

ROLE OF WOMEN IN RIOT TORN NOAKHALI IN 1946: AN EXTRAORDINARY JOURNEY FOR PEACE, STABILITY AND HUMANITY

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ABSTRACT: *In the 1940s when India was at its final stage of anti-colonial struggle, communal politics had spread its tentacles in the Indian political scene. In 1946 the communal balance of the Bengal Presidency, on the eastern part of India became delicate. Calcutta first witnessed a scene of horrific communal violence in the month of August. This was followed by the devastating communal riot in Noakhali, in the erstwhile Eastern Bengal (now in Bangladesh) where the Muslim majority community unleashed a reign of terror upon the Hindu minority community. But the most horrific part of the riot was that women of the Hindu community were abducted, molested and forcibly married to Muslims. The British government was, however, very indifferent to this situation and did little to calm the situation. It was in this situation that Mahatma Gandhi became the sole source of hope when he undertook a peace-keeping mission in Noakhali to restore communal harmony. More importantly he inspired a number of women to come forward in support of riot affected people. They went into remote villages, stationed themselves there and worked hard to restore harmony between the two communities, to convince the terrified Hindus to stay back and rebuild their social life. As women, the workers were especially empathetic towards the plight of women as there were number of cases of violence, molestation, abduction and forcible marriage. However, despite their best efforts, women achieved limited success. The communal mistrust was so deep that stray incidents of violence continued to happen. The effort to give molested women a new life also came to a naught because very few women were ready to admit that they were raped or molested. However, in those days of gloom the efforts the women made to bring about a positive change cannot be ignored.*

KEY WORDS: Women, communal riots, abduction, violence, conversion.

INTRODUCTION

In the 1940s the venom spewed by communal politics was able to spread its deep root into Indian political scene. The undivided Bengal Presidency was always at the forefront of the anti-colonial struggle. But at the same time the demand for a separate Muslim homeland had created a lot of mistrust between the Hindu and Muslims of the province. Noakhali which was a small coastal Muslim majority district of erstwhile East Bengal (now in Bangladesh) became the storm-centre of communal disturbances. Like other parts of Eastern Bengal, in Noakhali too, the economic power was in the hands of the Hindus, the minority community while the Muslims mostly worked

as subordinates under the Hindus. A large part of the Hindus also maintained social distancing with the Muslims. Their inferior social status along with the Hindu economic supremacy for ages were the main factors of resentment of the Muslims against the Hindus. Their simmering anger exploded in the autumn of 1946 on the day when Hindus were worshipping the Goddess Laxmi (the Goddess of wealth). What made matters worse was the fact that the perpetrators received full support from the Muslim League ministry of the province.

Women in the aftermath of the riot

The main targets of attack were Hindu property and Hindu influential people, some of whom were brutally murdered. Conversion of the Hindus was undertaken in an organised manner and on a larger scale than in the earlier riots. Hindus were to perform acts which were forbidden in their religion and perform Islamic practices like reciting the *Kalma*, eating beef, wearing *lungi* (a long loin-cloth worn by men) and women had to wipe off the vermilion mark on their forehead and to break their conch bangles- all symbols of Hindu marriage. Converted Hindus were compelled to marry their daughters to the Muslims. Hindu temples were also desecrated and idols were also damaged by the mob. Assaults and molestation of women formed a significant feature of the riots. Women were abducted and were forcibly married to Muslims. To keep the outside world completely in darkness about the terrible happenings rioters cut off the entry and entrance from and to the riot-stricken areas. Muslim employees in Post and Telegraph offices held up Hindu telegrams asking for urgent help. As a result Calcutta heard about the riots only after three days had elapsed. However, the British Government was indifferent in tackling this grave situation. When on Gandhiji's instructions Acharya Kripalini of the Congress party decided to proceed to Noakhali to examine the situation in person, he received no help from any official quarter. This sort of experience clearly manifested the indifferent and reluctant attitude of the British government.

