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SAROJINI NAIDU





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Sarojini Naidu.

# Sarojini Naidu

A BIOGRAPHY

PADMINI SENGUPTA



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FOR

*Ranen, Satyan and Kamalini*



## *Preface*

Sarojini Naidu's belief in goodness and kindness was so much a part of her life that she has left a trail of glory and warm affectionate memories behind her. True it was that at times her biting sarcasm or her quick rebuke left a few who sought her acquaintance a little bewildered; but her generosity and desire to help others so over-shadowed a few shortcomings which she may have possessed that almost all those whom I have approached to help me have painted a picture of a woman who was not only a dynamic personality, a poet, politician, patriot and peace-maker; but one who abounded in love for her fellow human beings. "I believe that nothing that is good can ever die," she said, and I sincerely hope that in my portrayal of Sarojini Naidu, I have to a certain extent at least kept this immortality, in which she believed, alive.

Sarojini Naidu always inspired others. Her mere presence left us with an urge to be up and doing. She was a source of hope, courage and creative activity. She also particularly tried to awake the women of India, and it was her habit, throughout her arduous life, to designate herself as "a mere woman." She stressed this fact when she became President of the Indian National Congress in 1925, when she presided over the Asian Relations Conference in 1947 and on many other memorable occasions. She even joked about her feminine qualification when she became the first woman Governor of an Indian State and said: "I am going as Governess to look after the U.P." She claimed that women were always honoured in India. As "a mere woman" myself, therefore, I offer no apology for writing this biography. Though I know I am inadequate to portray so magnificent a character, I have at least fulfilled my deep desire to write this biography, and to depict a great and good character to the present and future generations of India. I crave the indulgence of the reader, however, for all my shortcomings. It is impossible for one individual to do justice to a personality which presented so many scintillating facets to the

world, and there must be many features of her life which I have not been able to probe into or fathom, and many friends whom I have not been able to approach for their reminiscences.

Sarojini Naidu's message to the Asian countries can never be forgotten. She bid one and all to "love and forgive, love and create, love and be free." She also pleaded that there was no birth and no death. "We move onward and onward, higher and higher till we attain the stars. Let us move on to the stars. Who will forbid us and say 'Halt thus far and no further?' . . . . We do not cry for the moon. We pluck it from the skies and wear it upon the diadem of Asia's freedom." The writing of this book is a product of one of the seeds sown by Sarojini Naidu, though it has fallen far short of her high objectives.

My thanks are due to the co-operation and help of many and especially to Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, President of the Indian Union; H. E. Miss Padmaja Naidu, Governor of West Bengal, for allowing me to use her mother's manuscripts kept in the National Library, Calcutta; to Mr. Y. M. Mulay, Librarian, and Mr. A. R. Sengupta, Administrative Officer, National Library, for their courtesy in extending their help and providing me with photostats of Sarojini Naidu's poems; to the Editor and Librarian of the *Statesman*, Calcutta; to Dr. C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyar, Sir Dhiren Mitra, Mrs. Lakshmi Menon, Smt. Basanti Devi (Mrs. C. R. Das) Mrs. Nellie Sengupta, Mrs. Renuka Ray and Mr. S. N. Ray, Dr. (Mrs.) Muthulakshmi Reddy, Lady Protima Mitter, Mrs. Sushama Sen, Mrs. Nirmal Kumar Bose, Mrs. Surama Ray, Mr. P. C. Roy Choudhuri, Mr. Prabhat Chandra Ganguli, Mrs. A. C. Banerjee, Mr. Aditya Nath Jha, Miss M. Kovasji, Mr. S. M. Adhav, Mr. S. U. Ahmad and to many others who helped me and encouraged me to write this book.

Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Mr. R. M. Sengupta, my son Satyanath and my daughter Kamalini for so carefully reading the mss. and proofs. I would not have been able to write this book if it had not been for the constant and tireless help given to me by Kamalini for the last three years.

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PART ONE

*The Pulse of the Morning*

Springtime, O springtime, what is your secret,  
The bliss at the core of your magical mirth,  
That quickens the pulse of the morning to wonder  
And hastens the seeds of all beauty to birth,  
That captures the heavens and conquers to blossom  
The root of delight in the heart of the earth?

THE JOY OF SPRINGTIME

From: *The Bird of Time*



## 1 *Sapphire and Gold*

“Does this rose match my sari?” asked Sarojini Naidu, as she picked a red rose from a bowl full of flowers and held it against the deep dark red of her Murshidabad silk sari.

“You are the poet,” I answered, “and you ask me if they match?”

She laughed and pinned the flower into her chignon. She was staying in Dr. B. C. Roy's house in Calcutta, and as we said good-bye to her and stepped out into the crowded thoroughfare of Wellington Street, we marvelled at the humility and kindness of this great lady. We had spent over an hour with her in the middle of her busy short stay in Calcutta, and she had not grudged us a minute. I do not think I have ever heard Sarojini Naidu complain that she had no time either for her friends or for any form of work which she was called upon to undertake. She was always available, unless ill health, of which she knew far too much in her arduous life, forbade her to welcome friends or accomplish her programme. She was also a perfectionist and was never half-hearted about completing a task. The outstanding characteristic of Sarojini Naidu was that she did not merely spare time for her friends—she enjoyed being with them and appreciated every minute spent in their company. For this reason one never felt doubtful of the welcome one would receive, nor guilty of usurping a renowned woman's time. She is even today, and always will be, remembered in every nook and corner of India, not only for her national and international services but for her warm and generous friendships.

As we drove away, we remarked about Sarojini Naidu's intense love for colour. She was not only colourful herself, but brought and took colour with her wherever she went. Sapphire and gold, scarlet and blue, topaz and saffron, red and purple, these hues and all the colours of the rainbow lit up her poetry, her lectures, her witty repartee at the many soirées and interviews she held, her letters and conversation.

