

**SAROJINI NAIDU:  
WOMEN'S RIGHTS ACTIVIST AND FREEDOM FIGHTER**

By Isaiah Azariah, Albany State College

One of the many Indian political critics of her day wrote in 1940 that Sarojini Naidu had done more to advance the cause of women than "all the sermons of social workers in India during the past half a century."<sup>1</sup> And the sermons on behalf of women had been many, coming from such influential quarters as British governor-generals and civil workers as well as from simple European missionaries. Though there were some Indian women who had begun to take a strong hand in the fight for their rights, it was Sarojini Naidu who provided the impetus which was needed to upgrade the treatment of women in India. Through her eloquent oratory and strategic campaigns against British domination and for sexual equality, Sarojini Naidu actively proved to her traditionally male-oriented society that women as well as men could be leaders and responsible citizens in times of turmoil and in times of peace.

Sarojini Naidu's life spanned a transition period in Indian history when the era of dependence and romanticism of the 1800s gave way to the rising tide of nationalism, ushering in with the new century an era of conflict and change. In a sense, her life reflects the broad transition of her nation. Up to her middle twenties, Sarojini Naidu led what many of her biographers term a life in the ivory tower and what she herself terms as her "tower of dreams."<sup>2</sup>

Under her scholarly father's strict eye, her education was of a sternly scientific nature. Dr. Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya had received his Doctor of Science degree at the University of Edinburgh and, after a period of study in Bonn, had returned to India and founded the Nizam's College in Hyderabad, endeavoring to make education as accessible to the youth of India as it was to those in the west. Chattopadhyaya had campaigned for social and educational reform on behalf of women but his intellect and energy were also directed at pursuing his interest in science, alchemy, and classical Indian music and in cultivating a huge circle of intellectual friends. Describing her father to the English critic and writer, Arthur Symonds, Sarojini Naidu wrote:

My ancestors have been great dreamers, great scholars, great ascetics. My father is a dreamer himself, a great dreamer, a great man whose life has been a magnificent failure. I suppose in the whole of India there are few men whose learning is greater than his, and I don't think there are many men more beloved....He has wasted all his money on two great objects: to help others and on alchemy. But this alchemy, as you know is only the material counterpart of a poet's craving for beauty, the eternal beauty. The makers of gold are the makers of verse, they are the twin creators that sway the world's secret desire for mystery; and what in my father is the genius of curiosity...in me is the desire for beauty.<sup>3</sup>

This "desire for beauty" exhibited itself in her poetic prowess when, at the age of eleven, she began writing poems and eventually progressed to an epic-like two thousand lines at one sitting. Her mother, Varadi, herself a beautiful lyricist, did nothing to stem her daughter's flow of talent, and Sarojini began what proved to be a rich, though short-lived, poetic career. Since her father allowed only English to be spoken in their household, she felt more natural writing in this non-native tongue. However, she first received national recognition not for her poetry but for being, at the tender age of twelve, the youngest graduate of Madras University. In 1895, after three years of recovery from ill health, she was sent to study in England, first at King's College in London, then at Girton College at Cambridge on a special scholarship. In England she met such distinguished members of the Rhymer's Club as Arthur Symonds and Sir Edmund Gosse, both of whom encouraged her to write the non-derivative type of Anglo-Indian poetry that earned her the praise of British and Indian critics. Gosse later wrote:

She springs from the very soil of India; her spirit, although it employs the English language as its vehicle, has no other tie with the West. It abandons itself to the exposition of emotions which are tropical and primitive and in this respect, as I believe, if the poems of Sarojini Naidu be carefully studied, they will be found as luminous in lighting up the dark places of the East as any contribution of savant and historian.<sup>4</sup>

While she was still a student and neophyte poetess in Girton, she suffered a nervous breakdown from which she recovered only after a period of convalescence in Italy. In 1898, hampered by ill health once again, she left her degree unfinished and returned to India and her sweetheart, Dr. Govindarajulu Naidu, whom she married later in the year. Curiously enough, her marriage to Naidu was made legally possible only by the Special Marriage Act of 1872 which her father had introduced as one of his social reforms. The Act was designed to overcome caste barriers and permitted civil marriages between Indians. Ordinarily, her marriage would have been socially unacceptable because of her Brahmin caste and her South Indian husband's Naidu caste. Being one of the first couples to take advantage of the law, one biographer noted that with her marriage the "socio-traditional structure of Bengal and the South was slightly shaken" and the foundation laid for "intercaste and interprovincial marriages."<sup>5</sup>

As a young bride of nineteen, Sarojini Naidu settled down happily to married life. During the next few years she devoted herself to caring for her four children and making her home a center of intellectual society in Hyderabad. Indeed she was acclaimed by many as India's most successful hostess. Amidst all her activities, however, she found time to write the poems which brought her great renown amongst Victorian readers in England. All three of her books of poetry, published in 1905, 1912 and 1917, were first printed in London and took the English-speaking world by storm.