It was in those days of gloom and darkness that Gandhiji became the sole person to show the world the right path to bring back peace and normalcy. He undertook a peace-keeping mission during which he visited twenty-nine villages and in many places he succeeded in winning the support of the Muslims. But more importantly he succeeded in inspiring a large number of women to come to Noakhali and work for the riot-affected people. It is interesting to note that these women differed in their ideological beliefs. On the one hand, there were the members of All India Women's Conference (AIWC) who concentrated purely on social work, on the other hand there was the Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti (MARS), dominated by the Communist women. Women like Leela Roy (Nag) and some women earlier associated with revolutionary terrorism also came forward. Taking Gandhiji's advice women penetrated into the remote parts of Noakhali and established their camps with the aim of restoring communal harmony and instilling confidence in the minds of the terrified Hindus who had stayed back. Even house-wives who had no experience of a public life came forward. But this aspect of history has remained a neglected chapter in history.

Women plunging into work

As soon as the news of riots reached, the AIWC members of the Chittagong branch met at Nellie Sengupta's house and a Relief Committee was set up which would engage in relief activities. Ashoka Gupta was made the convenor of the committee. Initially, they decided that they would distribute food, medicines and clothes to the people who had fled from their villages empty-handed. MARS decided to send a relief squad in riot affected areas. Communist women like Manikuntala Sen, Renu Chakraborty, Bela Lahiri, Maya Lahiri, Ira Sanyal, Manorama Bose and others went for relief work. When the news of the Noakhali riots reached Calcutta, the dynamic Leela Roy formed the National Service Institute (NSI) to be on the side of the helpless Hindus. The workers reaching there observed that law and order was almost non-existent. But more alarming were the reports of cases of molestation, abduction and forcible marriage of women on a large scale. The government's inaction in this matter prompted Leela to write an open letter to the Governor of Bengal stressing government's indifferent attitude towards this issue and reminding the government that it was solely responsible for the maintenance of women's safety and dignity. Therefore, she demanded that Government should make necessary arrangements without any further delay to rescue women from the state of indignity and permit unofficial organisations to proceed unhampered to the affected areas thereby providing rescue work on their own.¹ Renu Chakraborty during her tour in the interior villages observed that village after village was deserted; women told them that their children were forcibly taken away from them, converted and married to Muslims.² However, women were hesitant to talk about their molestation. On 20th October, 1946 Ashoka Gupta on behalf of AIWC met the District Commissioner, Mr. Carter to discuss the issue of rescuing the abducted women. But Mr. Carter showed reluctance and was even sarcastic. She was disheartened by the fact that despite so many atrocities, committed on the women the civil society did not come forward to register its strong protest on the issue.³

From 30th October to 4th November, 1946 she undertook a tour of a portion of Trippera and Noakhali districts to get first-hand information about the situation. After her tour she suggested that following measures were to be taken urgently:

- 1) Search parties for abducted women,
- 2) Forming volunteer corps, patrol areas with armed guards,
- 3) Posting of more military,
- 4) Reassuring people that they were still Hindus,
- 5) Re-establishing them in their own homesteads by putting up some sort of huts as soon as possible,
- 6) Making arrangements for reaping the *aman* crop immediately and giving it to the rightful owners.⁴

Meanwhile, Leela reached Ramgunj - a riot affected area on 7th November along with five female and a few male workers. They found out that in many villagers till then nothing had been done to rescue these terrified people to safer places. On 9th November Leela established NSI's camp in Madhupur village, situated in the north of Ramgunj police station. The first task of NSI was to bring the helpless villagers to the relief camps. Uma Devi, an associate wrote that whenever rescue

workers entered a village, women cried for help. Leela demonstrated her indomitable spirit when at this point she covered nearly a distance of 90 miles to rescue over four hundred men and women within a span of six days.⁵ In this way the NSI unit of Madhupur rescued almost 1307 people from 27 villages and often workers did such rescue work without any military or police support.⁶

At about the same time Gandhiji arrived in Noakhali to restore communal peace and harmony. Sucheta Kripalini, Renuka Ray and other women workers of the AIWC met Gandhiji and sought for his guidance. Gandhiji asked them to go and live with the people in order to raise confidence among them. It was decided that each worker would be assigned one particular police station. 'Her work would cover all the villages under its jurisdiction. Thus she would acquaint herself with the actual situation in the area and be able to find out about the abducted women.'⁷