Colour suffused and intoxicated Sarojini's early life. In a letter to Arthur Symons, that renowned English poet and critic, who with Edmund Gosse was responsible for introducing Sarojini as a poet to the western world, the young songstress wrote from Hyderabad, asking her friend to "share an exquisite March morning" with her: "This sumptuous blaze of gold and sapphire sky;" she wrote, "these scarlet lilies that adore the sunshine; the voluptuous scents of neem and champak and serisha that beat upon the languid air with their impeccable sweetness; the thousand little gold and blue and silverbreasted birds bursting with the shrill ecstasy of life in nesting time. All is hot and fierce and passionate, ardent and unashamed in its exulting and importunate desire for life and love. And, do you know that scarlet lilies are woven petal by petal from my heart's blood, these little quivering birds are my soul made incarnate music, these heavy perfumes are my emotions dissolved into aerial essence, this flaming blue and gold sky is the 'very me', that part of me that incessantly and insolently, yes, and a little deliberately, triumphs over that other part—a thing of nerves and tissues that suffers and cries out, and that must die tomorrow perhaps, or twenty years hence."<sup>1</sup>

The *Krishna Churas* and *Radha Churas* must have been in bloom, the bulbuls singing from the red hibiscus bushes, and the rugged rocks of Hyderabad must have jutted out in their grandeur against the glowing sky. It was spring, and Sarojini was in the heyday of her youth and avenues of work and fame stretched ahead. There was magic in the air, when the muezzin called from his minaret, and the bells clanged from temple courtyards. Here was a city which combined all the glory of the Moslem rulers with the never-dying culture of ancient Hindu civilization, and here in the midst of palaces and palanquin bearers, Sarojini spent her childhood and early married life. Here she dreamt her dreams, "casting her soul like a net" and capturing her poems, delighting in the beauty of a home which combined Western comforts and Eastern exotic splendour, and here, basking in the love of parents, brothers and sisters, and later of husband and children, Sarojini lived in her ivory tower.

It was for her, always life, new upsurging life, which thrilled

<sup>1</sup>*The Golden Threshold*, by Sarojini Naidu, pp. 17, 18, William Heinemann, London, 1905.

and inspired her. Watching the faces of the monks in Italy, which country she first visited in 1898 as a girl of nineteen, she felt she would also like to gain the peace of the monastery and craved for Nirvana, and then she cried: "When one comes out again into the hot sunshine that warms one's blood, and sees the eager hurrying faces of men and women in the street, dramatic faces over which the disturbing experiences of life have passed and left their symbols, one's heart thrills up into one's throat." In an impassioned salutation to beauty and colour she exclaimed: "No, no, no, a thousand times no! How can one deliberately renounce this coloured, unquiet, fiery human life of the earth?" Monasteries and the cloistered life were not for this lover of life.

Sarojini Naidu was the leader of the All-India Women's Deputation to the Hon. E. S. Montagu, Secretary of State for India, in 1917. Mrs. Margaret E. Cousins who sponsored the deputation writes: "I remember she told us she had chosen her saree with care that day so that its effect might be like the gleaming of silver moonlight in the dark blue vault of the heavens,—the woman, the poetess and the stage-manager aiding and abetting the demand for justice and equality!"<sup>2</sup>

Writing to Mahatma Gandhi during her visit to America in 1928 as India's unofficial ambassador, Sarojini remarked: "I am now about to set out on the second stage of my travels, journeying across the breadth of the continent through the wheat districts and the mining districts over the Rockies to the magic land of California where I shall behold the waters of the Blue Pacific through the Golden Gate. . . . My experience and adventures in California will not, I promise you, exclude the exciting mysteries of Hollywood and its galaxy of dazzling stars!"<sup>3</sup>

And again, in another letter on the same trip she wrote, while on a "whirlwind train" that bore her across the continent, of the "diamond white snow regions of the Central Western provinces to the topaz and sapphire sun-lands of the South. Never, I assure you, did the souls of my Vedic ancestors raise such a joyous Gayatri to Surya Deva as I do in the glad hour of deliverance of the chilled and suffering tropic bones in my body."

<sup>2</sup> *The Awakening of Asian Womanhood*, by Margaret E. Cousins, pp. 120, 121, Ganesh and Co., Madras, 1922.

<sup>3</sup> *Young India*, April 11, 1929.

And once, the wandering singer expressed her nostalgia for India in the midst of all the warm receptions and gaiety of the wonders of the New World. She had finished one of her "long love letters", as she and Mahatma Gandhi laughingly called these beautiful records of her travels: "It is midnight here but already the dawn is breaking over the Sabarmati and its waters are the mirror of the morning rose and gold. I wish I were watching that morning rose and gold. But do not let my whisper of home-sickness become a loud clamour."

On solemn occasions, in the midst of white-clad Congress circles, when tempers were strained due to long days of harassment or imprisonment or disunity among the members of the Congress themselves, Sarojini Naidu would again and again be the source of colour and laughter. Thus, on March 2, 1943, when Mahatma Gandhi broke his fast in the Aga Khan Palace, after very nearly succumbing to his great ordeal, and after intense suffering, Sarojini was the only person present who brightened the anxious little group around Gandhiji with colour. It consisted of fellow prisoners, Pyarelal, Sushila Nayar, Mira Behn, Kasturba and six doctors. A feeling of depression enveloped everyone despite the joy they felt that the Mahatma had survived his fast. When would they be released? What would be their future and that of India? But Sarojini was undaunted, and in the midst of a severe white-clad company she entered happily draped in a deep purple sari. Mira Behn who wore rough Khaddar led the singing of *Lead Kindly Light*. It was a hymn much loved by the Mahatma which he often included in his prayer meetings. Many years after his death, Marion Anderson sang this hymn when she visited Rajghat and laid a wreath on the Mahatma's memorial. Now in the palatial prison, the worn out and saddened "jail-birds", after months of incarceration and after they had lost Mahadev Desai in the gloom of the claustrophobic palace, and not knowing that in the immediate future, their beloved Kasturba would also be taken from them, sang this lovely hymn:

"So long Thy power hath blest me, sure it still  
 Will lead me on,  
 O'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent, till  
 The night is gone;

And with the morn those Angel faces smile,  
Which I have loved long since, and lost awhile.”

At that time, except for the relief of the breaking of the Mahatma's fast, it seemed that the smiles of those angel faces had been completely obliterated during those dark indefinitely long prison days. After the prayer meeting, Kasturba handed her husband a glass of orange juice. He took half an hour to sip six ounces, and during this anxious and painful time, not a word was uttered. Then, Sarojini Naidu awoke to activity and served the doctors with fruit juice. But there was still no talk and even the ebullient laughter of the poetess was silenced for the time being. She herself was unwell, and long months of being caged had unnerved her indomitable spirit; but inactivity was never her forte, and she asked the doctors if they would care for a second glass. The Mahatma lay worn out and silent and sad on his bed. How bleak indeed would this ceremony have been if not for the bright presence of Sarojini Naidu!

She loved Bengal; but often criticized the ladies for wearing too much white. “Why don't you wear bright colours, the beautiful colours of the rainbow?” She would ask. “Why just white and pale pastel shades?”

