



CONTRIBUTIONS OF DURGABAI DESHMUKH IN FREEDOM STRUGGLE IN ANDHRA

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Abstract

Durgabai Deshmukh, a leader, organiser, social worker, freedom fighter and a champion of women's welfare in Andhra entered the public life at a younger age. Inspired by Gandhi's ideals, Durgabai mobilized women in Andhra districts into the freedom struggle. Coming from humble background, she was a self-made person who dedicated her entire life to the upliftment of Women. Durgabai was an inheritor of the legacy of 19th century social movement. The present paper is an attempt to analyse contribution of Durgabai Deshmukh, to freedom struggle. It also aims to study her childhood, influence of Gandhi, Madan Mohan Malavya and other leaders her active participation in the freedom movement.

Key words: Women welfare, Andhra Mahila, Khadi, Salt Satyagraha, Constituent assembly, Balika Hindu Pathashala

Introduction

The need for women's studies was greatly felt in the recent years it helps in understanding women's position in the society, the cause for her oppression and subordination and her struggle for equality are elicited. Among the greatest pioneers of women freedom struggle in the 20th century in Andhra is Smt. Durgabai Deshmukh, who gave a powerful thrust to social work, particularly for the cause of women in Andhra.

Before going into a detailed discussion, a brief sketch of the social reform movements undertaken by the 19th century intellectuals, especially of those movements that immensely contributed to the emancipation of women is required. The role of various voluntary women's organisations of early 20th century which worked strenuously for the welfare of women in India in general and in Andhra in particular also needs mentioning.

The pioneer of women welfare of Andhra was Smt. Durgabai, in whose valuable services we see fulfilment of the work of her predecessors, like Pandit Ramabai, Mrs. Annie Besant, Mrs. Margaret Cousins and others.¹ She gave an organizational form to the ideas regarding women's welfare predated by the 19th century intellectuals in Andhra. A born leader, organizer, tireless social worker, valiant freedom fighter, and a champion of women's welfare in Andhra, she started her social services at the age of thirteen with the Balika Hindi Pathashala.²

Durgabai emerged as an adventurous social reformer cum social worker. As a crusader, she fought for women's emancipation from the out dated customs and traditions like child marriages, forced widowhood, polygamy, and Devadasi system.³ Durgabai, being a victim of the child marriage⁴ herself, boldly opposed the primitive system and liberated herself from the bonds of the custom and strived hard for the liberation and progress of the Andhra women.



The social reform movements in India had a tremendous impact on the Andhra region. There were large-scale reforms in Andhra in the 19th century to improve the deplorable condition of women. Andhra women were steeped with ignorance and illiteracy coupled with superstitions. They were dictated by outmoded customs and traditions⁵. During the mid-nineteenth century, many enlightened intellectuals of Andhra like Muddu Krishnam Naidu,⁶ Kandukuri Veeresalingam and his followers, Bulusu Sambamurthy, Gurajada Appa Rao,⁷ Raghupati Venkataratnam Naidu,⁸ and Rayasam Venkata Sivudu fought vehemently against child marriage, enforced widowhood, Kanyasulkam and the Devadasi system.

During the first decade of the 20th Century, women's organizations were started by educated women; they were instrumental in arousing the consciousness among the Andhra women. Women's organisations like Gruhalakshmi and Andhra Mahila worked for the propagation of education and for women's welfare. It may be noted that political consciousness among women in Andhra arose during the second decade of 20th century.

Gandhi's Influence on Women in Andhra:

Many women's magazines like the Grihalakshmi⁹ and the Andhra Mahila¹⁰ strenuously worked for the propagation of women education and for women's welfare. It may be noted that political consciousness in Andhra in the second decade of twentieth century also brought political awareness among the Andhra womanhood though the Andhra political leaders sidelined the cause of women in the political struggle. Andhra women were greatly influenced by Gandhiji's ideals, writings, and speeches. Gandhiji's attitude towards women was a natural corollary of his ideals non-violence (ahimsa).¹¹ He held a view that women are the apostles of ahimsa; he also advocated that women should have equal rights of freedom and liberty with men.¹² He vehemently opposed the "child marriage", which in his opinion, is both moral as well as physical evil¹³ and advocated for widow remarriages. He believed that women should have the freedom to participate in the national building activities. He also said that women were most competent to carry on the social services because of their natural qualities of gentleness, love and compassion¹⁴. Such appeals and lofty ideas about womanhood and his call for freedom proved irresistible to Andhra women and many of the upper class women came out of purdahs and actively participated in political struggle.