Yet there was discontentment lurking beneath the surface of her life. Writing to her poetic mentor, Symons, she said:

I have taught myself to be commonplace and like everybody else superficial. Everyone thinks I am so nice and cheerful, so "brave," all the banal things that are so comfortable to be. My mother knows me only as "such a tranquil child!"<sup>6</sup>

Though she had been involved in many of the social organizations and reform groups in her native town of Hyderabad, it was not until she met the national leader and activist Gopal Krishna Gokhale that she began involving herself in the struggles of her nation as a whole. It was Gokhale, one of Mahatma Gandhi's advisors in South African affairs, who she claimed inspired her entrance into national politics. Gokhale told her, "Consecrate your life, your talent, your song, your thought, your dream, to the Motherland."<sup>7</sup>

And heeding his advice with a vigor and determination that astonished those who knew her only as a dreamy poetess, she actively worked to establish women's rights and to promote Hindu-Muslim unity. Disturbed by the continual dissension she encountered between those of different castes and religions, she repeatedly spoke out against factionalism among Indians. At a public meeting on the campus of a Madras college, she told the crowd standing there:

You know that you are provincial--and you are more limited than that--because your horizon is bounded almost by your city, your own community, your own sub-caste, your own college, your own homes, your own relations, your own self. I know I am speaking rightly, because I also in my earlier youth was afflicted by the same sort of shortsightedness of love. Having travelled, having conceived, having hoped, having enlarged my love, having widened my sympathies...my vision is clear. I have no prejudice of race, creed, caste, or color....And until you have acquired and mastered that spirit of brotherhood, do not believe it possible that you will ever cease to be provincial,...that you will ever be national.<sup>8</sup>

Sixteen years later she was still working to unite Hindu and Muslim factions and at each public meeting her words seemed to evaporate all hostilities for a time. In 1917, she told a group of Hindus and Mohammedans that Hindu-Muslim unity was

not resentment, not suspicion, not the ungenerous schism that divides and says aggressively, "we are a majority and you are a minority and so we shall trample on you." These things are the cancers in the growth of social life. Rather we want the chivalry of the majority--the original children of this land to say to their muslim brother, "Take



what we have because there is no division between you and us...." This is the feeling of generous love, of brotherly love that we want to establish as a thing flawless in the hearts of Hindus towards Muslims.<sup>9</sup>

By 1905, Sarojini Naidu was truly part of the organizational leadership of the Indian nationalistic movement. Her presence at student conferences and strikes which began at this time had a tremendous impact on youth, and she spoke at many such meetings in Benares, Calcutta and Bihar.<sup>10</sup> Because of her cosmopolitan upbringing, her speeches revealed a vision that was informed by a confluence of eastern and western ideas; the old and the new, the patriotic and the universal, found common ground in her intellect. Gokhale, writing to her after her speech proposing a resolution on the education of women at the All-India Social Conference of 1906, said, "Your speech was more than an intellectual treat of the highest order. It was a perfect piece of art. We all felt for a moment to be lifted to a higher plane."<sup>11</sup>

At the Calcutta session of the Conference, she equated India's struggle for independence to that of its women for equality of educational and social opportunity. "Does one man dare," she asked the assembly,

deprive another of his birthright to God's pure air which nourishes his body? How then shall a man dare to deprive a human soul of its immemorial inheritance of liberty and life? And yet, my friends, man has so dared in the case of Indian women. That is why you men of India are today where you are: because your father, in depriving your mothers of that immemorial birthright, have robbed you, their sons, of your just inheritance. Therefore, I charge you, restore to your women their ancient rights.<sup>12</sup>

The greatest political influence upon Sarojini Naidu's life was Mahatma Gandhi, whom she met in London in 1914. In his autobiography, Gandhi writes that he had just arrived the day before to organize an ambulance unit as his contribution to Britain's war effort. The Lyceum, a ladies' club to which Sarojini Naidu belonged, was trying to sew as many clothes for the soldiers as they could. "This was my first acquaintance with her," he wrote. "She placed before me a heap of clothes which had been cut to pattern and asked me to get them all sewn up and return them to her."<sup>13</sup> He humbly complied and with this meeting, she and Gandhi became fast friends; and irrevocably, "the poet in her receded and the active patriot and fighter for freedom came to the fore."<sup>14</sup>