Once she was staying with Dr. B. C. Roy in Calcutta when the engagement party of one of his relations took place. The prospective bride, dressed in palest pink, sat in the midst of her many friends, all more or less dressed in light-coloured or white saris. Suddenly Sarojini Naidu entered in brightest peacock blue—looking more like the bride than the bride herself. She sat amidst them in her splendour and cried: “Why is the girl getting engaged in such pale clothes? Why is she not dressed in a bright colour?”

There was much laughter, and no engagement ceremony could have been gayer, for Sarojini was there.

With colour, there was a buoyant spirit of construction and creation in all the varied aspects of Sarojini Naidu's life, a “spirit of delight” which lit up the most dismal situation and brought laughter where tears had prevailed. The lilt of her early songs were fitted with the red torch of creative beauty burning out the “dead dreary habits” and grey miseries of life and rebuilding edifices of turquoise and gold.

“Here, O my heart, let us burn the dear dreams that are dead,  
 Here in this wood let us fashion a funeral pyre,  
 Of fallen white petals and leaves that are mellow and red,  
 Here let us burn them in noon’s flaming torches of fire.”

## 2 *Dreamers of Dreams*

Sarojini Naidu’s love of colour, her joy for living, her craving to create, her astoundingly friendly, loving and comprehensive attitude towards humanity, were as much inherited as they were a part of her own individuality. Her father, Dr. Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya has today become a legendary figure. All those who knew him remembered him as a loving but almost eccentric human being and a towering personality. He was such stuff as dreams are made of, and belonged to a magical, weird world. The quaint stories related about him and the astounding incidents connected with his life still make one listen open-mouthed.

Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya is said to be the original character of the “Man in the Train” whom Rabindranath Tagore depicted in his story *Kshudita Pashan* (Hungry Stones). The poet was said to have met Aghorenath first on a journey. The narrator says: “My kinsman and myself were returning to Calcutta from our Puja trip when we met the man in a train. From his dress and bearing we took him at first for an up-country Mahomedan, but we were puzzled as we heard him talk.”<sup>4</sup> This stranger could discourse on all subjects giving the impression that “The Disposer of All Things” never did anything without consulting him. Very soon the stranger was embarking on his extraordinary gift of make-believe, so quaintly interwoven with real life, so that one was always left with a feeling of unreality after meeting him. The stranger quoted to suit his mood. “There happen more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are reported in your newspapers.” He then went on to relate strange happenings of science mingled with quotations from the Vedas and Persian poetry so fluently that he was thought to be “Supernaturally inspired” by magnetic or

<sup>4</sup> *Hungry Stones*, by Rabindranath Tagore, p. 3, Macmillan & Co. Ltd., London, 1950.

occult powers. While in a waiting-room of a railway station, the stranger embarked on the weird story of "Hungry Stones" much to the astonishment of his co-travellers. The narrator says: "I spread my bed on the table and was about to lie down for a comfortable doze when the extraordinary person deliberately set about spinning the following yarn. Of course I could not sleep that night." And thus the story was unwound—a strange and bizarre tale. At the end of it, the coolies announced the arrival of the train; and an Englishman, leaning out of his first class compartment immediately recognized the stranger and hailed him with a familiar "Hullo". The narrator and his kinsman stepped into a second class, and never saw the man again. Who was he, and had he but made fools of his fellow travellers? Thus the story ends, but Rabindranath Tagore is believed to have confessed that this strange character who related "Hungry Stones" was in reality Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya.

Sarojini Naidu herself described her father thus: "My ancestors for thousands of years have been lovers of the forest and mountain caves, 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 a great white beard and the profile of Homer, and a laugh that brings the roof down. He has wasted all his money on two great objects: to help others, and on alchemy. He holds huge courts every day in his garden of all the learned men of all the religions—Rajahs and beggars and saints and downright villains all delightfully mixed up, and all treated as one. And then his alchemy! Oh dear, night and day the experiments are going on, and every man who brings a new prescription is welcome as a brother! But this alchemy is, you know, only the material counterpart of a poet's craving for Beauty, the eternal Beauty. 'The makers of gold and the makers of verse', they are 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—in me is the desire for beauty. Do you remember Pater's phrase about Leonardo Da Vinci, 'Curiosity and the desire of beauty?' "<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *The Golden Threshold, op. cit., pp. 14, 15.*

There are fantastic stories about Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya! about the all-night meetings he and his friends held in an unused gymnasium in Hyderabad, about his weird friends, his impulsive charity and quaint pursuits. So-called scientists would gather, and in splendid spirits, with laughter ringing through the vaults of the ancient gymnasium, they would light their cauldrons and start their experiments, striving to convert the baser metals into gold. No doubt every young scientist knew in his heart of hearts that he was merely striving to reach the man in the moon; but there are stories about the glorious fun they used to have and the joy of wasting time, or striving for the impossible. And over the whole proceeding towered the figure of Sarojini's father, a great jovial man with his flowing beard.

Aghorenath was not only a brilliant scientist but a poet, in Urdu and Bengali; and often he held gatherings where he recited his verse. His wife, the gentle and dreamy Varada Sundari was an ephemeral and visionary character. She possessed a sweet bird-like voice and was a renowned singer. When she was a girl at school in a village in East Bengal she was said to have won the Viceroy's Gold Medal for singing. Her youngest son, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya describes her as being fond of sitting on the broad window sill over-looking the old gate in their compound in Hyderabad, but the tears used often to brim over in her eyes, when she sang, and her voice would at times choke. Then her children would cry: "Mother, how sweetly you sing, but why do you cry?"<sup>6</sup> Not only was Varada Sundari a great and well-known singer, but she wrote beautiful Bengali lyrics. Often her husband would ask her to sing or recite her poetry to him, and many contemporary poets declared that her verse was good. It must have been a familiar pastime for the children to gather around their parents listening to their mother's sweet songs and recitation of poetry or their father's more sonorous outpourings. Here in this home there was music and drama and verse, dreaming of great achievements, building of fantastic castles, and above all, the human touch, always present, of catering to friends, rich or poor, beggar or prince. And here, in this rich artistic background was born and bred Sarojini, together with her brothers and sisters.

<sup>6</sup> *Life and Myself—Dawn Approaching Noon*, by Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, Nalanda Publication, p. 71.

Varada Sundari's love for music and dancing was so profound, that even many years later, when the Chattopadhyayas had left Hyderabad and settled in their home in Lovelock Street in Calcutta, friends who still remembered that home of dreams and visions have told me that they have seen Varada Sundari dance and sing.