Many of the progressive women of India and women's organizations were instrumental in arousing the self-consciousness among the Andhra women to fight for their welfare and to agitate for equal rights.

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Durgabai's Early Life and Influences:

Durgabai was born in a middle-class family on July 15, 1909, at Rajahmundry (a historic town in the coastal district of west Godavari in Andhra)¹⁵. In one of her articles entitled, The New Dimensions of Women's in India, she gave a general picture of the condition of middle class women during the early years of the 20th century. To be born into a middle-class family in India at this period national development was to be born into a secured little world where women had her place allotted by custom and sanctified by religion. The



stresses of modern life hardly touched by the child born a girl, therefore destined to be, if lucky, taught to read and write and beyond that to serve.

At a very young age, Durgabai specialized in the fine arts, songs, mastered musical instruments like the veena and the *harmonium*¹⁶, acquainted her adeptly in floral decorations, and actively participated in social and cultural shows organized by her father. Thus, a Zeal for reform and social and social revolution was needed. It had a long lineage; it emigrated from her ancestors' time, it was reflected in her parents' life, and the same was followed and fulfilled during her lifetime. Through the Nineteenth century intellectuals, Durgabai was herself a victim of child marriage. She wrote in her autobiography that the only mistake committed by her liberal father was marrying her off at the age of eight to Zamindar's adopted son, Sri Subba Rao.

She came out of the bond of marriage and restarted a new life and career not only for herself but also for the other socially oppressed women who were prepared to come out into the wider area and utilize their potential, and to play a vital role in India's social and political struggle for independence. Durgabai family life started very early; at the age of nine in the year 1918, she used to gather children from the neighbourhood and teach those songs and some crafts. Durgabai's urge for education started very early; she studies in Girl's Municipal School in Kakinada upto the fifth standard¹⁷ and when Gandhi visited Rajahmundry in the year 1921, she was greatly inspired by his speech and the course of action suggested by him. Profoundly influenced by him, she boycotted the school where English was taught and burnt the foreign clothes and took to wearing Khadi and started in institution named Balika Hindi Pathashal based on the medium, Hindi, besides giving them training in crafts, stitching, embroidery, khadi, spinning, and teaching patriotic songs.

Durgabai's Entry into Freedom Movement:

In the year 1922, prior to the commencement of Annual session of Indian National Congress, Gandhi, Gandhi deputed Dakshina Bharata Hindu Prachara Sabha under Pandit Hrishikesh Sharma and his wife Smt. Sharada Devi to spread Hindi in south, particularly in Kakinada and the Congress Session as well as the first session of Hindi Sahitya Sammelan was to be held. Durgabai showed remarkable qualities in teaching and training as many as 400 women volunteers in Hindi from Balika Hindi Pathashala. Through she herself could not become a volunteer for the Congress Session, because of her being underage, she actively participated in the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan.

The Andhra leaders found that there were only two National institutions in Kakinada-one was Machilipatnam Jateeya Kalashala and the other was Balika Hindi Pathashala. They were entirely based on Gandhian principles. So they arranged for the visit of various important national leaders like Chittaranjan Das, Kasturba Gandhi, Maulana Shaukat Ali, Jamnalala Bajaj and C.F. Andrews to these institutions, they greatly appreciated the remarkable services of Durgabai, who at the young age of 13, worked as the principal, teacher and the servant of the School¹⁷. The patriotic songs like *Charka Chala Karlege*, *Swarajlenge*, *Khuddhar hum na chorege* were the songs sung by the inmates of Balika Hindi Pathashala. Thus, the school started by her at Kakinada who joined her school. In later years, it concluded various examinations Hindi like Prathamik, Madhyamik and Rashtrabhasha and Visharad, and trained annually about 40 to 50 Women to appear the forerunner of Andhra Mahila Sabha Institutions started her¹⁸.



