

Invisible Women in Visible History:The Freedom Struggle of Malda in West Bengal

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Abstract:*If the role of the women in the freedom movement of India is not discussed, history will remain incomplete. In the freedom movement of India the women also fought with sacrifice, consciousness and indomitable spirit side by side with the men. It was not easy for the women to fight as freedom fighters in the male dominated society, yet they came out from their traditional role and responsibilities as housewives after crossing the bar of various prejudices. So the participation of women in the freedom movement and national awakening is unbelievable and praise worthy. From the beginning of the twentieth century, the quick progress of female education encouraged them to claim their due right in the society and also helped them to be associated with various political movements. In recent times, many writers have tried to estimate the role of women in the freedom movement of India. The main aim of this research paper is to highlight the noticeable role and participation of some females of Malda district in the freedom movement of India. To fulfil this paper, a well-established and much publicized treatise has been consulted.*

Keywords: Awareness, Freedom, Malda, Nationalism, Shelter, Violent, Women etc.

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Introduction

The woman of Malda, the northern district of West Bengal, played a significant role in the freedom movement. Without their help, participation and active co-operation, it would have been

Invisible Women in Visible History: The Freedom Struggle of Malda in West Bengal

impossible for the male to fight against British rule in a glorious way. They played a significant role in the four movements namely, Swadeshi movement, non violent and non cooperation movement, civil disobedience movement, quit India movement against the British. Every movement made a deep influence on Malda. It is because in every movement the female becomes involved in a direct and indirect way with the male. Those women involved in the movement in active way were Surendrabala Roy, Bijli Pravadebi, Sudharani Debi, Uma Roy, Tarubala Sen, Mahamaya Debi, Gangamoni Banerjee, Sushobha Sen, Sabitri Goswami, Gouri Banerjee, Kamala Maitra, Hena Chakraborty etc.¹ Particularly, before the quit India movement when the Congress mahila sangh (Congress Women Forum) was formed under the leadership of Surendrabala Roy the national activities of the women of Malda increased too much. A primary school was established on behalf of the Congress Women Forum. Women of the forum became involved in selling Khadi (hand woven cloth) spinning and village development etc.²

Malda district was formed out of some portions of outlying areas of Purnia, Dinajpur and Rajshahi districts in 1813.³ The total area of the district is 3733 square kilometers. Malda District is called the gateway of North Bengal.⁴ Malda, district of colonial Bengal had been exploratory of the freedom struggle. The history of the freedom struggle of Malda District is very glorious. Malda District of Bengal where the Nationalist Movement created and sustained social alliances among the contending classes in the context of the anti-imperialist struggle. During the period from the establishment of colonial rule to the attainment of independence, the district witnessed numerous anti-British movements, revolts, demonstrations, protests and criticism of the government in local newspapers. The success of the District Congress Committee, as well as the District Congress Mahila Committee, rested, informing the united front against the colonial rule on the local question of the district.⁵ The women of Malda District during the time of Anti-British movement became involved in the blockade of police stations, participation in various picketing and also gave shelter of the freedom fighters in their own houses and thus saved them from the anti-movement network. The women were not always guided by the men in the Nationalistic movement rather, they themselves organised it according to their own decision.⁶ In this research paper some prominent women of Malda District particularly in the national movement of India have been discussed.

Invisible Women in Visible History: The Freedom Struggle of Malda in West Bengal

Objectives

The present research paper focuses on the following objectives

- To explore the freedom movement of Malda District in general.
- To highlight the role played by women freedom fighters in the freedom movement of Malda District.
- As well as to highlight to create awareness about different women freedom fighters of Malda District.

Research Methodology

Quantitative and Qualitative two methods will be followed in dealing with the study. Objectivity will be taken as a tool to study the subject matter. To reveal the truth different sources will be applied in writing the subject matter under study. To reveal the truth course examination will be followed based on the available sources materials. Two types of sources will be applied Primary, Secondary Sources.