And there was also present in the mother a premonition of the unknown. She was known to be psychic. Harin Chattopadhyaya relates a strange story, one night of her waking her husband up and asking him to take a lantern and go to the chicken run, for she had dreamt that her hen was dying. She was scolded by her sleepy husband, but she insisted on the midnight inspection and sure enough there on a stone, as she had dreamt it, lay her hen, dying. She also possessed certain superstitions, as for instance her insisting on seeing the face of her youngest son Harin, during the waxing crescent moon. Indeed, the childhood of Sarojini and her brothers and sisters was an ever-long chapter of "ecstatic invention and discovery." Harin wrote: "Our parents had done everything to make us feel that life was one fluent process of rainbows and fancy happenings."<sup>7</sup> Varada Sundari also taught her children to believe in a great being called God.

Speaking of his parents, Harindranath says: "They were not merely human parents, but rare spiritual beings, high points of evolution, two truly unworldly lights walking through the darkness of life, illumining it wherever they walked, casting hope and blessing on whatever they met on life's roadway." They dwelt on earth like noble beings, and left behind them a portion of their dreamy world, which Sarojini inherited, and around which she wove her rainbow patterns, thereby creating a tapestry of lasting beauty to ornament and decorate her otherwise sad country. Her patterns of woven dreams will for ever hang on the walls of Indian political, social and everyday life—patterns of untold value to be treasured through the years.

<sup>7</sup> *Life and Myself*, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

### 3 *Aghorenath*

Dr. Aghorenath Chatterjea came from village Brahmanagar in East Bengal. His family belonged to an ancient line of great Sanskrit scholars who had studied the Vedas and the rich literature of India for many long years. They also taught the scriptures and were much respected in Bengal. Apart from their scholarship, the Chattarajans, as they were called, were devoted lovers of nature and spent long sessions in forests meditating and philosophizing on the wisdom of the "vernal woods." Dr. Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya was himself a master of Sanskrit and widely read in the poetry and drama of both India and the West. Studies at school were too easy for Aghorenath and he always topped his class. In his village he was not only rooted to his books but ranged the countryside far and wide, making friends with one and all. Aghorenath's romance with his wife started when he was on one of his jaunts. He loved boats and the wide sun-steeped rivers of Bengal and was for ever hobnobbing with the boatmen and being carried across the waters in their slender craft. In his wanderings he fell in with some dacoits and became fast friends with them. They much appreciated Aghorenath's gift of spinning yarns and soon, though only a boy, he became their master, but of course never a dacoit! He cared nothing for caste and convention and is said to have broken his sacred thread and flung it into the Ganges. He was fourteen at the time. One day, from his boat he caught sight of a girl who was hardly nine years old. He fell in love with her at first sight, and his dacoit friends provided help for him to meet this little girl. Harindranath Chattopadhyaya says: "We are grateful, since otherwise we should have been deprived of the honour, the extreme honour, of carrying throughout our lives the memory of a woman who was 'half-angel and half-bird.'" And thus the two met and Aghorenath married the little bride whom he first encountered by the river-side in such romantic circumstances.

After Aghorenath finished his schooling, he became a brilliant scholar in Calcutta University. He was, however, a poor man, and it is said that he was forced to borrow books and study under street lamps. Despite these difficulties, he held his own with many of the great scholars of his day including Rajani Nath Roy, Sashi

Bushan Dutt, Khirode Chandra Roy Choudhury, Srinath Dutt and others. He was as great a scholar of English as he was of Sanskrit, besides which he mastered Greek and Hebrew, French, German and Russian. His motto was to learn something new each day, and if he failed to do so he considered the day lost. Many years later, in 1917, when I met Harindranath Chattopadhyaya in Madras, I remember him looking through a dictionary and telling me that it was one of the most useful occupations in the world to learn one new word each day from the dictionary and thus to enrich one's vocabulary. He had obviously followed his father's idea.

In Calcutta, Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya came in contact with Keshab Chandra Sen and was initiated into the Naba Bidhan cult by Brahmananda Sen himself. Aghorenath was no less fond of adventures in Calcutta than he was during his school days in Brahmanagar. He came from the sturdy stock of Kulin Brahmins, and zealously took over the task of reforming some of the habits of his own sect. A group was formed of young men who chivalrously began to rescue Kulin girls from the clutches of their inconsiderate parents or guardians who followed the traditional custom of giving their daughters in marriage to very old and sometimes even moribund men in order to preserve the Kulin caste. The band of youth consisted of Aghorenath's cousins, Naba Kanto, Nishi Kanto, and Sital Kanto Chatterjea, Barada Kanto Halidar, the father of Basanti Devi (Mrs. C. R. Das) and Sarada Kanto Halidar. They rescued many girls and brought them to be educated to the Banga Mahila Vidyalaya, the first institution in India for imparting education to girls up to the matriculation standard. The band of young Galahads was under the leadership of Dwarkanath Ganguli, one of the foremost reformers of Bengal, and a pioneer in the field of women's education and emancipation.

Very soon, Aghorenath's enthusiastic band of knights errant were ostracized by their relatives and severely criticized for being the kidnapers of Kulin girls. The whole band then took shelter in the Brahmo Samaj which was then a powerful force in Bengal, led by Keshab Chandra Sen. Aghorenath's wife, Varada Sundari was then in Calcutta, and when Aghorenath went abroad for studies in Europe, he left her as an inmate of the Bharat Ashram, which was run by Keshab Chandra Sen. Here Varada Sundari re-

ceived her early education together with lessons in housekeeping, for which she later became so famous. She was one of the first inmates of this famous Ashram started by Keshab Chandra Sen.

Aghorenath possessed a passion for chemistry and after completing his studies in India, he went abroad on a Gilchrist scholarship and further won the Baxter Physical Science scholarship and the Hope prize. He took his Degree of Doctor of Science at the University of Edinburgh in 1877, and was awarded the Vans Dunlop Scholarship. He was the first Indian to obtain his Doctorate Degree of Science, even before Jagdish Chandra Bose and Acharya Profulla Chandra Ray. Aghorenath continued his studies in Germany after leaving Edinburgh, and here his brilliance was given further scope. Profulla Chandra Ray describes him as a man with a capacious head "full of grandiose ideas."<sup>8</sup>

In Bonn, Aghorenath seems to have come in contact with a renowned Dutch chemist, Van't Hoff, who remarked that "every letter of Aghorenath was pronounced with wonderful accuracy." P. C. Ray visited Van't Hoff in his laboratory near Berlin and regretted that Aghorenath's "giant intellect was practically lost to India, at least as far as chemistry was concerned," for on his return to India, he did not pursue the enthusiastic research which he had followed abroad.