With this aim in mind Ashoka Gupta, Dr. Phulrenu Guha and Phullarani Das toured about twenty villages of Lakshmipur area from 7th to 13th November. These villages were inhabited mostly by backward Hindu communities of *Namasudras* and *Jugis* origins. The women were quick to detect a common pattern in the attacks. Firstly, in most villages a large number of houses including the handlooms were burnt to ashes and houses that escaped destruction by fire were plundered.⁸ Secondly, they observed that conversion under threat of death was universal, but at the same time they acknowledged that though conversion saved life, it did not protect the house from loot and arson. After conversion, women had to break their conch bangles and rub off the vermilion mark on their parting. The places of worship were defiled and Hindus were forced to eat beef.⁹ Thirdly, the team noted that in most cases, culprits were known persons belonging either to the same village or neighbouring villages. But the victims were threatened not to lodge any statements with the police.¹⁰ The people having lost everything in the riots virtually had no buying capacity at all. A few cattle, betel nuts and coconuts were the only possessions that they were left with but these commodities had no selling price. Moreover, in riot torn villages most people were suffering from lack of clothes and almost no utensils. A considerable number of people were also suffering from diseases like Malaria, or Cholera.

The team also started collecting statistics of crimes committed against women. They observed that even women were not spared from physical assault.¹¹ They also came across cases of forcible marriage, molestation and even rape. Young girls, who had not yet reached their marriageable age, were not spared.¹² But it was not easy to extract information from the victims. Sometimes they had to talk to them alone for a long time before they dared come forward with their tales of sorrow. But in the days of darkness, not all human values were lost. They found out that some Muslims, even at the cost of risking their lives, had tried to save their neighbours. In this way for a month they toured the villages to have first-hand information about the situation. They also distributed relief materials. But when they asked the villagers to return to their villages, they refused. Also their efforts to rescue the abducted girls came to a nothing. At this stage Gandhiji asked the workers to go to the villages and stay with them to boost their confidence. His message to the workers was: "Unless you prove to the villagers that before harming your own children, no one can cause any

harm to the villagers, you cannot request the uprooted villagers to return to their own villages.”¹³ The workers now started working in different camps in interior Noakhali.

Gradually NSI picked up relief and rehabilitation work among the riot affected people after the situation had been normalised to a certain extent. This task required huge human and monetary resources. Leela issued an appeal on behalf of the NSI requesting people to come forward and contribute towards the cause in any manner.¹⁴ The workers however, soon realized that unless communal harmony was restored between the two communities the Hindus would not be able to gather enough courage to return to their villages. Therefore, from the month of December, 1946 NSI workers decided that their prime task would be to work for communal harmony and win the confidence of the Hindus. With this aim in mind several sub-camps or outposts were also established under the Madhupur camp. In each outpost two workers were posted who were entrusted with the task of convincing the villagers about their urgency to get back to their villages and to start normal life as early as possible. Their tasks included distributing clothes and blankets among distressed villagers irrespective of their religion, making arrangements for the treatment of the sick, education for the children of both the communities, forming a village-vigilant volunteer crops and introducing handicrafts as a source of living.¹⁵ The NSI workers also ensured that the refugees received government assistance that was due to them and were able to buy necessary items in controlled price. The outposts used to run schools which were attended by students belonging to both communities. Apart from customary education, lessons to enhance their level of general knowledge were also imparted. Handlooms and charkha were installed in order to enable people to earn something and the thread was supplied by different outposts.¹⁶ It was estimated, that until the month of Chaitra, 1353 B.S. (April 1947) the NSI had been successful in offering assistance to at least eight thousand people.¹⁷ In every outpost there would be a small dispensary where local doctors would attend patients at a fixed time. Besides these, the NSI workers worked hard to win the confidence of the majority community. In some cases, they succeeded; and a number of Muslims spontaneously agreed to extend help in rebuilding houses or returning looted goods. Even Gandhiji appreciated their work and wholeheartedly supported their endeavour.

