

SAROJINI NAIDU



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Sarojini Naidu

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An Illustrious Life

Great poetess and patriot Sarojini Naidu, also known as the Nightingale of India, lived a purposeful life. A devoted freedom fighter, a principled politician, a progressive activist, a radical reformer, an inspirational poet - woman of varied talents and high calibre, Sarojini Naidu lived life to its fullest. Her sincerity and zeal in speeches, poems and conversation reflect devotion and loyalty towards her motherland. Sarojini's career exhibits an intriguing paradox. She was one of those great personalities whose greatness is difficult to identify and substantiate.

Sarojini was not only the first Indian woman to become the President of the Indian National Congress but also the first woman to become the Governor of a state in independent India. Ahead of times, she painted a romantic, idealistic picture of Indian women in her poems, and she, in real life also led the struggle for women's emancipation in India. She came forward and roused them to a realisation of their own latent powers. On the other front she demonstrated how politics could be a clean game. Certainly, Sarojini Naidu, with her multifaceted personality, was one of the most colourful and memorable women of the 20th century. She said in poetry:

- Today that seems so long, so strange, so bitter, will soon be some forgotten yesterday.

- Let us rise, o my heart, let us gather the dreams that remain.
- We shall conquer the sorrow of life with the sorrow of song.

Sarojini Naidu, an eminent personality is treasured in the memory of every Indian. As a politician, nationalist leader, poet, activist for women's rights, orator, and celebrity, she was certainly one of the most memorable mighty Indian women.

Family Background

Aghorenath was a multifaceted person whose qualities of a philosopher, scientist, poet and teacher rolled into one. He took his degree of Doctor of Science at the University of Edinburgh in 1877, and afterwards studied at Bonn. On his return to India he founded the Nizam College at Hyderabad. He was a great influence on Sarojini. She used to say, "My Father is a dreamer himself, a great dreamer, a great man. I suppose in the whole of India there are few men, whose learning is greater than his." The home of Aghorenath Chattopadhyay was known as the 'Seat of Learning', because there met all men of learning and culture — moulvis, pundits, European scholars, lawyers, prominent social personalities. Her mother, Varada Sundari was an accomplished cook. Outwardly she seemed self-effacing. But she had a distinct personality of her own. She used to compose lyrics in Bengali and was a good musician.

In fact, her father, Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya, was an extraordinary man in many ways. Born at Brahmanagar, a village in East Bengal, he wandered far and wide during his childhood. He was also fond of boating. But the tramp in him dwelt side by side with the scholar. At an early age he acquired an enormous amount of information on all sorts of subjects.

When he was fourteen he fell in love with a girl named Varadasundari and promptly married her. It turned out to be a very happy marriage. His poverty would have prevented him from getting a university degree had he not won a scholarship through sheer hard work. He studied chemistry at Calcutta University. His work in that field was so impressive that he was awarded a stipend for higher studies in Europe. In 1877 he secured

his D.Sc. degree from Edinburgh University, the first Indian to win this distinction. Aghorenath had a flair for languages. Besides Sanskrit, he taught himself Greek, Hebrew and several European languages. His interest in social reform led him to the Brahma Samaj and he was initiated into the Samaj by Keshab Chandra Sen himself.

On his return to India, he gave up his researches in chemistry, probably because he was convinced that his true vocation was that of an educator. His decision came as a disappointment to leading scientists like J.C. Bose and P.C. Ray. Aghorenath moved to Hyderabad in 1878 and took charge of a school there. He soon won the Nizam's esteem. The Dewan, Sir Salar Jung, also took a keen interest in his educational schemes. The establishment of the Girls College and the Hyderabad College (later re-named as Nizam's College) was largely the result of Aghorenath's efforts.

As Principal of the latter institution, he became one of the most popular men in Hyderabad. His house on Nizam Shahi Road became the meeting-place of scholars, poets, artists and people drawn from all sections of society. Aristocrats dressed in robes of embroidered silk and wandering singers in rags, Oxford-educated professors and village priests, scientists and palmists, pious Muslims, orthodox Hindus and Christian missionaries all were welcome.

Aghorenath loved to entertain his visitors, not only with food and drink but also with interesting stories and anecdotes, real and imaginary, which he narrated with great enthusiasm. After Salar Jung's death, political conditions in Hyderabad became unstable. Aghorenath felt uncomfortable in the new situation. Moreover, his alignment with the nationalist movement was not palatable to the Nizam. He had to leave Hyderabad, but was called back a few years later and resumed his educational and social activities. One of his hobbies, which attracted a good deal of attention, was alchemy. Though, trained as a chemist in the scientific tradition, he firmly believed that the secret of turning base metals into gold could be found. In this belief he carried on all kinds of experiments. Aghorenath moved to Calcutta after retiring from the Hyderabad state educational service. He led a quiet life in a house on Lovelock street where he died in 1915.

Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya exerted considerable influence on Sarojini. She always spoke of him with the deepest respect and admiration and often quoted his remarks in her speeches. She gave a vivid description of his appearance, when he was at the height of his powers; "with a great white beard and the profile of Homer, and a laugh which brings the roof down'. Even in his passion for alchemy Sarojini found something akin to her own imaginative nature". "This alchemy", she wrote in the introduction to a collection of her own poems, "is only the material counterpart of the poet's craving for Eternal Beauty. The makers of gold and 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, the very essence of all scientific genius, is in me the desire for beauty."

Birth and Childhood

Sarojini was born on the thirteenth of February, 1879. She grew up in an atmosphere of culture and refinement. Her earliest memories were those of the lavish hospitality which her mother offered to guests and visitors. The house was 'a cross between a museum and a zoo', full of pet animals, curios, bric-a-brac, and a medley of strange people 'astronomers, scholars, mystics, beggars and Princes'. Her mother was an accomplished cook. The kitchen was full of delicacies, and a dozen unexpected guests could be fed at any moment.

Many languages were spoken in the Chattopadhyaya household. All the children were multilingual. Sarojini's eldest brother, Virendranath, is reputed to have been fluent in sixteen languages. Sarojini herself spoke Urdu, Telugu and English. Her parents spoke to the servants in Telugu, to the children in English or Hindustani and to each other in Bengali. Sarojini never learnt to read or write Bengali, an omission she never ceased to regret. Curiously enough, as a child she resisted English for a long time. Her father once punished her for this stubbornness. He locked her up in a room and refused to let her out until she had composed a stanza in English.

Sarojini's childhood was, thus, as interesting as it was happy. In later life she spoke about an *ayah* named Gagga, who was

deeply attached to all the children, and Ballayya, the family tailor. Along with her three sisters and four brothers, she led a carefree life, not unduly sheltered but thoughtfully regulated by her parents. Aghorenath and his wife allowed their children to imbibe freely the varied influences to which they were exposed and encouraged them to develop their talents. Sarojini's brother, Harindranath, once said that their parents had done everything to make them feel that life was one fluent process of rainbows and fancy happenings.

Although, Aghorenath — philosopher, scientist, poet and teacher rolled into one — dominated the household, his wife, Varadasundari, was by no means a non-entity. She was gentle, quiet, unassuming. But she had a firm grip on all the domestic affairs and was an efficient housewife. Outwardly she seemed self-effacing. But she had a distinct personality of her own. Nor was she without talent. She composed many lyrics in Bengali and was a good musician. However, friends remembered her primarily as a patient, kind, sweet-tempered person, not without a touch of sadness. She was religious by temperament and is said to have had many premonitions of future events. She was anonymous in her charities. Even her children did not know how many people she helped out in times of distress or need. Varadasundari died at Calcutta in 1916, about a year after the death of her husband.

A Comfortable Childhood

The fortunate circumstances of her life cannot be measured in terms of worldly riches but by riches more valuable than gold. Her father, a true academician brought up his children in perfect freedom. She enjoyed unrestricted freedom at home. In a sense, she was brought up in the lap of luxury. Her father employed an English and a French governess with a view to give her an excellent training. She also had a Persian teacher and developed a taste for it. Even as a child she had the luxury of having her own room, her own library, her own furniture and her own wardrobe, of which an average Indian child could not even dream of. Aghorenath paid special attention to all her requirements. He wanted her to follow in his footsteps. But she had distinctly inherited poetical bent from her mother.

She wrote, later in one of the letters to Arthur Symons, a literary scholar with whom she had made acquaintance in London, how her inborn poetic instinct struggled to master circumstances, and how it ultimately triumphed: "one day, when I was 11', read the letter, 'I was sighing over a sum in algebra. It wouldn't come right but instead, a whole poem came to me suddenly. I wrote it down. From that day my 'poetic career' began."

Early Education

Sarojini was educated at Hyderabad and Madras. She did consistently well in her studies, in spite of poor health. She passed her Matriculation examination from Madras in 1891 at the early age of twelve. She not only secured a First Class but was first in the entire Presidency. That was the only examination which Sarojini ever passed. She had no particular craving for the B.A. degree. Moreover, ill health compelled her to discontinue her studies from time to time.