Back in India, Dr. Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya was invited to Hyderabad about 1878, where he established a school with English as its medium. As a teacher he soon earned a name for himself and was held in high esteem for his scholarship by the Nizam, who wanted to start a college to encourage higher studies. Aghorenath founded the Hyderabad College, and was appointed its Principal. It was first affiliated to the Madras University and later became the famous Nizam's College. On its walls a portrait of Aghorenath still hangs.

Together with the help of his wife, Aghorenath began to take an interest in women's education. With the active co-operation of two other enlightened women, a Girl's College for women was started as a part of Osmania University. Dr. Aghorenath was a champion of the cause of women. He strongly believed in their economic independence and in giving them equal opportunities

<sup>8</sup> *Autobiography of a Bengali Chemist*, by Profulla Chandra Ray, Orient Book Co., Calcutta, 1958.

with men. He did much to abolish child-marriage and to establish the remarriage of widows.

He proved an ideal Principal of a college for he sought the personal friendship of his pupils and students flocked to his congenial and hospitable home "to sit at his feet and hear him talk on any subject." Soon, Aghorenath's circle widened to such an extent and became so important that the gatherings came to be known as the "darbars" of Dr. Aghorenath. An intellectual group was formed under the name of the Angrimah-e-Ikwan-us-Safa (The Brotherhood Society). Under its auspices, many absorbing discussions were held on social and political problems of the day.

After five years of dynamic service to humanity Aghorenath seems to have become so mixed up in politics that the rapid progress of his brilliant career was sadly hampered.

Acharya Profulla Chandra Ray regretted this patriotic fervour on the part of Dr. Chattopadhyaya and remarks: "Aghorenath on his return to India became head of the Education Department in the Nizam's dominions but unfortunately embroiled himself in party politics and was in the forefront of the National Movement. . . . I remember as a boy reading the *Hindu Patriot* one day in which the Editor (Kristodas Pal) lectured to the school master (meaning Dr. Aghorenath) to keep clear of politics."<sup>9</sup> There is no knowing to what heights of scientific research Aghorenath may not have reached if he had not scattered his intellect on diverse activities extending from alchemy and music to the emancipation of women and the freedom of his country.

The entrance of Aghorenath into politics was spectacular and short-lived. In 1883, Salar Jung, the Dewan of Hyderabad State, died, and the administration passed to a Council of Regency consisting of some Hyderabad noblemen with the Nizam as President. This Council was soon faced with political trouble over the "Chanda Railway Scheme." The existing railway ran from Hyderabad to Wadi. It was proposed that a British Company would extend the railway to Warrangal and then on to Bhadrachalam or to Vijayawada, then known as Bezwada, on the one side, and on the other side, up to Chanda. The belief soon grew in Hyderabad that this scheme would not be an economical proposition, and the people were annoyed because they were not consulted. A

<sup>9</sup> *Autobiography of a Bengali Chemist, op. cit., 107.*

group under the leadership of Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya and Mulla Abdul Quayum was set up, called "The Committee to consider the Chanda Railway Scheme." It recommended that all the facts regarding the new railway scheme should be placed before the public. The Committee also asked why this administrative scheme was considered at all. The Council of Regency and officials of the Residency were amazed at this interference. The public concern "did not suit the purpose of the meddling political agent who thought after his kind, that not only British India proper but also the feudatories should be reserved for British exploitation. The enraged Resident extorted the meddlesome Bengali, often the *bete noire* of the Anglo-Nizam's territory, within 24 hours of the issue of the UKASE."<sup>10</sup>

Dr. Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya was suspended from Service and deported from Hyderabad on May 20, 1883. He was taken in an "unceremonious manner" and was escorted by "eleven Arab military men." He was not even allowed to buy himself a First Class ticket. He was forced into the train, and unmoved, he spoke to the crowd: "Gentlemen, you will please bear witness that I do not enter this carriage willingly, but that I am compelled to do so." He told Major Dobbs, the Judicial Superintendent of the Railway, that his rights as a British subject should be looked into, but Dobbs "regretted his inability to interfere."<sup>11</sup>

A few years later Aghorenath was brought back to Hyderabad and again made Principal of the Nizam's College. Mulla Abdul Quayum also returned from Madras together with another agitator, Dastoor Ausagi Hoshung. They were vindicated, partly because they carried themselves with gentlemanly pride and dignity.

At Aghorenath's instance, the special marriage Act, 1872, already in vogue in British India, was introduced into Hyderabad. He also founded the "Young Men's Improvement Trust", which worked for the regeneration of Indian women. He set up a school of thought which believed in the need for English, though the importance of the mother tongue was also stressed. He also established an examining body called "Anjuman-i-Maoyar-ul-uloom", which held examinations on various subjects in Urdu and attracted

<sup>10</sup> *Autobiography of a Bengali Chemist, op. cit., p. 107.*

<sup>11</sup> *Aghorenath Chatterjee, by P. C. Roy Choudhury, Amrita Bazaar Patrika, November 25, 1962.*

students from all parts of India. Successful candidates were given certificates; but for want of funds the Society died; though the Osmania University later was more or less run on the same lines. At Aghorenath's house in Nizam Shahi Road, the All India Sanskrit Conference held a series of annual meetings. A society known as Ikwān-us-Sufa also held cultural meetings in this cosmopolitan house and ran a monthly magazine.<sup>12</sup>

When the National Congress was born in 1885, it was helped by people from the princely States. Aghorenath, Mulla Abdul Quayum, Ramchandra Pillai and others worked hard in Hyderabad to spread the National movement.

In 1888 a number of articles appeared in a local paper, *Safir-e-Deccan*, supporting the Congress. Both Aghorenath and Mulla Abdul Quayum, were reprimanded for anti-government views. Abdul Quayum died in 1906. He was a welder of the Congress to the Mohammedan Community and a great national worker. He and Aghorenath were an astounding pair. They started the Swadeshi cult in Hyderabad, when Bengal was aflame with the Swadeshi agitation.

Lokmanya Tilak's school of extremist thought also appeared in Hyderabad. A gymnasium became a centre of Swadeshi agitation at Chaderghat. Aghorenath often presided over meetings here, spreading the Swadeshi cult, and Bengali youths who used to visit Hyderabad in secret introduced the Bengali revolutionary technique in that feudatory state. Articles with photographs of Tilak and Bepin Chandra Pal were published. Swadeshi pamphlets and photographs were widely distributed after being imported into Hyderabad. "Use Swadeshi" became the slogan and *Bande Mataram* the national song. Over the years the National Movement grew.