Notable Women Freedom Fighters of Malda District

Surendrabala Roy

Surendrabala Roy was a great freedom fighter. She made an extraordinary contribution in the anti British freedom movement in the Malda district. She was born in April 1901 at the house of maternal uncle of the then time Delhi-Dewanganj under the Purnea district. The name of her father was Mohini Mohan Mishra and mother name was Jagat Mohini Debi.⁷ Her father was the Junior landlord of Harishchandra pur. Surendrabala Roy was married with Dwitidhar Roy at the age of eleven. Her father-in-law's house was at Singhandi village under Patnitala police station of Dinajpur district. Dwitidhar Roy, the husband of Surendrabala Roy was a steadfast Congress worker. Surendrabala Roy was inspired in the freedom movement by her husband. After this, she accepted patriotism as the motto of life. In Spite of the social obstacles the female had to face at

Invisible Women in Visible History: The Freedom Struggle of Malda in West Bengal

that time, she left the closet behind the curtain, aroused the zeal for independence among the local women and dedicated herself completely in the service of the country.

In the year 1930, when the civil disobedience movement began, every member of her family participated in it. The house of her father-in-law was a centre for conducting the movement. As a part of suppression of the British government, the office of the Patnitala police station was kept under lock and key by government agents and the Congress party was declared unlawful. At that time two thousand female Congress workers under the leadership of Surendrabala Roy took control of the Congress office and hoisted the national flag. The police took all of them at the Balurghat police station and kept the Congress office under lock and key.⁸ In 1932, while taking second attempt to take control of the Congress office Surendrabala Roy and some other women were arrested and put behind bars. As a result the women of farmers and middle classes joined the movement en masse.⁹

Surendrabala Roy was sentenced to one year rigorous imprisonment. First she was put at Dinajpur prison and Rangpur prison. Then she was taken to Bahrapur prison. In spite of her being a landlord daughter and daughter-in-law, she was put in a third class prison cell, she accepted this difficult life with glee and cheerful face. At the Bahrapur prison she was attacked with jaundice and her health broke at dawn. In this condition she was released from the prison. She went into father-in-law's house but she noticed the apathy towards her for being an inmate behind the bars. Then she came back father's house at Bhaluka of Harishchandra pur with her son. Her father Mohini Mohan Mishra built up a house for his daughter at Bhaluka. Her husband Dwitidhar Roy came there after spending two years behind bars. Her brother Sourindra Mohan Mishra helped her from all sides in her work of serving the nation. All members of her father's house became Congress workers. After that the particular house of Bhaluka became the shelter of freedom fighters.¹⁰

After realising the importance of political organization Surendrabala Roy formed the 'Congress Mahila Sangh' (Congress Women Forum) in co-operation with Labanyalata Chanda.¹¹ In January, 1939 Subhaschandra Bose came to join the district peasant conference at Naghari School of Malda. Surendrabala Roy, along with the volunteers of congress women forum namely Bijli Pravadebi wife of Atul Kumar, Mahamaya Debi wife of Mahadeb Kumar and with others welcomed him.¹² Not only that, a primary school was established and managed on behalf of the

Invisible Women in Visible History: The Freedom Struggle of Malda in West Bengal

‘Congress Women Forum’. Besides this she engaged the women in khadi cloth selling, spinning and various village development works. In 1942, when the Quit India movement began, Surendrabala Roy, her son Bomkesh Roy, brother Sourindra Mohan Mishra, All of them joined the movement. This particular house became the main centre of movement. Local blacksmiths, potters, Hindu-Muslim etc. had free access in this house. During the movement when all the male workers were put behind the bars, Surendrabala Roy continued the work of the movement.¹³ In this way, she worked for freedom without any self-interest. India gained independence on 15th August, 1947 due to the sacrifice and self denial of the freedom fighters like Surendrabala Roy.