Since her childhood Durgabai condemned the social evils like child marriage and devadasi system and considered Devadasi¹⁹ as a reprehensible and when Gandhiji visited Kakinada in 1926, for the fund raising campaign, she wanted to arrange a meeting of the Devadasi Women and the Muslim Women who were observing the custom of Burqua²⁰, with Gandhiji. She strongly believed that any change in their life and social custom. Could be brought in with Gandhiji's influence. With great difficulty, she secured permission from the local leaders like Shri Bulusu Sambamurthy and Konda Venkatappayya²¹. On the condition of submitting Rs. 5000/- to Gandhiji, Durgabai collected the fund from the Devadasi women by propagating the ideas and greatness of Gandhiji was impressed by the organization of that meeting²² and reform among Muslim Women and propagated the constructive programs for the emancipation of women. Durgabai translated the speech of Gandhi into telugu in his later tours to Andhra²³.

She organized processions in the streets of Kakinada against wife beating and the oppressed attitudes of men folk towards their wives. She also raised her voice against the enforced widowhood and the cruel and barbarous custom of torture of women on the death of their husband; even the young women were subjected to this brutal custom. She first oppressed this practice at home, when her mother attained widowhood on her father's death and that inspired several women in the neighbourhood²⁴.

Role in Salt Satyagraha

Though Durgabai's contribution to the National Movement Andhra started much earlier by implementing the constrictive programmes propagated by Gandhiji, her active participation in the freedom struggle started in 1930, during the Salt Satyagraha Movement.²⁵ She had never been a member of any political party, but she, as an individual, was profoundly overwhelmed by the National Movement initiated by Gandhiji. Among the Andhra Pradesh, Durgabai held Tanguturi Prakasham and Bulusu sambamoorthi in highest esteem,²⁶ the former was called as Andhra Kesari, i.e, Lion of Andhra, a selfless national leader, who sacrificed his career and wealth to the cause of the National Movement.

When Gandhiji called for Salt Satyagraha against the Salt tax imposed by the British administrators, though no women had been included in Gandhi's chosen volunteers at Sabarmati, Sarojini Naidu joined the Salt March, becoming the first women to participate in Civil Disobedience Movement.²⁷ Durgabai was the second women to participate in Salt Satyagraha from Andhra. Many provincial Congress Committees resolved to launch Satyagraha. The movement was headed in South India by C. Rajagopala Chari, who launched Satyagraha at Vendaranyam.²⁸

Andhra leaders like Tanguturi Prakasham and Kasinadhuni Nageshwara Rao chose Chirala in Andhra as venue for Satyagraha activities. Durgabai thought Madras would be the right place to launch a mass movement. She met Prakasam and persuaded him to do Satyagraha at Madras, and thus became responsible for the historic decision of selecting Madras for Satyagraha.²⁹ She wrote a letter to Gandhi seeking permission to do Satyagraha, and indicated that even if permission is refused, she would go ahead to take part in the Satyagraha; he was compelled to go permission to her. After Tanguturi Prakasham and K. Nageshwara Rao were arrested, Durgabai became the leader and instructor of Salt Satyagraha in Madras Presidency.³⁰ She spearheaded the movement by organizing public meetings, processions all over the Presidency facing lathi charges. She also toured many cities like Arani, Chittoor and Arcot, inspiring people to participate in the campaign.³¹ Wherever she addressed a public meeting people attended to the spell bound and followed her in the processions. She mesmerised the audience with her forceful and persuasive speech.



Lord Cunningham the then Commissioner of Madras after seeing her indomitable courage called her “Lioness Durgabai”.³² It was due to the reason that she was badly bruised in the cane charge when she tightly held a fistful of Salt in her grip though her fingers were bleeding. Later, she was arrested and imprisoned at Rayavellor Jail. During her imprisonment she came in contact with other women political prisoners of the jail and listened to their life territories. As soon as she was released from Royavellor jail in 1931 following Gandhi Irwin pact she attended Congress session at Karachi and met prominent leaders like Sardar Patel and Jaman Lal Bajaj. Durgabai was again arrested in 1932 and in the jail, she was tortured and beaten that led to shoulder injury. Then she decided to peruse her studies. The life in jail inspired her to educate herself and emancipate the womanhood in Andhra. Thus, she realized the need for and the importance of education for women and the handicap of illiteracy.³³