Hyderabad State did not like the import of Swadeshi goods; but did nothing as the British Government did not forbid their manufacture. Much later, the Swadeshi cult began to take a violent turn. Mr. Jackson, Collector of Nasik was shot at by a Marathi student, Anant Lakshman Kanare, on December 21, 1909. Wide scale arrests and reprisals followed. Arms were discovered as being manufactured in Hyderabad. A number of citizens were suspected and some were removed from the Education Department. Aghorenath soon had to leave Hyderabad and settle in Calcutta.

<sup>12</sup> *Aghorenath Chatterjee, op. cit.*

The organization, Fard Afroze, in which a Swadeshi shop had been established, was closed, and many libraries and gymnasiums were forcibly broken up. Both the spread of Swadeshi and the Indian National Congress in Hyderabad were largely due to Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya, which is not commonly remembered today. Aghorenath was hounded by the police throughout his life. One of his daughters, Sunalini, married Shri B. C. Roy, a Barrister in Cuttack, but Aghorenath was forbidden to visit her. In Calcutta, Aghorenath's house was often visited by the C.I.D. whom he invited to eat with him. He lived in Lovelock Street after he left Hyderabad, where he spent his last few years.

Dr. Aghorenath, because of his political turn, was early retired on a proportionate pension. He wanted to re-equip a badly equipped science laboratory, but his requests were ignored, mostly to humiliate him. An enquiry was held by the Madras University Enquiry Commission and the blame was heaped on Aghorenath. He was retired and sacrificed because of his political ideas. "In the history of the Indian National Congress, Dr. Aghorenath's contribution should find a place in golden letters. As a scientist, he was an early pioneer in encouraging research and like J. C. Bose and P. C. Ray infused the spirit of research in young scholars. His conversation had a brilliance of its own."

No one who met Aghorenath Chatterjee can ever forget him. He left an "indelible impression."<sup>13</sup>

Speaking as President at the Asian Relations Conference in March, 1947, Sarojini Naidu referring to her father remarked: "Nothing can die that is good." To Sarojini, Aghorenath, her revered and beloved father, had never passed away. She remarked: "When my father, who was one of the greatest men of the world was about to die, his last words were: 'There is no birth and there is no death. There is only the spirit seeking evolution in higher and higher stages of life.'" And so Aghorenath passed on to a higher existence.

Sarojini said of her father: "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."

<sup>13</sup> *Aghorenath Chatterjee, op. cit.*

## 4 *Childhood Home*

Not only did Sarojini inherit the capacity to dream, write poetry and live in her ivory tower—a world of creative beauty—but she learnt from her father and mother the art of enjoying life. As Taya Zinkin remarked, she was “a woman so full of *joie de vivre* that she chewed life at both ends.”<sup>14</sup> Sarojini’s zest for life was part and parcel of Sarojini herself. She was intoxicated with existence and drank to the dregs the visions she pictured from earliest childhood of a poet’s hopes and desires. This was due mainly to the fact that her childhood home rang with the happy shouts of children’s laughter and their growing aspirations—children who were far above normal for there were at least two recognized writers and poets in later days to be found in that spacious house in Hyderabad, not to mention the genius which dwelt in both parents. Harindranath Chattopadhyaya says that when he was born at 4 p.m. on April 2, 1898, he “did not know at that moment to what great and wonderful parents” he was being “linked in the history of man in general.” Looking back on those childhood days, however, he recalled “their greatness and spiritual integrity.” He was indeed born “under a fortunate star.” Sarojini, the eldest child, born nineteen years earlier, had a much longer session in this ideal home than her youngest brother.

According to Harin, the house was a cross between a museum and a zoo—“a museum crowded with precious things of wisdom and culture; a zoo crowded with a medley of strange types—some even verging on the mystic, for our home was open to all alike.”<sup>15</sup> The father often sat in an easy chair with a host of friends surrounding him, a mixture of great men and small, astronomers and thieves, learned and foolish, nawabs and beggars.

There were indeed strange characters in this home. There was the nurse Gangu whom the children called Gagga. She was a second mother to the children, and was beautiful with a snub nose and slit eyes and almost negroid hair. Every now and again, she would get drunk and give notice, and when she left, the youngest children felt that they had lost all, but their mother would

<sup>14</sup> *Reporting India*, by Taya Zinkin, Chatto and Windus, 1962.

<sup>15</sup> *Life and Myself*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

tell them not to fret, the nurse would return, and on the second or third morning she would be found working. When this nurse eventually died she was taken away in a sitting position as is the custom of the Telugus. She left a gap which could never be filled. Another familiar figure in the house was Ballayya, the *darzi*, who wore a huge maroon turban.

Varada Sundari's kitchen was always full of food. In this domain she was the queen and cooked the most delectable dishes. She was surrounded by servants who were most devoted to her; and she used to chat with them as she would with members of the family. She was an "excellent housewife who was always ready to lay the table for another half a dozen persons, whether they were beggars or loafers or great scholars."<sup>16</sup> She was round-faced and "if you watch Sarojini's eyes and catch them in a moment, when they lapse into contemplative 'politics-cancelled' and quiet, you will get a glimpse into the quality of mother's eyes which were always brimful of mercy, kindness, contemplation," wrote Harin.<sup>17</sup> Varada Sundari had dimples when she smiled. She wore beautiful saris, though when she worked in the house she was always seen in simple cotton—she was never free from a sense of duty and was never vain.

Varada Sundari and Aghorenath spoke to each other in Bengali but to the children in Hindustani and the servants in Telugu. The children never spoke Bengali. There were many linguists in the house apart from Aghorenath, for Varada Sundari knew many languages and Virendranath, the eldest brother spoke sixteen languages. Varada Sundari's nature was soft and she sparkled with humour, traits which were also inherited by her children, especially Sarojini. In 1917, Mrinalini Chattopadhyaya, Aghorenath's second daughter, set up house in San Thome, Mylapore, Madras, a tiny house by the sea, to which I was a happy and frequent visitor. Here Mrinalini, whom we called "Gunu Aunty", presided like a queen, mothering her younger brothers and sisters, and carrying on to the full the traditions of her parents' Hyderabad home. The little sitting room was never empty. We sat on the floor, or on divans or chairs, or wherever we could find room. There were usually shoals of us, and morning or evening, we listened to the

<sup>16</sup> *Aghorenath Chatterjee, op., cit.*

<sup>17</sup> *Life and Myself, op. cit.*

songs of the talented Harindranath, Sunalini and Suhasini. We acted song-dramas composed by Harin, we drank tea and imbibed delicious Hyderabad sweets and fed ourselves on the deep and fascinating atmosphere of culture and camaraderie which only those who knew the Chattopadhyaya family can understand. We, the young students of Madras, revelled in this atmosphere of creative art. I can well imagine, therefore, the convivial atmosphere, the scintillating repartee, the warm friendship and the inspiring talent which flourished under the patronage of Aghorenath and his sweet-voiced wife, Varada Sundari Devi.

