors of the great thinkers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Eswarchandra Vidyasagar, Justice Mahadeva Ranade, D.K Karve, Dayananda Saraswati and Swami Vivekananda, considerable changes were brought in the pattern of women's lives in India. As Geraldine Forbes rightly notes: "In reality the concept of the 'perfect wife' was being redefined. First, there were modifications in the appropriate activities for a female at different stages of her life. Second, the appropriate arena for female action was expanded. And third, there was a new and growing approval of individualism" (p.28, *Women in Modern India*).

Taking cue from such changes initiated by male reformers, many women movements and organizations came in to existence. In the wake of these movements and organizations, some women names came to prominence. Among them some significant ones are Nawab Faizunneesa Chaudhurani (1847-1905), Pandita Ramabai(1858-1922), Sarala Devi Chaudhurani(1872-1945), Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932), Dr. Muthulakshmi (1886-1968), Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya (1903-1988) and Anandibai Karve (1856-1950).

It could be safely said that Pandita Ramabai Saraswathi was a pioneer in the matter of women education. She established two schools—*Sharada Sadan* in 1889 (in Bombay and Poona) and *Mukti*, in 1887—to provide education for young widows, poor and destitute. By 1900 *Mukti* had grown into a major institution,

housing 2000 women and children attending school and involved in industrial training and production. Along with physical education the curriculum of the school included training in printing, carpentry, tailoring, masonry, woodcutting, weaving and needle work as well as training in farming and gardening. But while the attempts of the institution were to open a new vista for the poor and destitute women, Ramabai's conversion to Christianity made her unpopular.

In the Nineteenth century, an independent and a very dignified picture of Indian woman was presented by the Tagore family. Swarnakumari Devi, daughter of Maharshi Debendranath Tagore and elder sister of Ravindranath Tagore founded Sakhi Samiti in 1886. Sakhi Samiti, the first women organization in Bengal to be set up by women, was started to provide assistance to indigent widows and helpless women. *Bidhaba Shilpashram* for the widows was founded by Swarnakumari's daughter Hironmayee Devi, and Swarnakumari Devi was the president of *Shilpashram*. She also organized *Mahila Shilpamela*, an annual fair where women made cottage industry products from different parts of India were displayed.

Sarala Devi Chaudhurani the younger daughter of Swarnakumari Devi first materialized the idea of women organization by women at national level. She, perhaps had inherited the undaunted patriotism from her father Janakinath Ghoshal and an independent spirit by the Tagores as well. Very individualistic Sarala, after her graduation from Bethune College in 1890 took up a paid job "to know herself" as she herself says, but soon gave it up. Back in Bengal her patriotic spirit became very active. As an editor of *Bharati*, a family magazine, she wrote many inspiring articles for freedom fighters. Since she thought that body and mind are complementary to each other, she felt the need for physical training, which is essential for strong and healthy body. In this connection she opened an *akhra* (club for physical training) and *byayam samiti* (gymnasium). A Muslim Ustad was appointed to train the young men in *akhra* and *byayam samiti*. These clubs served as linkages with revolutionaries during Indian freedom struggle.

Sarala's extraordinary organizing ability extended to the conduct of the celebration of *Ashtami* in 1902 and *Utsavs* in 1903; the celebration of which would induce and encourage unity and confidence among the Indians. Her stature as an advocate of women's cause is very impressive. Involved in national politics she thought for the women of India and her articles in *Bharati* were to inspire and encourage women to participate in national affairs. The Indian Store for Indian Women that she opened was to provide a market and to popularize handicrafts and indigenous goods made by women of *Bidhaba Shilpashram*. To educate women, small educational centers at Bengal and Punjab were also established by her.

Sarala was the first woman to develop a network among women at national level. She founded *Bharat Stree Mahamandal* (the Great Circle of India) in 1910—much before the inception of All India Women's

Conference (1927). In *Early Feminists of Colonial India*, Bharati Ray quotes the ‘clearly stated’ objective of Bharat Stree Mahamandal in Sarala’s own words:

The object of the *Bharat Stree Mahamandal* is the creation of an organization by means of which women of every race, creed, class and party in India may be brought together on the basis of their common interest in the moral and material progress of the women in India; and in a spirit of mutual helpfulness for the progress of humanity through that of their own sex (p. 81-82).