She decided to take up law as her profession in her future life in order to the justice for women in legal matters³⁴ and resolved to devote her life to help women in overcoming their handicaps. She revolted within the Congress Committee against allowing the British adopt a “divide and rule” policy through the differential treatment of political prisoners by categorizing them as A, B, C class prisoners. When she herself was allowed to be an “A” Class Prisoner, she voluntarily chose “C” class in prison and in this regard, she passed a resolution in the Congress Committee meeting at Guntur. She was arrested again in the year 1933, and was kept under Solitaries Confinement at Madura Jail, in a Cell next to the gallows. She suffered with bouts of hysterical due to bad food and the agonising cries of the criminals who were to be hanged. She revolted against the Jail authorities about the worst treatment meted out women prisoners. Her health was badly affected after a term imprisonment, and was advised by doctors to retire from active politics. She was also asked to follow some occupational therapy. She used to engage the fellow prisoners with songs and reciting patriotic plays. She used to spin two thousand yards of yarn every day in jail.

During her imprisonment and political participation, she came into contact with many women leaders like Smt. Ashar of Gujarat, Shri Nityananda Kanugo of Orissa, Sister Sardadevi, Kutti Amma of Malabar, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya of Karnataka, Vedantam Kamala Devi, Rukmini Lakshmipathi and others.³⁵ She worked for sometime as a volunteer in the Hindustan Sevalal run by Smt. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya and Dr. N.S. Hardikar at Bombay,³⁶ after which she worked in the Kasturba Gandhi Memorial Trust and became the trustee and organized the collection of funds for the trust in Andhra. When Durgabai was in jail, her mother was running Hindi Pathshala in her absence, but later when both were arrested the property of the school was confiscated by the government. They were forced to sell their house and migrated to Rajahmudri. She realised that women need to be self-reliant.

Durgabai decided to continue her education, at the age of twenty-four, after a long engagement in public work and her participation in the National Movement. While she was in jail, she learnt English alphabets from her fellow prisoner Rukmini Lakshmipathy. With great enthusiasm and zeal for knowledge, she withstood all hurdles, economic and social, especially against the persuasion of the political leaders who asked Durgabai to resume her political work. However, she decided to pursue her studies with the help of Shri Goparaju Ramachandra Rao³⁷, better known as Gora. Under his able guidance, she appeared for the examination conducted by the Banaras Hindu University as private candidate.

In the year 1934, she joined the University as a regular student with the financial help given by Pandit Madan Mohan Malvya. She wrote in her autobiography “if Gandhiji inspired me in starting Balika Hindi Pathashala in early 20s in Kakinada, it was the inspiration I got from Madan Mohan Malvya in Banaras



Hindu University that formed the basis of launching upon constructing program for Andhra Mahila Sabha in Madras in 40s.” Later she completed her B.A honours from Andhra University. She completed her bachelor of law in 1941 from Madras. Gandhiji honoured Durgabai with a gold medal in 1944 for her contribution in Dakshin Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha. While she was in Chennai, her public life started with the establishment of Andhra Mahila Sabha providing training to women in literacy.

Durgabai Role in National Building

Durgabai was elected as member of constituent assembly in the year 1946 and moved to Delhi. She involved in the preparation of draft constitution under the chairmanship of Dr. B.R Ambedkar. As a member of steering committee, she moved more than 750 amendments. After the constitution came into force, Nehru assigned her with the work of famine relief in Rayalaseema district. In the year 1952, she was sent as first Indian delegation to China. In the same year she was appointed as a member of Planning Commission and was made in charge of social services. She contributed immensely as a Chairman of Social Welfare Board and initiated several social benefit programme for women and children. She married Dr, Chintaman Deshmukh, the then Finance Minister in 1953 and both works together in the social service. The illustrious career to an end with her death in 1981.