Sarojini was born on February 13, 1879, and with her birth the house was "filled with joy". Seven more children were born after her, four boys and three girls. Sarojini, in a book of childhood poems, writes on December 20, 1894 of a brother who was born and died. The poem is entitled *In Memoriam*:

"Thou cam'st to us two years ago  
 In June, when pink wild roses blow  
     Beneath the golden skies,  
 When Autumn winds made melody  
 And yellow leaves fell from the tree,  
 God's angels set their seal on thee  
     And closed thy lovely eyes."<sup>18</sup>

Virendranath was the eldest son, a revolutionary patriot who died an exile abroad in 1942. He was sent to Oxford during the First World War and never returned to India. He interested himself with a number of movements abroad, especially with the League against Imperialism. He lived mostly in Berlin. He was anxious to form an All-India Anti-Imperialist Federation in India. He felt the National Indian Congress did not represent the whole of the Indian people and was strongly in favour of an All-India Organisation. His other brothers were Bhupendranath who worked and died in Hyderabad, Ranendranath and the poet Harindranath.

Aghorenath insisted on being called "Uncle" by any young visitors. In the background Varada Sundari was always to be seen, hospitable and attentive, a typical Bengali housewife. She busied

<sup>18</sup> *Songs*, by S. Chattopadhyaya, 1895.

herself about the home, always at the beck and call of her illustrious husband. The rich food, the friends who poured into the house, and the cheerful manner in which everyone was greeted has remained in the memory of many old friends.

The cosmopolitan atmosphere of the Chattopadhyaya home in Hyderabad has been stressed over and over again by Sarojini herself; in one of her speeches she cried: "I was brought up in a home over which presided one of the greatest men of India and who is an embodiment of all great lores and an ideal of truth, of love, of justice and patriotism. That great teacher of India had come to us to give immortal inspiration. That is a home of Indians and not of Hindus or Brahmins. It is because my beloved father said: 'Be not limited even to the Indians, but let it be your pride that you are a citizen of the world,' that I should love my country. I am ready to lay down my life for the welfare of all India."

### 5 *Dawn of Life*

Aghorenath taught his eldest daughter to be widely interested in many things. She went to school early and was one of the cleverest pupils, always standing first in her class. Her school studies, however, did not interest her as much as the teaching she received in her home. Through the enthusiasm of her father and his wide reading, Sarojini early imbibed strange forms of knowledge which made her a leader in school. She was also inclined to rebel against her father's wishes at times. For instance, he wanted her to be a real adept at English, a language which in her early childhood she seemed to have been reluctant to learn. "I was stubborn", she said, "and refused to speak it. So one day when I was nine years old my father punished me—the only time I was ever punished—by shutting me in my room alone for a whole day." Sarojini, however, did not suffer the agony of claustrophobia in her "prison". Neither did she weep or sulk. She determined smilingly to obey her father's commands and when she was released she told him that her ambition was to become really proficient in English. Her punishment became a joke with her, but her determination to obey her father obsessed her, and soon she mastered the English language.

age, and spoke to her parents only in English, though her mother spoke back to her in Hindustani.

Sarojini wrote of her own early achievements thus: "I don't think I had any special hankering to write poetry as a little child, though I was of a very fanciful and dreamy nature. My training under my father's eye was of a serious scientific character. He was determined that I should be a great mathematician or a scientist, but the poetic instinct which I inherited from him and also from my mother (who wrote some lovely Bengali lyrics in her youth) proved stronger. One day, when I was eleven, 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. At thirteen I wrote a long poem *a la* 'Lady of the Lake'—1,300 lines in six days. At thirteen I wrote a drama of 2,000 lines, a full-fledged passionate thing that I began on the spur of the moment without forethought, just to spite my doctor who said I was very ill and must not touch a book. My health broke down permanently about this time, and my regular studies being stopped I read voraciously. I suppose the greater part of my reading was done between fourteen and sixteen. I wrote a novel, I wrote fat volumes of journals: I took myself very seriously in those days."<sup>19</sup>

Aghorenath's next ambition for Sarojini was to make her pass the Matriculation Examination. For this she had to attend High School, and there was no suitable institution at Hyderabad for her to pursue her studies. She was therefore sent to Madras where she passed in her twelfth year in the First Class, coming first in the Madras Presidency. Here was an astonishing achievement for so young an Indian girl. Her success was all the more surprising as the examination in 1891 was by no means easy. Neither were girls accustomed to attending school in the higher classes. Sarojini's syllabus consisted of English, a second language, Science, Mathematics, History and Geography. Some of the questions were of the B.A. standard of today. Sarojini's outstanding success brought her fame throughout India, but strangely enough, being famous did not in any way fascinate her. She disliked publicity and renown. Later she confided to Arthur Symons: "Honestly, I was not pleased; such things did not appeal to me."

<sup>19</sup> *The Golden Threshold, op. cit., pp. 11 and 12.*

Dr. (Sir) C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyar, Sarojini Naidu's lifelong friend and only nine months junior to her in age came to know her soon after she passed the Matriculation Examination and became a celebrity. His father also knew Aghorenath and he says that Sarojini learnt the lesson of tolerance and communal harmony and appreciation of Islamic culture in all its aspects from her father. The true greatness of father and daughter lay in the fact that they were "dreamers of dreams" but like all idealists, they were simple and humble and neither knew the extent of their own fame nor paid much attention to the endless tributes which were paid them.

Despite her brilliant beginning it is strange that Sarojini is not known to have passed any other examinations, not even in London or Cambridge. This was perhaps due to the fact that mere academic study had no appeal for her. She seemed to have disliked any form of organized study. Another reason may have been that she was only sixteen when she went to England in 1895 and nineteen when she returned. She did tell a friend many years later that she was too young to graduate when she was in England. Her interests, however, were wide and she was well read in English and Urdu. Her health after her Matriculation also completely broke down, and she stayed at home in Hyderabad for three years from 1892 to 1895 without studying any further until she was sent to England.