Higher Education in England

Sarojini was sent off to England. It was widely believed that Aghorenath's opposition to the marriage was the result of caste prejudice. But the assumption was unfair. He was much too liberal and enlightened a person to attach any importance to differences of caste. It was, in fact, not at all unnatural for Sarojini's parents to have hesitated in giving their immediate consent. Their daughter was only fifteen, had been in poor health for some time, and had just begun to reveal her poetical and scholastic talents. Perhaps they thought that she should continue to develop her interests for a while without distraction. Or perhaps they merely wanted to make certain that it was not just puppy-love, that Sarojini's attraction for the young doctor was sufficiently strong to ensure a happy marriage.

So, when the Nizam offered a scholarship, Sarojini was sent to England. She was first admitted to King's College in London, but later moved to Girton College, Cambridge. She was, however, not happy in the classroom. Like Rabindranath, she seems to have played truant quite often, bored with structured courses of study.

Love at First Sight

The gloomy and depressing experience was fortunately balanced by another experience that was joyful and exciting. On a visit to Sholapur she met a young man named Govindarajulu Naidu, who had just passed out from Medical College. She was strongly attracted towards the young doctor, and he reciprocated her feelings. Sarojini's parents were a bit disturbed by this unexpected turn of events. They felt that she was too young for marriage and sent her away to Madras. After a while they decided to put even greater distance between the two young people.

Tour of Europe

Leaving Cambridge, she travelled the continent, sojourning in Switzerland and Italy for a few months in 1897. Sarojini, with passion in her frail body always desired to be 'a wild free thing of the air like the birds, with a song in my heart'. Here her desire was fulfilled. Her radiant letters from Italy read, "This Italy is made of gold, the gold of dawn and daylight, the gold of the stars, and now dancing in weird enchanting rhythms through this magic month of May, the gold of fireflies in the perfumed darkness - 'aerial gold'." Further, her letters were like streams, happily flowing, singing and enjoying. It read, "God! How beautiful it is, and how glad I am that I am alive today! I drink the beauty like a wine, wine, golden and scented, and shining, fit for Gods."

Days in England

It was a coincidence that Dr. Annie Besant, the head of the Theosophical Society at Chennai, and later a promoter of Home Rule for India, was also a passenger in the ship which Sarojini boarded for her voyage to London. She came to love and admire Sarojini as a daughter and offered to take care of her. In England she had a unique privilege of being ward of Miss Manning, who was the pioneer worker for Indian students in England. At Miss Manning's salon, some of the highest literary figures of England resorted. There Sarojini met Sir Edmund Gosse, a well-known English scholar who later sponsored her in England; Arthur Symonds, another scholar; William Archer, the distinguished drama critic and Mr. Heinemann, her future publisher. She studied for

two years at King's College. Then she joined Girton Girls College at Cambridge. Those two years she invested in refining her poetic talent in the vicinity of Sir Edmund Gosse. She showed him all her poems. Gosse advised her to forget the robins and the skylarks of the English countryside and to set her poems firmly among the mountains, the gardens, the temples...to be a genuine Indian poet of the Deccan, not a clever imitator of English classics!

Sarojini valued the advice of this famous English critic and made a transition from skylark to bulbul. The poetess had lost herself in the city of poems. She got tired of university life, with its routine and discipline. Moreover her health broke down and her career at Girton ended.

The Marriage

All through this, she kept in touch with Dr. Govindrajulu Naidu through letters. Probably he was the only Indian to devour the bulbul's melodies.

After a stay of three years in England she landed on Indian soil in September 1898. She wanted to meet her love. Her parents had thought that she has forgotten Govindrajulu Naidu but she was determined. In December 1898, amidst all the oppositions, the lovers got married, breaking through the bonds of caste. Sarojini was firm in her resolve never to desert her cherished ideals, though friends might fail her and her community scoff at her and called her a renegade. She had a happy domestic life. It was only that at times illness hampered the easy flow of Sarojini Naidu's life. Dr. Naidu was a loving husband. She found in him the fulfilment of her soul's deepest yearnings.

Children

The loving couple was blessed with four children by the end of 1904 - two sons and two daughters, the eldest Jayasurya, second Padmaja, the third, Randheera, and the youngest Leilamani. Sarojini wrote a poem dedicated to each newborn. In worldly riches she was fairly endowed. The poet in her was finding fuller expression. At the time her heart held some of her most cherished dreams.