To materialize the general objectives was not easy. Lack of education, absence of medical aids, lack of information and communication were the major obstacles. Hence, the *Mahamandal* drew a plan of action. According to which it was decided to set up branches in all the important cities of India under a central body at Lahore. For married girls and women in *Purdah* a system of home education would be started in various places of the country. Sarla’s plan of action included the appointments of Literary committees to encourage the growth and spread of Indian vernacular literature, and to make modern thought accessible to literate Indian women. It was also decided to set up depots to facilitate the Indian women for bringing their handicrafts to the market and also to encourage indigent women to engage in productive work to be able to earn some money for their livelihood. The *Mahamandal* would also start an enquiry into available medical aid and induce women to take advantage of existing institutions. To have a wide network of women, the Mandal would affiliate itself to any other women’s association with similar aims and, importantly, open bureaus of information regarding women’s society, their work and progress in the society, their work and progress in the country. It must be noted that even after almost two centuries of establishment of the first women organization, holistic vision of such organizations has not been yet realized in Modern India. Membership of *Mandal* was open to any woman of any creed and nationality on payment of one rupee entrance fee and its annual subscription was also fixed to one rupee. With many branches at Calcutta, Punjab, Oudh and Agra, however, *Mahamandal* worked successfully though the endeavor was confined to a small section of women. From April 1911, the branch at Calcutta under the helmswomen ship of two distinguished women—Swarnakumari Devi as President and Krishnabhabini Das as secretary—started *Zenana* education. And in 1930, a formal educational institution was founded in Bhowanipore. Nari Nirvaha Bhandar (The Women’s Mart) was commenced to provide facilities for the sale of women’s handiwork. The proceeds of the sale went to the indigent women workers. For the realization of its goals *Mandal* took the help of some men. Sarala induced these men to encourage and inspire women of their family to join the *Mandal*.

The accomplishments of the Mandal are well summed up by Bharti Ray: “In the history of women’s movement in India, *Bharat Stree Mahamandal* has a special significance. It marked the beginning of women’s organizations by women leaders and set the trend for many later organizations.” (p.86, Ibid) The two-fold importance of these women’s organizations in women’s history, according to her was:

First, they signified the transfer of leadership in women’s movements from men to women

Second, the example of the Mahamandal reveals an interesting dimension of the women’s movement in India. Contrary to the popular belief that the movement took its cue from Western feminism, there was a connection between it the anti-British nationalist movement. (P. 86, Ibid)

Bharat Stree Mahamandal marked the beginning of many women organizations at regional plane in the nation; there was an awakening in every part of India. One such women’s movement took place on cultural grounds at Hassan, the semi Malnad region in Karnataka. In 1913, when *Bharat Stree Mahamandal* was active in Calcutta, Punjab and other parts of India, a small women organization was taking its shape in Bangalore. Some women—mostly from affluent families—of Bangalore city, in the then Mysore state formed *Seva Sadan Society*, which was affiliated to the *Seva Sadan* of Bombay. The objectives of the society “were to educate young girls and underprivileged women from all castes and creeds in learning arts and crafts which would help them earn some money to take care of themselves”. (p.91, Rajeshwari Chatterji: *Thousand Streams: A Personal History*).

The Society registered independently in 1917 under Mysore state, was called *Mahila Sewa Samaj* or Women’s Service League. Parvathamma was the President of the Samaj. Kamala Dasappa a thirty two year old widow, served as Honorary Secretary. The income of the society was from subscriptions by the members, donations and grant from Mysore state Government. The Samaj started in a humble way. A primary school with government grant was opened. The majority of pupils of the school were widows and abandoned wives. The activities of the Samaj gradually extended to various fields. Language classes, handiwork classes, music classes and classes of domestic science were introduced to attract women—young and old. The Samaj also taught stories from Hindu epics and *Puranas*. The activities were said to be guided and disciplined by the President and the Honorary Secretary. The artifacts made by the women were sold and the money realized would go to the Samaj. The Samaj also had a “Gentleman Helpers’ Committee”, constituted of important members of the Samaj for advice on important financial matters and dealings with the government. The Samaj also opened educational institutions for the village children, young widows and the destitute. In 1930, the members and pupils of the Samaj organized a Ladies Cooperative Society. Along with cultural and academic

