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Role of Ignored Revolutionaries in India's Freedom Struggle: A Case Study of Sushila Mohan

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ABSTRACT

Struggle for Freedom of India is such an exceptional phenomenon in the History of Indo-Pak subcontinent as large number of people from every walk of life participated in it. Each Indian contributed with full enthusiasm irrespective of gender, caste, and creed and ultimately achieved independence from British Colonialism. However, in general role of Indian men is connected with the liberation of India while the part played by women has been marginalised over a period of time. It is not wrong to say that India's freedom struggle is incomplete without the discussion of women's role. Just as men contributed in acts of violence, nonviolence against Colonial Government, similarly history of Indian Freedom struggle has its own account to offer when it comes to women, challenging the British administration. Therefore, this research explores the role of radical women of Punjab against British Government, with particular focus Sushila Devi, also known as Sushila Didi. This study also discusses the revolutionary activities of Sushila which are relatively unknown as compare to the role of other revolutionaries. She was as active as other revolutionaries but her name has been laid under the dust of time, unheeded and forgotten. Consequently, the purpose of this research is to highlight her that how bravely she fought and left no stone unturned in proving her capability to lead the revolutionary struggle for freedom against British rule in India.

Key Words

Colonialism, Resistance, Punjab, Freedom Struggle, HRSA, Women Empowerment, Revolutionary Struggle

Introduction

The annals of freedom struggle in India are inadequate without discussing the role of Indian women. These ladies made the unbelievable and unmatched sacrifices at those times when the

concept of women development was arising or was not so popular. There were hundreds of females who offered resistance against colonial rulers and struggled shoulder by shoulder with men. The true spirit and courage were continuously shown by these women and they said yes at every call of their leaders whether it was the matter of civil disobedience or swadeshi movement. These women, in the line of their duty and dedication did not bother to break their traditional household tasks and works. Their enthusiasm and involvement is nothing less than that of other freedom fighters and elite leaders of freedom movement as in male dominating society, it was not an easy job in those days to remain present at forefront of the such active movements.

There are many instances in history which indicates that the participation of females in resistance movements totally challenged the orthodox thinking of women's association with household duties. Furthermore, they did not lose their lives only but also had to face such problems of female infanticide, child marriages, pardah and chardewari because their status in that period was kind of unprivileged one and they have to dedicate their lives to the households' responsibilities and they were not allowed to participate in other activities like political demonstrations etc. Although lot of efforts were put for the uplifting of women in colonial Punjab and due to all these efforts, their condition was better to much extent in the twentieth century.

They showed their dedication without thinking a second about the punishments or tortures which they could face during this thorn full journey. Among such women folks one name was Sushila Mohan who offered severe resistance to British administration by vindicating all probabilities, therefore this research entitles to explore her legacy which she made in the pages of history by displaying her violent nature. This research is mainly focused on highlighting the struggle of a freedom fighter and to write this paper, the data has mainly derived from primary and secondary sources like official documents, websites, books, articles and contemporary newspapers.

Involvement of females in Indian freedom struggle is the story of making bold choices and one such bold choice was made by a lady named as Sushila Mohan who is known in the pages of Indian history with the titles of Didi and Jhon of Arc of India. She was born on 5 March, 1905 in the family of a military man who was a retired doctor, named as Karam Chand. Her birth place was a small village named, Danto Chuharh, district of Gujarat in Punjab t is also worth mentioning that she was born in to a family which was already filled with the passion of patriotism. Her uncle whose name was Gurditamal, was also from medical profession was a faithful Arya Samajist and she was raised under the flag of nationalism and strong feelings of nationalism. Moreover, during the period while she opened her eyes into the world, a tendency of distress and upsurge was there in Punjab due to economic conditions and patriotic feelings. At that time every Punjabi was filled by anti-British feelings and also was impressed by the international environment regarding the resistance and revolution against imperialist governments.

Therefore, it was not a surprise that she had these strong sentiments against British since her early days. she was so much vocal against British Government that her father had to bear the consequences of this anti-British activities as he was warned that if such kind of activities would not be stopped, he might be relieved from his job. All these kinds of threats or pressures were useless for Shushila who instead of listening to her father left the house and returned after some years when her whole family started to participate in the rebellion against British Government.