In USA and Canada

Sarojini arrived in New York in October 1928. After a year's stay she returned, in July 1929. Her journey through USA and Canada was a great success. Wherever she went, she received a warm welcome. She represented India and its struggle for freedom. Her lectures on India were grouped under three main headings. The first series consisted of interpretations of Indian womanhood. Sarojini also explained the role of Indian women in the nationalist movement. In the second series, she spoke about the renaissance in modern India, surveying trends in philosophical and religious thought, and the new movements in literature and arts. In the third series, she explained the spiritual ideals of India, distinguishing elements of universal and permanent values from all that was superficial and custom-ridden. Everywhere, she spoke about the significance of Mahatma Gandhi.

The beauty and variety of the American landscape enchanted her. She was impressed by the vitality, dynamism and optimism of the people, their sense of duty, their love for freedom and respect for the dignity of human labour. At the same time, Sarojini was not blind to the darker side of American life. She was concerned with the unjust treatment to the Negroes and the American Indians. C.F. Andrews, Mahatma Gandhi's friend, happened to be in the USA during Sarojini's visit. He wrote to Gandhiji about her 'amazing popularity' in America. The letter was published in *Young India*.

After America, she went to Canada. It was equally successful. The *New York Times* published an editorial and a letter about her. The *Unity of Chicago* paid a glowing tribute to Sarojini 'nobly born, highly educated, utterly consecrated, dowered with supreme gifts of intellect and will'. One of the highlights of her journey was a great reception held in her honour at the International House.

In Social and Political Arena

Sarojini Naidu was at that time in every way a happy and contented woman. She was in the bloom of youth, admired and loved by her husband, popular as a graceful, charming, elegantly dressed hostess. Her face glowed with the joy of motherhood. She

was free from material want, her parents were still in good health, and there were no worries or anxieties of any kind. It would have been easy for her to immerse herself completely in domestic bliss and forget everything else. But such was not her temperament. Even as a child she had felt a strong, though vague, desire to look beyond the narrow limits of personal pleasure. This desire is expressed in many of her juvenile verses, one of which has already been quoted above ('High ideas formed my radiant dream'). Now that she had found fulfilment in love, and felicity in her home and children, she sought avenues for expressing her altruistic instincts.

The strongest of these instincts was that of patriotism. She heard the call of the motherland and responded with all her heart. She travelled widely, met important leaders and tried to supplement by personal observation the knowledge she had acquired about India through books. In 1900 she spent some time in Bengal. During this visit she met Romesh Chandra Dutt, whose English translations of the *Ramavana* and the *Mahabharata* she had read with admiration. The famous scholar read some of Sarojini's poems and encouraged her. In 1903 she went to Madras.

The lectures which she was invited to deliver at several colleges marked the beginning of her career as a public speaker. She exhorted the students to develop a pride in India and to work for national unity. The subject of one of her lectures, delivered at Pachaiyappa College, was "True Brotherhood". Although, she was only twenty-four at that time, the advice that she gave to her student audiences revealed her wide reading and maturity of thought. She stressed the necessity of overcoming caste and religious prejudices and of viewing India's future in the light of developments in other parts of the world. From Madras she travelled along the east coast of India and again visited Calcutta where she addressed students of Bethune College.

In National Movement

Sarojini's close association with the nationalist movement can be said to have begun at the eighteenth session of the Indian National Congress which was held at Bombay in December 1904. She was already familiar with the history and ideals of the Congress through the work done by her father. Aghorenath had, in collaboration with Abdul Qayum, established a branch of the

Congress at Hyderabad. He had taken the initiative in getting the writings of Lokamanya Tilak and Bepin Chandra Pal printed and distributed in Hyderabad state. Sarojini had childhood memories of these activities. Now, at the Bombay session of the Congress, she had opportunities of meeting some of the well-known nationalist leaders Pherozshah Mehta, C.Y. Chintamani and, above all, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Sarojini was invited to recite her poem, *Ode to India*. The poem was heard with deep appreciation and the young poetess became immensely popular among the delegates.

It was at this time that Sarojini met Ramabai Ranade, one of the pioneers of the women's emancipation movement in India. All in all, her visit to Bombay in 1904 was thus an important event in Sarojini's life. From now on, the cause of India's freedom and the need to improve the status of Indian women claimed more and more of her attention and finally became the dominant factors in her life. Her popularity as a speaker kept pace with her fame as a poet. Many educational, cultural and social institutions in different parts of India invited her to give lectures under their auspices. She was also elected to important offices in literary and social organisations. The decade between the Bombay Congress (1904) and her first meeting with Mahatma Gandhi (1914) was for her a time of learning and, to some extent, also a period of 'rehearsal' of her future work in the social, political and literary spheres.