She continued to work in the area of women's rights, however. Between 1917 and 1919, the Indian Women's Association, which she had founded in 1908 with the help of Margaret E. Cousins, the great Irish reformer in India, along with Annie Besant and the Home Rule League, organized meetings throughout the country and participated in political conferences both of the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League. The Association also organized official deputations to British officials to seek more reform laws. In

1918, Sarojini Naidu addressed the Bombay Provincial Congress at Bijapur, moving for the passage of a resolution that placed on record the "support of the Conference for women's franchise in India, and in its opinion that such a franchise should be given to women."<sup>15</sup> In 1919, she went to plead for the franchise for women before a Joint-Select Committee of Parliament in London. It was due in great part to her efforts in this vein that with India's independence, women's voting rights were part of the original constitution.

As her organizational attention shifted to India's struggle to free itself from British domination, she returned to England in 1919, this time as a member of the All-India Home Rule League. There she told the British public about the horrors of the Jallianwallah Bagh massacre, attempting to heighten its awareness of India's struggle for freedom. In 1920, she returned to India and joined Gandhi's Satyagraha movement. Her impassioned speeches against continued British rule heightened the nationalistic fervor of every gathering and every official assembly she addressed. Speaking before the Calcutta Congress, she articulated a proud nation's desire for self-government:

What is really at the base of all our grievances is that our self-respect has been trodden to dust, that our manhood has been challenged, that the primary rights of man to defend his honor, to defend his women and to protect his country have been taken away from him. This is the deadliest insult that has not merely emasculated and embittered but has almost slain beyond redemption the spirit of the heroic Indian. Not that you have lost political power and domination, but that you have lost the spirit within you that was your birthright and inviolable treasure....We demand all the dignity, the sanity, the creative authority of power that is responsible to itself and to the nation.<sup>16</sup>

On October 4, 1921, Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu and other leaders issued the policy of non-cooperation which they would henceforth follow and the nation was launched on a course that would either make or break the cause of nationalism. When, three years later, Gandhi was arrested and brought to trial, it was Sarojini Naidu who stood beside him during the court proceedings. When he was sentenced to six years' imprisonment, Gandhi turned to her and said, "I entrust the destiny of India in your hands."<sup>17</sup>

Being a vital organizational member of Gandhi's civil disobedience campaigns, she was elected president of the Indian National Congress as early as 1925 when neither Jawaharlal Nehru nor Vallabhbhai Patel had yet received this honor. Gandhi himself had proposed her name, and in her brief speech of acceptance she sought to revive the flagging spirits of the nationalists whose great leader lay immobilized in prison. In an expression of hope and courage, she said, "In the battle for liberty, fear is the one unforgivable treachery and despair, the one unforgivable sin."<sup>18</sup> Her speech gained world-wide attention and she was praised by British and American newspapers as "a Joan of Arc who rose to inspire

During the years 1928 and 1929, after Gandhi had been released from prison, she travelled to America and Canada as his representative, and on this ambassadorial mission she was a huge success. An article in the New York Times described her as "a singular combination of personal qualities. As a politician she can be stern and strategically-minded, issuing ultimatums to the British rulers, demanding swaraj for her followers, and leading women's deputations for equal franchise. On the other hand, her songs and poems reveal only love for the beautiful in nature and humanity."<sup>20</sup>

With her increasing political prominence, she began to feel the backlash of British disapproval. In 1930, she was arrested for taking part in the salt Satyagraha launched by Gandhi and was put in prison for almost a year. Soon after her release, she accompanied Gandhi to London for the Second Round Table Conference with British officials and she was asked during a lecture on India's architecture to address those gathered there. Rising to her feet, she said:

I was alive a little while ago in a living land of beauty and now I find myself awake in the dead land of reality. It is not possible to express oneself in mere English words. We of the Round Table Conference, confronted with the rather gloomy pictures of the future, all realize how beautiful was the past of India....It was brave adventurers from South India who made what the lecturer called "the greatest triumph of architectural art." It was in shape and form and beauty, the aspiring soul of India that never dies, whether in London or in far-off Indo-China. I feel once again that she has performed the immemorial function of being revealer of life.<sup>21</sup>

In 1932, Sarojini Naidu, along with Gandhi, was again arrested and imprisoned for actively participating in the civil disobedience movement. While in prison, Gandhi began a twenty-one day fast during which he became so weak that he was released on May 8, 1933. Sarojini Naidu was released the same day to help Gandhi's wife care for him. Her health being unstable also, Sarojini Naidu returned to her family home in Hyderabad for a time before picking up the banner of freedom once more. Working independently and as Gandhi's aide during crises, she travelled extensively over India gathering support and giving hope in the campaign for independence. She was imprisoned once more in 1942 before being released unconditionally ten months later when it was feared that she would die. But all her efforts had not proved fruitless.