Early Years of Sushila and Influence of Revolutionaries on Her

Shushila was a brilliant student of Kanya Maha Vidyalaya¹ institution and was very famous among her fellows and since her college days she was very active and had patriotic feelings as once in 1926, there was a literary Conference² where she recited her nationalist poetry and was acclaimed by the audience. In fact, it was the time when she got a platform to express her nationalist feelings and met with a likeminded person named, Bhagwati Charan. He was also a nationalist and known as a person who was ready to take up any difficult task for the sake of his motherland and freedom movement. He was close associate of Bhagat Singh and his companions and in 1928 he also wrote the Manifesto of Naujawan Bharat Sabha.³ His encouragement was a strong motivating force which led Susheela also to take up many difficult and daring activities. Although she was already prepared to make sacrifices for the sack of India's freedom but her constant interaction and discussions with Bhagwati Charen deepened her curiosity towards nationalism. It was not only Bhagwati Charran but her wife Durga Devi⁴ also who influenced Susheela Mohan regarding struggle for independence of India. Both women participated actively and nurtured a deep sense of linking with national struggle for the freedom of India. Her circle of such compatible people not only improved her enthusiasm but also kindled a keen vow to advocate and act for the ideals of nationalism.

Simon Commission and Protest of Sushila

The third decade of 19th century was more active in terms of resistance and reaction from the side of Punjabis as a lot of protests and resilience was being shown off to the administration. In 1928 India was facing constitutional and political deadlock over the announcement of Simon Commission's arrival. Many Indian freedom fighters were on streets to oppose and boycott their proposals. Shushila who at that time was also among them and her active participation was started in 1927 when she joined protests about Simon commission in Calcutta and met with Subhash Chandara Bose.⁵ At that time Subhash Chandra Bose was the head of She Her protest during Simon Commission was a turning point for her career as she came into contact with many revolutionaries and it was for the first time that she equally participated with other notable freedom fighters.⁶

After taking part in protests against Simon Commission, Susheela was now completely focused towards the activities of Hindustan Socialist Republican Association.⁷ This organization was in the process of development and was in need of dedicated and active comrades like Susheela. She was already in touch with Bhagwati Charan and others⁸ so the duty of distribution of literature related to the HSRA was given to Sushila who without any fear and hesitation accepted it and distributed the material in various cities of Punjab like Jalandhar.

Role in Escape of Bhagat Singh from Lahore

It was the high time in the annals of Colonial Punjab that every revolutionary was involved in making efforts for the freedom of India. Sushila who at that time was working as an under-cover revolutionary also started to teach children at Calcutta.⁹ At that time, she was acting as tutor of Chajju Ram¹⁰'s daughters when on 21st of December, 1928 she was asked by Vohra to accompany him¹¹ to railway station where they had to receive Durga Devi¹² and an activist who was disclosed later as Bhagat Singh. Vohra was also in Calcutta during that time to contribute in the Yearly Summit of the Indian National Congress, organized by Subhash Chandra Bose.¹³ In fact, it was

the time when Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukh Dev killed the British Police Officer Jhon Poyantz Saunders¹⁴ on 17th December, 1928 and now Bhagat Singh and his comrades wanted to travel out of Lahore. Therefore, after reaching to Calcutta safely Bhagat Singh stayed at the home of Chajju Ram with Sushila who was popularly called as Didi by other revolutionaries. She herself has narrated the story that how she received telegram.¹⁵ As she narrates that,

“Annual Congress session was to be held in Calcutta. Shri Bhagwati Charan had reached Calcutta to my place prior to Saunders assassination. His aim was to contact Bengal revolutionaries. I got a telegram from Bhabhi Durga that she is reaching Calcutta with his brother. I could not make out anything of that telegram, but Bhai Bhagwati Charan immediately understood that Durga ji is coming with Sardar Bhagat Singh. I made arrangements for their stay here. We reached station to welcome them. Bhai Bhagwati immediately recognised Sardar. Since having clean shaved and fresh haircut and being in European attire, I could not immediately recognise him. We hugged each other and I brought all to my residence in Sir Chhaju Ram’s place. Bhagat Singh stayed with me in Calcutta and Bhai Bhagwati Charan along with Bhabhi Durga returned to Lahore, as the staying together of all in Calcutta was not considered safe.”¹⁶