Sarojini was exceptionally fortunate in receiving, during this period of preparation, the guidance of a man like Gopal Krishna Gokhale. There were others, too, who counselled her from time to time and whose advice she accepted in a spirit of humility. But Gokhale's influence on her was deeper, wider and more enduring than that of any other leader. She looked upon him not merely as a preceptor but as a close personal friend. Gokhale's affection for her was so deep that he felt genuinely happy and proud whenever she attained any success or did something noble. And if she did or said something that displeased or disappointed him, he chided her with a father's authority.

From 1902, when he urged her to dedicate her life to the service of India, right up to his death in 1915, almost all the public activities of Sarojini Naidu bore the impact of Gokhale's views. The relations between Sarojini and Gokhale will be considered in some detail in a later chapter. It therefore seems unnecessary at

this point to trace the history of her public career before her decisive meeting with Mahatma Gandhi. On the other hand, it seems appropriate to conclude this chapter with a survey of her literary attainments during this period.

Non-cooperation Movement

In 1920, Mahatma Gandhi formally started the Non-Cooperation movement. The movement received tremendous response throughout India. Sarojini played a vital role in awakening and organising the youth. She addressed hundreds of meetings, exhorting people to boycott foreign goods. In an address to the students, she said: "It is a battle of self-purification, self sacrifice and self-devotion. Come, march with me to the Temple of Liberty."

Towards Freedom

The Asian Relations Conference, held in New Delhi, in March 1947, was the last important event before independence with which Sarojini was closely associated. She presided over the Steering Committee meetings held in the Constitution House lounge, and again at the Plenary Session of the conference held at Purana Qila. Sarojini made a moving speech, calling for understanding and goodwill among the nations of Asia. Those who heard her felt that India, even before formal attainment of freedom, was going to play an important part in the unity of Asian nations.

The Governorship

The eve of independence arrived. Sarojini was offered the governorship of Uttar Pradesh, politically most sensitive state of India. She was unwilling. But Mahatma Gandhi urged her to utilise her lifelong experience in working for Hindu-Muslim Unity. She was convinced to accept the responsibility. The Chief Justice of Allahabad High Court administered the oath to the office to Sarojini Naidu at the Government House, Lucknow on August 15, 1947. Sarojini addressed the UP (Uttar Pradesh) legislature. The speech delivered without any notes, created a deep impression. She soon merged herself in the work she was assigned to. She familiarised herself with the peculiarities and complexities of UP.

She handled these problems tactfully. The agitation of UP, which later became an ugly feature of major cities in UP, did not assume serious proportion as long as Sarojini was there to defuse the tense situations. Her wit and wisdom were remarkable in all avenues.

She brought together people belonging to rival groups and conflicting ideologies. "In my green pastures here at Lucknow", she once said, "Lions and lambs lie down together very pleasantly." Although, she had to be at Lucknow most of the time, she appreciated the cultural importance of Allahabad and Banaras as well. In December 1947, the Benaras Hindu University conferred an honorary doctorate upon her. The previous day, she had attended the Golden Jubilee Convocation of the Allahabad University.

Last Phase

Mahatma Gandhi's assassination shattered Sarojini. She too lost her health gradually. In October 1948, she fractured a leg and was in great discomfort. Still the lady known for her anecdotes could laugh at it. In a letter to her friend she wrote: "My Excellency is very disturbed and anxious...It is bad for an old lady, nearing 70, with a groggy heart, high blood pressure, and an injured leg to be so disturbed" read the letter, "What are you going to do about it?" At the end of 1948 and the beginning of 1949, she visited Shantiniketan and Lucknow University. Later she went to New Delhi. As she was returning to Lucknow, she fell ill. Dr. B.C. Roy examined her and found that her heart had become very weak. She was treated by expert doctors but to no avail.

The Demise

Sarojini Naidu passed away in the early hours of the morning on March 2, 1949. Within few hours of the news, leaders and public poured in Lucknow. Pandit Nehru, Maulana Azad, Govind Ballabh Pant and other national leaders arrived. C Rajagopalachari and Lady Mountbatten came on hearing about the sad demise of Sarojini Naidu. Jawaharlal Nehru personally supervised arrangements for the funeral. The cortege proceeded slowly through Hazratganj in Lucknow to the bank of river Gomti. Her son Dr. Jayasurya performed the last rites while, 60,000 people watched in silent grief as Sarojini Naidu merged with her motherland and nature.