training to women and young girls the Samaj also helped the poor and the destitute to become self-reliant. Besides these many activities, the Samaj developed socially into a prestigious institution and has been serving till date with its educational institutes. Gandhi's visit to the Samaj twice—in 1927 and 1934—prompted the Samaj to start spinning and weaving classes.

Kastur Ba, Sir. M. Visweswaraiiah, Rt. Hon. V. Srinivasa Shatri, Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Lady Mirza Ismail, Lady Irwin were among many other great personalities who visited the Samaj with appreciation for its works.

About two decades after the establishment of *Bharat Stree Mahamandal* in 1910—in 1934, a *Mahila Samaj* was established in the semi Malnad region of Hassan. The activities of the Samaj increased considerably by the time it got registered in 1938. Membership was open to any woman in and around Hassan. The fee was nominal. It is remarkable indeed that the Samaj in those days and in a remote hilly region could also frame its own bye-laws. The Samaj could own a new building of its own with grants from the Maharaja of Mysore, Sri Jayachamarajendra Wodeyar, and land from Hassan Municipality. The Samaj from that time was named after Kempu Cheluvarajammaniyavaru, the mother of the Maharaja. Such patronage from royal family also marks a boost that the Samaj got to extend its activities by conducting classes in language, music, sewing, spinning and weaving. Women were also trained to prepare *papad*, *sandige*, pickles and *Masala* powder, soap etc., which were sold in the fairs of Arasikere, Sakleshpur and also in the Mysore Dasara Exhibition. The money earned by the sale went to the poor women who did the work. Condensed classes for adults, especially for widows and abandoned wives were arranged to equip them for training classes. Some sports activities were also introduced. By all these activities the Samaj opened a new avenue for women and was instrumental in the emergence of many women organizations in villages around Hassan. An All Mysore State Women's Conference was also organized by the Samaj and Lady Mirza Ismail presided over the conference. Among the women who worked for the progress of the Mahila Samaj B. Nanjamma's is a prominent name. She also happens to be the sister of B.M. Srikanthaiah, the doyen of Kannada Literature. After the death of her lawyer husband, Mylariah, Nanjamma faced the hardships of widow's life with dignity and assisted her fellow women community to be educated and self-reliant as well. She was instrumental in the establishment of Mahila Samaj in Sakaleshpura, Arasikere, Channarayapattana and Chickmagalur taluk. The other names associated with the Mahila Samaj are Yathirajamma and Mahalaksmamma.

The Mahila Samaj of Hassan was to a great extent inspired by the Mahila Samaj of Bangalore, which in turn was inspired by the Women's Organizations at the national level. They all came to existence during the period of national awakening. Behind these streams and sub-streams of women activities one sees the same

energy of the mighty Ganga. But what should be of concern to us is the amnesic tendency of society where women's work is concerned. There is a paucity of records relating to Hassan Mahila Samaj. There is not the same enthusiasm in the society (compared to male organizations) to construct and sustain the history of women's movement and organizations. Books relating to women and their organizations—at the national and at the regional level—are very rare. For example one hears these days about Sarala Devi, but in connection with Gandhiji—and for the possibility of a scandal. That she did remarkable things like setting the tune in the 1905 Congress meet for the National Anthem “Vande Matharam”, or that Vivekananda wanted her to serve as his chief instrument for awakening the nation are matters our society does not take adequate cognizance of. The autobiography of this remarkable builder of the nation is yet to become available to non-Bengali readers. Indeed it is probably not widely available in Bengal itself. Similarly, it is important to maintain a record of the services of women like Nanjamma who sought to convey the women energy (for building organizations at National Level) to the regional level.

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