It is pertinent to note that when Bhagat Singh reached Calcutta, an annual session of Congress was just started in Park Circus Area¹⁷ and the whole city was under close inspection of British authorities.¹⁸ Although, this city was more benign as compared to Lahore where the risk of recognition of Bhagat Singh was higher, yet it was the intelligence of Sushila which kept Bhagat Singh safe. She made him cautioned and asked him to stay in room while she way away and also told the people around her that Bhagat Singh was her brother who got sick and was advised by doctor to rest in room. Even some prescriptions and medicines were also kept aside by Sushila to solidify her claim.¹⁹

She not only provided him shelter and support but also arranged his meetings with other revolutionaries of Bengal. During his hide Bhagat Singh with the help of Sushila utilized his stay for organizational communications with other radicals. He met with the revolutionary Trailokyanath Chakrabarty who was an active member of Anushilan Dal²⁰ and tried to convince him for joining his cause. He also met with Jatin Das also known as Robin, who was a revolutionary from Calcutta with advanced knowledge and strategies and convinced him to set up stock of bombs at Agra so that the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association could be strengthen.²¹ During his short stay at Calcutta, Bhagat Singh utilized it at utmost level and for this the cooperation of Sushila Didi was worth mentioning.

The Attack on the Legislative Assembly

It was the first encounter of Sushila with Bhagat Singh and his associates as she not only provided shelter to Bhagat Singh but also become the part of planning of these revolutionaries. This successful lodging proved one fact that this revolutionary woman was successful in deceiving the British authorities. After helping Bhagat Singh in hiding, tasks of more challenging nature were waiting for her as after attending the Conference of Congress both Durga and her husband had left for Lahore. Bhagwati Charan had also learned about the tricks of making of bombs so he was in hurry for preparing the other revolutionaries for their fight against Colonialism in India.²²

Immediately after the return of Bhagat Singh a critical moment came in life of Sushila when she was asked to come to Lahore. Upon reaching Lahore she stayed with Bhagwati and Durga and

came to know about the planning of HRSA of conducting an attack on Legislative Assembly in Delhi. She had clearly described the preparations and instructions that how Bhagat Singh was not the first choice of the close circle of the party because all of them were worried about his safety. Later upon the insistence of Bhagat Singh it was decided that he along with other comrade would throw bomb during the session of Legislative Assembly in Delhi.

The time to act on the plan was arrived so Sushila along with Durga went to meet Bhagat Singh as it was a quite risky action in which he might not have survived. Bhagwati Charan and Azad also accompanied him and he was fed his favourite things by his companions.²³ As the time approached for Bhagat Singh to join B.K. Dutt in the scheduled plot Sushila pierced her thumb and applied it on Bhagat Singh for his safe returns.

Arrest of Bhagat Singh and Efforts of Sushila for His Release

It was 8th April 1929 when these revolutionaries of Hindustan Socialist Republican Party threw bombs and were arrested. After their detention the next task for Sushila Didi was to liberate them therefore, she was involved in a plan to attack on the Viceregal train of then Viceroy Lord Irwin so that the pressure could be exerted on British authorities. It is worth narrating that how much she was expert in disguising as she asked by Vohra to spy the transportation train of Viceroy which was carrying him between Delhi and Agra. She has mentioned in her biography that she wore expensive attire to disguise as a rich lady and got permission from police authorities to inspect the beauty and grandeur of train and informed Bhagwati Charan about the compartment of Lord Irwin. On 23rd of December, 1929 the plan was executed and bomb was thrown²⁴ near Delhi in which he remained unhurt.²⁵ This stunt failed to draw any desirable consequences but it was successful in challenging the intelligence network and law enforcement authorities of Colonial set up in India.