Phulrenu Guha opened a camp in Lakhipur while Manikuntala Sen and some other Communist women started working in a camp in Chandpur started by a religious mission. Phulrenu Guha wrote: ‘The experience of camp life was quite varied. Here not only religious discrimination but caste differences had also secretly made a place.’¹⁸ She described an incident in such a camp where a woman made a great hue and cry because her puffed rice had been touched by someone belonging to an inferior caste.¹⁹ Manikuntala Sen during her work in Noakhali also came across an incident which demonstrated the conservative attitude of the Hindu society. She came across a Hindu child widow in the camp who was in love with a Muslim boy and wanted to marry him. Even the girl’s brother had no objection to it. But as the camp was started by a mission, the monks had serious reservations about it and even went to the extent of suggesting that the girl should be killed, cut into pieces and immersed into the water.²⁰ Manikuntala and Maya Lahiri failed to convince the girl to come to Calcutta where arrangements for her studies could be made. At last the family members took her away. The AIWC used to run three camps in Majupur, Parbatnagar and

Tumchar. One thousand fifty-five persons were taken care of at camp no.1, one thousand one hundred and five persons in camp no.2 and eight hundred persons at camp no.3.²¹ It was also observed that people had lost almost everything in the riots. Therefore, adequate foodstuffs in the form of rice and *atta* should be provided to them by the government until the people were in a position to resume their work. AIWC workers also saw to it that nobody was left out when government relief was distributed. When a widow was wrongfully deprived of her compensation on the ground that the surviving family members would take care of her, Ashoka took up her case. She argued that the widow had a room and a cow which was slaughtered. Ultimately the Relief Officer was forced to give the woman compensation. Ashoka later recalled that the aforesaid event had created quite an uproar in those days.²²

The workers gave utmost importance to restoration of mutual faith and harmony between the two communities. In this regard the fast undertaken by Gandhian worker Biwi Amtus Salam deserves special mention. She was a devout Muslim and Hindu-Muslim unity had been the passion of her life. In Noakhali at Sirandi she started a fast against her own community when three sacrificial swords were stolen by the local Muslims to kill Hindus. Amtus Salam insisted on returning them but when the Muslims refused she resolved to abstain from all food and even water till the miscreants showed a change of heart and in token returned the swords they had stolen.²³ The fast continued for twenty-five days. At last two swords were returned but the third one could not be traced. As the return of the sword was the symbol of unity and peace between the two communities, the local Muslims gave an adequate guarantee to maintain peace and harmony.²⁴ Only after that Amtus Salam broke her fast. However, this novel event rarely finds mention in history.

One issue in which the workers were very concerned was the issue of the recovery of the abducted women. Despite their best efforts they were not much successful in this regard. The main hindrance in such a task was that very few women were ready to admit that they were molested or raped. Such refusal to admission was born out of a fear of social ostracisms – which was alarmingly high among the people. Ashoka noted that in few cases abducted girls were taken back by their families, but in innumerable cases the families disowned such girls or in some cases the abducted girls were unable to overcome the trauma.²⁵ She remembered one incident in Bejoynagar where even after two months of her return to her home a married woman was forced to come to the Union Board Office late at night and then molested every night. Ashoka tried to persuade them to lodge a police complain, but the woman and her husband were too terrified to mention any name.²⁶ With no other option in sight, they fled to safer places. Sucheta Kripalini, however, managed to recover about 50-60 adult women from different Muslim homes.²⁷ They were placed under the guardianship of Labannyalata Chanda. The latter made arrangements for their stay and education at Coomilla and later in Bankura. Kamala Dasgupta, earlier associated with revolutionary terrorism, was very much active in Madhupur camp. She was eager to get the molested women married to suitable men. However, she could not progress much. Women rarely admitted that they were molested. Most of those who admitted were already married and most of them were taken away by their husbands. Unmarried girls were mostly under-age. The men who were ready to marry molested women preferred little bit educated women, but most of the village women were illiterate.²⁸ All these made the task almost impossible and the women workers were not much successful in this matter.

CONCLUSION

In this way the women workers tried to change the situation for the better. However, the subsequent Bihar riots made the situation worse. Despite the workers' best effort stray incidents of violence could not be stopped. The chain of communal violence also convinced the leaders of the inevitability of partition. So started the partition negotiations. It was often alleged by the Muslim community in Noakhali that the predominantly Hindu workers were working only for the Hindus, while the poverty and sufferings of the Muslims were overlooked. The women workers tried to convince them that as the Hindus were the victims they should be given preference. However, they failed to win the complete trust of the Muslims. They also failed to do much for the abducted and molested women. But their efforts to bring about a positive change in the existing position cannot be ignored. At an age where the division between the private and the public was very strong for women, it was commendable that women were able to break that barrier to a certain extent by living in interior villages, in camps, staying away from their families and mixing freely with people.

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