Five years later, India gained her independence from Great Britain. After having survived the political vicissitudes of public life and the disappointment of unresolved Hindu-Muslim tensions which led to the division of India, Sarojini Naidu was elected the first governor of the state of Uttar Pradesh. Addressing her electorate on Independence Day, she said:

We are reborn today out of the crucible of our sufferings. Nations of the world, I greet



you in the name of India, my mother--my mother whose home has a roof of snow, whose walls are the living seas, whose doors are open to you ...I give for the whole world the freedom of India, that has never died in the past, that shall be indestructible in the future, and shall lead the world to ultimate peace.<sup>22</sup>

Facing her country was a long road to self-sufficiency and stability. As early as 1923, she had spoken in favor of Gandhi's "constructive program" for India's development. In a speech before the Kerala State Conference she had said:

Liberty must be based on the firm redemption from death. First comes the economic regeneration from the death pool in which we are immersed. My friends, go with me from end to end in India!...you people with a climate that helps the poor to be comfortable, go with me where you can count the ribs of those unburied corpses that have not one thread of filthy garment wherewith to clothe the modesty of their women. Go with me to places where children are nothing more than the incarnations of hunger. Every point of them, every nail of them, every eyelash of them is crying out for food, crying out for more blood in veins depleted of the lifeblood of little children. Then ask me, "Is Mahatma Gandhi right when he says that in Khaddar lies India's salvation." Not Khaddar meaning five yards or three of ugly coarse clothes, the less washed the more patriotic the wearer thereof; that is not the program Mahatma Gandhi meant. He meant by it the economic regeneration of India, so that all her industries might be coordinated for her uplift and her redemption from poverty.<sup>23</sup>

The extent of underdevelopment could not defeat her resourceful and energetic spirit, however. She attacked the problems in her state as untiringly as she had worked to oust the British from India. But her term as governor was short and many of the reforms for which she had worked were left unfinished. After just two years in office, she died at the age of seventy on March 2, 1949.

She had requested that her epitaph read, "She loved the youth of India," for in them she knew her dreams would live on. It was in the youth of India that her hope for a new India rested. But perhaps it would be no exaggeration to say that as much as she urged others to be "practical mystics," she herself was one of the greatest "practical mystics" of them all--and as such she takes her place beside Gandhi and Nehru as one of India's greatest and most beloved leaders.

- <sup>1</sup>Yusuf Meherally, Leaders of India (Bombay: Padma Publications Ltd., 1946), p. 46.
- <sup>2</sup>Padmini Sengupta, Sarojini Naidu (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1966), p. 39.
- <sup>3</sup>Tara Ali Baig, Sarojini Naidu (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, Patiala House), p.2.
- <sup>4</sup>P.V. Rajyalakshmi, The Lyric Spring (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1977), p. 3.
- <sup>5</sup>Sengupta, Sarojini Naidu, p. 33.
- <sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 36.
- <sup>7</sup>P.E. Dustoor, Sarojini Naidu (Mysore: Mysore Printing and Publishing House, 1961), p. 3.
- <sup>8</sup>Sarojini Naidu Speeches and Writings of Sarojini Naidu (Madras: G.A. Natesan and Company, 1925), p. 5.
- <sup>9</sup>Naidu, Speeches, p. 80.
- <sup>10</sup>Baig, Sarojini Naidu, p. 34.
- <sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 2.
- <sup>12</sup>Naidu, Speeches, p. 11.
- <sup>13</sup>Dustoor, Sarojini Naidu, p. 3.
- <sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 4.
- <sup>15</sup>Naidu, Speeches, p. 194.
- <sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 153.
- <sup>17</sup>A.N. Dwivedi, Sarojini Naidu and her Poetry (Allahabad: Kitab Mahal, 1981), p. 32.
- <sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 39.
- <sup>19</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 40.
- <sup>21</sup>Sengupta, Sarojini Naidu, p. 246.
- <sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 313.
- <sup>23</sup>Naidu, Speeches, p. 360.