Plan of Breaking Jail

All the members of HRSA including Sushila decided to get liberate the prisoners of Second Lahore Conspiracy Case²⁶ and Sushila was assigned the collection of weapons and information about the Jail authorities. During that time there was presence of masculine philosophy among revolutionaries as they considered women such entity which would lure these radicals away from their struggle for freedom and they were not allowed to live in revolutionary hideouts. Therefore, it is pertinent to note that Sushila Mohan always served as transporter of secret information, protected the escapees, and also acted as a medium in the safekeeping of arms.²⁷

Chandrasekhar Azad, another notable revolutionary had same views about the involvement of women in their revolutionary organization which were later changed due to the bravery of Sushila and her fellow women.

As when these radicals were planning for the safe escape of Bhagat Singh, Azad sent Sushila to meet with Bhagat Singh for further instructions and even at that time she was under complete surveillance of British Authorities, she met with him and discussed the plan. For this communication Azad relied only on her because he knew her calibre though it's a different matter that the plan was cancelled due to the death of Bhagwati Charran when he was testing his own manufactured bomb which was exploded accidentally.²⁸

She was so much daring that she often visited the places where all the bomb making stuff was present and participated in preparation of gunpowder.

Sushila was much dedicated and knew the cost of being a revolutionary that how she always would be on the run would have to live fugitive life and relied on the network of old friends. For example, after the death of Bhagwati Charran she remained inactive for some time she also took shelter in Lahore in the house of Jang Bahadur Singh who was a journalist for the newspaper, Tribune and stayed there for almost half month.

She also stayed at her close friend Satyavati's place as well and after some days changes her location and went to Delhi. Subsequently the failure of jail break plan led Sushila to join 'Bhagat Singh Defence Committee'²⁹ and collection of funds for the accused radicals. She along with Durga Devi also met with Gandhi and persuaded him to convince Lord Irwin to review the Lahore Conspiracy Trial.³⁰ During this meeting Jawaharlal Nehru, was also present there and was so much impressed by the bravery of these women and he himself has admitted this fact in his biography.³¹

Impact of Bhagat Singh's Ideology Over Her

Although Sushila Mohan was closer to Bhagwati Charan³² and was working under his guidance but when she met with Bhagat Singh, his impact was deep and profound. His courage and dedication to fight for the cause of independence inspired her a lot. His activities and philosophy stimulated her to contribute in the freedom movement, shaping her own involvement and ideology by offering continues resistance against British Colonials. Consequently, Bhagwati Charren and Bhagat Singh's legacy, was not just for men or students but it was also for the women like Sushila Mohan, who pursued their efforts with full zeal and zest.

None the less, Bhagat Singh's passion and activities created a spark among all revolutionaries and Susheela not only tried to disseminate his message but also exerted the pressure over British officials through her continues involvement in the radical activities.

She not only extended complete support to Hindustan Socialist Republican Association through her active participation and working for the development of party ideals but also took part actively in huge tasks against the British Officials. Bhagat Singh's ideology of 'it takes a loud noise for the deaf to hear'³³ influenced her completely and she acted upon it. Her participation in various extremist activities like attack on Lord Irwin and planning to get Bhagat Singh free was the reflection of the fact that the philosophy of revolution attracted her a lot and she followed this idea in her whole career.

Her participation extended strong support to the cause of Bhagat Singh and liberation of India from British Colonization by planning and offering resistance against the British authorities. Bhagat Singh also had a great regard for her as she was like a sister to him and many times, she tied *rakhi*³⁴ on the wrist of Bhagat Singh and wrote letters to him.³⁵

Shyam Mohan and Sushila

Shyam Mohan was a known lawyer of Delhi who met with Sushila in 1929 during her days of being active revolutionary who not only provided his full support to Sushila for her cause but also his house served as a shelter place for other revolutionaries as well. Both married to each other in 1933.