To summed up Durgabai Deshmukh who entered public life at early age challenge the notion of confining women to home. After entering national movement influence by Gandhian philosophy undertook several constructive programme spinning Khadi, propagation of Hindi etc. She actively participated in Salt satyagraha movement even vehemently opposing Gandhi’s denial of women’s participation in active resistance during Salt Satyagraha. Durgabai’s contribution for women welfare and freedom struggle in Andhra is immense and noteworthy.ⁱ

Notes and references

1. Putli Krishnamurthi, Changing Condition of Women in Andhra, 1987 p.40
2. Ibid, p.41
3. S.Sarada, Andhra Mahila Sabha: A Study in the Social welfare Organizations, Doctoral Thesis, Osmania University, Hyderabad, 1982, Op.Cit, p.53
4. Durgabai Deshmukh, Chintaman and I, Delhi, 1980, p.1.
5. ibid
6. Muddukrishnama Naidu was the great social reformer predecessor of Veereshalingam Pantulu. In his book, Hitabodhini protested against social evils and practices like Kanyasulkam, the system of bride price, compulsory widowhood, and child marriages.
7. Gurajada Appa Rao, famous novelist and social reformer of 19th century. He exposed the glaring social evils of 19th century in his greatly acclaimed novel, Kanya sulkam.
8. Ragupati Venkatratnam Naidu, followers of Veereshalingam carried countrywide campaign against Nautu Paulia in Andhra. A teacher and social reformer founded monthly journal ‘Zenana’ in 1895 to promote women’s education.
9. Gruhalakshmi is a journal society dedicated to the cause of women through its pages strongly advocated social reforms.
10. Andhra Mahilalu, a monthly magazine of Andhra Mahila Sabha, helped in propagating for the need of women welfare in Andhra.
11. Putli Krishnamurthi, op.cit, p.29.
12. Tendulkar, Gandhiji and His work, Bombay, 1944, p.168
13. Hingorani, (ed.), To the Women-Vol III, Karachi, 1941, pp 122-123
14. Tendulkar, Gandhiji and his Works, op.cit, p. 168.



15. Durgabai Deshmukh, Chintaman and I, op.cit, p.1
16. A musical instrument which was in earlier days called as Sanipetta, a prostitute box used in dance programme. However due to reform movement this instrument assimilated by all the dominant caste in later years and still continuous to be a major instrument in music.
17. Tara Ali beg (ed.), Durgabai Deshmukh in B N Ganguly (ed.), Social Development, Delhi, 1977, p.5
18. Durgabai Deshmukh, Chintaman and I. op.cit. p.1
19. Durgabai Deshmukh, Chintaman and I, op cit., p.3
20. Burqua is a vel worn by Muslim and royal Women.
21. Bulusu Sambamurthi is the one of the selfless freedom fighter of the Andhra, whom Durgabai held at highest esteem. Konda Venkatappayya famous Congress leader from Kakinada.
22. It is to be noted that the congress leaders objected to the meetings since the women's questions' became secondary to the Nationalist struggle
23. Durgabai Deshmukh, Chintaman and I, p5
24. Ibid. p.6
25. Durgabai Deshmukh letter to Prof. Caldwell, Australia National University, Dated 23rd February 1974, State Archives, Andhra Pradesh.
26. Oral History Transcript of smt. Durgabai Deshmukh, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Teen Murthy, pp14-13.
27. Vijay Agnew, Elite women in Indian Politics, 1979, p.40. It may be noted that Gandhi's March included only men volunteers and he explained to women that they are not needed for this March because they are to be protected and not to be put to hardships.
28. Durgabai Deshmukh, Chintaman and I, p.10
29. I.V. Chalapati Rao, Durgabai Deshmukh, Hyderabad, 1983, p.8
30. Oral History Transcripts of Durgabai Deshmukh, op.Cit., p.14.
31. I.V. Chalapati Rao, Op. Cit., p.8
32. Durgabai Deshmukh, Chintaman and I, p.11
33. Durgabai Deshmukh's Acceptance speech on the occasion of the presentation of Nehru Literacy Award, New Delhi, march 14, 1973, p.2. Andhra Pradesh Archives.
34. Durgabai Deshmukh, Chintaman and I, p.11.
35. Neti Seeta devi, Durgabai Deshmukh Jeevitha Charitra, Hyderabad, 1977, p. 140.
36. ibid, p.103
37. Gora was an atheist, and Social worker, He worked for the upliftment of the untouchables and a teacher by profession. He was the first guru of Durgabai and guided her during her early educational career.