Sudharani Debi

Sudharani Debi was another powerful women freedom fighter of Malda district. She was born in 1901 at Gorabazar, Bahrapur of Murshidabad district. Her father's name was Purna Chandra Dubey and mother's name was Bhabatarini Dube. She read up to class IV at the Bahrapur Missionary School. At the age of twelve years she was married with conservative landlord Harendranath Agasti of Shersahi under the police station of Kaliachak of Malda district. After seven years of married life in the year 1920 a disaster came upon the family, i.e her husband Harendranath Agasti died.¹⁴ After becoming a widow, she spent the rest of her life along with the freedom fighters. A meeting of the freedom fighters and volunteers took place at her Shersahi house. She saved freedom fighter Bhupen Jha from the police by giving him shelter in her house. Atul Kumar of Malda, Nalinakshma Sannyal, Sambal Sannyal of Bahrapur, Rejaul Karim, Bijoy Singh Nahar, Atulya ghosh of Congress had free access in this house. So police searched her house many times. She indirectly participated in the freedom movement, gave shelter to the young revolutionaries and the Congress workers provided them with food, cloth and money and protected the arms of the revolutionaries.¹⁵ When the revolutionaries took shelter in her house, the police officer went to her house in search of the fugitive revolutionaries but she did not allow them to enter her house.¹⁶ She became the Debi Choudhurani of Shersahi towards the freedom fighters. This great female freedom fighter died on 30th January 1947. This village is known as the Debi Choudhurani village towards the local people of Shersahi till today.¹⁷

Invisible Women in Visible History: The Freedom Struggle of Malda in West Bengal

Uma Roy

Another prominent female freedom fighter of Malda district was Uma Roy. She was born at Rajshahi in 1919 of the undivided Bengal.¹⁸ Uma Roy was married with the renowned freedom fighter and Congress leader Ramhari Roy, son of the landlord of Harishchandra pur. Following the footsteps of her husband, she also joined the freedom movement. Uma Roy was one of those women who were associated with the 'Congress Women Forum' of Malda. When Gandhiji began his Quit India movement, its wave reached Malda also. Uma Roy actively joined the movement. During the time of Quit India movement Ramhari Roy, the husband of Uma Roy made their Malda house as the centre of the movement workers. Movement was conducted from that house. The British police took it as an offence and arrested Ramhari Roy. Then his wife Uma Roy took control of the management of the movement and conducted it successfully.¹⁹ After the independence of India Uma Roy and her husband Ramhari Roy remained with the Congress party. In the 1967 general election she became a candidate of the Indian National Congress and won from the Malda Lok Sabha Seat. She was the founder of a school and a welfare institution at Malda. She formed a co-operative organization to help the poor and poor women through self-help groups. This prominent freedom fighter and National Congress leader died on 19th December 1999.²⁰

Tarubala Sen

Tarubala Sen was one of the distinguished freedom fighters of Malda district. She was associated with the freedom fighters and national congress. Surendrabala Roy formed the 'Congress Women Forum' and many women of the district joined it. Other noticeable members of this organisation were Surendrabala Roy, Tarubala Sen, Uma Roy, Sushobha Sen, Sabitri Goswami, Gouri Banerjee, Kamala Maitra, Hena Chakraborty et cetera came from the well-established and aristocrat family. At the beginning Tarubala Sen was in the management of 'Congress Women Forum' after that Uma Roy took over the management responsibility of it.²¹ When The Quit India movement began in 1942 the women of Malda district joined it. Tarubala Sen joined the anti-British meeting and procession and managed it. She also joined the anti-British national congress leader's movement. Surendrabala Roy established a 'Kanya Shikshalaya' girls school. She performed all the affairs of that school i.e, appointing teachers, fund collection etc. Tarubala Sen

Invisible Women in Visible History: The Freedom Struggle of Malda in West Bengal

collected funds from places like Old Malda, Bachamari, Kotowali, Arapur, Harishchandra pur etc. In this time Gangamoni Banerjee and Sushobha Sen co-operated with Tarubala Sen in that affair.²² This renowned freedom fighter remained attached with the national congress till the last days of life.

Conclusion

In spite of many obstacles and backwardness, a large number of women joined the freedom movement of India defying the so-called traditional prejudices. Only the name of a few female freedom fighters have been discussed in this paper but there were innumerable women who were associated with anti-British nationalistic movement in direct or indirect ways and kept significant contributions in the freedom movement of India. The participation of the large number of women in the freedom movement was a brilliant chapter in the history of anti-British movement. There were so many instances where spontaneity was noticed in the protests and voices of the women those who disliked the life-style of a common housewife in the critical moment of the nation. Those women built up the courage and consciousness to conquer every catastrophe with risk of their lives. In this way the women of Malda gave proof of their love and dedication for the country and countrymen. History will be resounded with the chorus of glorious and devoted lives for the cause of the country.

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Invisible Women in Visible History: The Freedom Struggle of Malda in West Bengal

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