Her Mobilization During Gandhian Phase

After the execution of Bhagat Singh Sushila participated in a session of Congress which was under ban by the British Government and as she was already in the notice of authorities who declared her as an offender, arrested her and served her for six months. It is very interesting that during her arrest she was known to the authorities through her false name Indu. These were very narrow barracks with no proper arrangement for sleep and she shared these quarters with some noteworthy revolutionary women of those times.³⁶

In 1942 Quit India Movement was announced and as a result of Sushila's participation in the protest she was again in the prison and at that time she was bearing very heavy price on her head, announced by British authorities.³⁷ There was high risk of disclosure of her identity and she still had time to complete her jail period so her jail inmates arranged bail for her and she was rescued from jail.³⁸

After India attained independence, she settled in old Delhi and trained Dalit women in many handicrafts. After some time, her name was forwarded by The Delhi Pradeosh Congress Committee for the selection of 'Aldermen' of Delhi Nagar Nigam. Municipal Corporation of Delhi on April 3rd, 1958 successfully elected her as aldermen.³⁹ She also selected as Vice President of District Congress Committee C/o Natwar Lal, Cloth Market, Delhi.⁴⁰ Later she was passed on 13th January, 1963 in Delhi.⁴¹

Conclusion

Efforts made by Sushila Didi in the pages of Indian fight for independence occupies the ineradicable place. She struggled with true dedication and offered tough resistance to the British Government and faced various agonies, mistreatments, and hardships. When most of the leadership of HRSA was in jail or trying to resist she came forward and took charge of the struggle. Even revolutionaries like Bhagwati Charran, Azad, Bhagat Singh and Durga Devi always relied on her. She organized public meetings, provided support and place to radical comrades and actively participated in gathering information. She was so much critical for the organization that every revolutionary trusted her blindly, hence no one can forget that how bravely she supported every act of resistance and faced the baton of police and went behind bars.

She not only offered resistance through radical actions but also supported the cause of freedom by donating her jewellery and personal belongings. Although the main leadership of HRSA was almost neutralized by the British authorities till 1931 but it did not break her spirit and she continuously carried on her participation by joining the Indian National Congress and Quit India Movement. Subsequently, India achieved independence on 15th August, 1947 but it was not the end of her struggle.

She did a lot for the welfare of down trodden Dalits of India and provided them vocational training. She remained active until her death and participated in community politics as well but her contribution in fight for Indian freedom and her revolutionary works alongside her male counterparts kindled a passion of change among all Indians. In spite of her contribution and activism, anecdotes of Indian freedom movement have overlooked her role and buried her participation under the weight of more acknowledged figures. However, in the shadow of past she

is an unsung character whose legacy is a reminder of those uncrowned women who fought for the liberation of India but has been ignored by history.

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- ³⁵ Aparna Banerji, Heritage Status for KMV Makes City Stand Tall, *The Tribune*, July, 07, 2015 <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/archive/jalandhar/heritage-status-for-kmv-makes-city-stand-tall-103296/>

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- ³⁷ She was absconder in Lahore conspiracy case and Deli case. Prabha Chopra (ed.), *Who's who of Delhi Freedom Fighters*; Volume 1, (Delhi: Gazetteer Unit, Delhi Administration, 1974), 401.
- ³⁸ She was saved in disguise of a Punjabi dress Shalwar and Kameez as she usually wore Sarees. Geraldine Hancock Forbes, *Indian Women and the Freedom Movement: A Historian's Perspective*, (Research Centre for Women's Studies, S.N.D.T. Women's University,1997), 103.
- ³⁹ On April 3 in the election of Aldermen the Delhi Municipal Corporation, the Congress Party won all the six seats. The successful, aldermen are: Mr. Brij Mohan, Mr. Nur-ud-Din Ahrad, Bawa Bachittar Singh, Mr. Trilochan Singh, Mrs. Sushila Mohan and Mrs. Memo Devi. See Further, Civic Affairs Monthly Journal of Local Government and Public Administration in India vol 9 no. 7 April 1962 P.C.Kapoor, (Kanpur: Citizen Press, 1962),84 &106. https://www.google.com.pk/books/edition/Civic_Affairs/zOomAQAAIAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=did+shusheela+mohan&pg=RA2-PA85&printsec=frontcover Yogesh Puri, *Party Politics in the Nehru Era, A Study of Congress in Delhi*, (Delhi: National Book Organization,1993), 84. S.LPoplai, *Indian Affairs Record Vol. III Feb.1957-Jan 1958*, New Delhi: Indian Council of World Affairs, 202. R. S. Tripathi, R. P. Tiwari, *Perspectives on Indian Women*, (New Delhi: APH Publishing Corporation, 1999),138.
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