Those three years were among her happiest. During this care-free time she became a poetess and wrote prolifically. She "lisped early" in numbers, for they came to her spontaneously.

In the archives of the National Library in Calcutta are kept Sarojini's earliest poems, printed on rough paper, and with the inscription on the cover, written by hand: "Poems by S. Chattopadhyaya, dated 3rd Oct. 1896." The poems are a collection of Sarojini's verses from 1892 to 1896 and reveal a precocious and mature mind for a girl in her early teens.

The longing to travel possessed her even as a child, for in May 1892, she wrote the *Traveller's Song* at the age of thirteen.

"O'er Italia's sunny plains  
All aglow with rosy flowers,  
I wander now 'mid fallen fanes,

And now amid the myrtle bowers—  
 But, wheresoever I may roam  
 I long for thee, my dear dear home!”

On her fourteenth birthday (February 13, 1893) Sarojini wrote a charming verse called *On My Birthday*; and here is the joy of a child revealed in immature but spontaneous verse:

“My birthday! O this day I am fourteen!  
 And childhood’s years on golden wings have fled,  
 Right many a grateful blessing have I seen,  
 And purest joys on me their lustre shed,  
 As flew those years over my happy head.  
 My joys were not what joys to childhood seem:  
 Not on unthinking sports my soul was fed,  
 But nursed it was on many a brighter theme,  
 And lofty high ideas formed my radiant dream.”

Edwin Arnold seems to have early inspired Sarojini, for in March, 1893, she wrote a poem to him, of which a few lines emphasize her enthusiasm for this great lover of India:

“Poet! that dost sweetly sing  
 Of fair India’s land, my home!  
 O wheresoever thou dost roam,  
 My fairy slaves choice blessings bring!”

At this time, Sarojini seems to have lived in Sholapur for some time, as many of her poems were written here. Was she sent away because of her growing love for a young Doctor? Were her parents rather horrified that a girl so young should fall in love? Also, was her choice of a man of different caste disapproved by her parents despite their broad cosmopolitan views? The beginning of Sarojini’s love for Dr. Govindarajulu Naidu occurred after her Matriculation.

Her early poems are of an intensely romantic nature. In *Love’s Vision* Sarojini pours out her heart’s desire:

“Fair as the flowers of the rich spring-time,  
 Sweet as the music in the summer prime,



already talk of her going abroad—of her being sent away in order to forget her early love.

The little volume of early poems has never, to my knowledge, reached the public eye, and in a future anthology of Sarojini's poems they could be included, merely to show the girl between the age of twelve and fifteen growing into womanhood and revealing her youthful poetic merit. Though so young, there are a few lines that betray the strength and promise of the future lyricist.

When Sarojini was sent away to England, it is said by most biographers that she was prevented from marrying Dr. Naidu because of the difference in caste, Dr. Naidu not being a Brahmin. Such a consideration could, however, not have been the main one for stopping the marriage, for Aghorenath was a staunch reformer and himself threw away his sacred thread. The more likely cause was, no doubt, the fact that Sarojini was far too young to marry. She was scarcely fifteen and Aghorenath himself had spoken strongly against child-marriage. He had to remain true to his own creed. Whatever the actual reasons, it was decided that Sarojini Naidu should go abroad, especially as she had been granted a scholarship by the Nizam. When she returned three years later and was of the same mind, there seems to have been no great objection to her marrying Dr. Naidu. The barriers of caste were never again raised.

Dr. Naidu in every way followed an orthodox and gentlemanly procedure in seeking to marry Sarojini. He came one day into Aghorenath's home and diffidently asked for his daughter's hand. Aghorenath was astounded and thundered: "Does my daughter know of this proposal?" "No," replied Dr. Govindarajulu Naidu, "I have not spoken to Sarojini about this proposal. That is not the Indian custom."

Aghorenath's immediate reaction to Dr. Naidu's proposal was to consult his wife, and she, like all true mothers, seemed to have long known the feelings of Sarojini and informed her husband that their daughter fully returned her suitor's feelings. But, like her husband, Varada Sundari was not in favour of the marriage, and suggested that Sarojini be sent back to Madras, possibly to study. But the Nizam came to the rescue and offered the young girl a scholarship to go to England. Aghorenath immediately clutched at this straw like a drowning man and it was decided to send

Sarojini away from Hyderabad. The romance of a new country would surely make her forget her love for a young doctor. Sarojini sailed for England in September, 1895, for further studies.

## 6 *Abroad*

Sarojini started her University studies at King's College, London. Later she went to Girton College, Cambridge. But the lecture room seemed to oppress Sarojini's romantic spirit. The beautiful countryside beckoned to her, and often she played truant and did not attend lectures. It was from this association with the English countryside that she developed her poetry, choosing as her subjects the flowers and birds and village life of England.

Soon, Sarojini was introduced to the renowned critic Edmund Gosse. He describes his first meeting with Sarojini and his subsequent influence on her as follows: "When Sarojini Chattopadhyaya—as she then was—first made her appearance in London, she was a child of sixteen years, but as unlike the usual English maiden of that age as a lotus or a cactus is unlike a lily of the valley. She was already marvellous in mental maturity, amazingly well-read, and far beyond a Western child in all her acquaintance with the world."<sup>20</sup>

Edmund Gosse explained that "by some accident" Sarojini was introduced to his house and soon became one of the "most welcome and intimate" of guests. Actually it was one of Sarojini's fellow students who took her to Edmund Gosse in order to give her a chance to meet one of the leading figures on the English literary scene. He entreated Sarojini to allow him to see her verse, and a bundle of MSS was one day reluctantly and shyly thrust into his hands. As soon as he was alone, he began to peruse the verses and was both disappointed and embarrassed. "The verses which Sarojini had entrusted to me were skilful in form, correct in grammar and blameless in sentiment, but they had the disadvantage of being totally without individuality. They were Western in feeling and in imagery, they were founded on reminiscences of Tennyson and Shelley; I am not sure that they did not even

<sup>20</sup> *The Bird of Time*, by Sarojini Naidu, William Heinemann, London, 1912, p. 3.

breathe an atmosphere of Christian resignation. I laid them down in despair; this was but the note of the mocking bird with a vengeance.”<sup>21</sup>

But Mr. Gosse did not wish to “daunt the charming and precocious singer by so discouraging a judgment.” He thought of her youth and enthusiasm and decided to speak to her. He advised that all her poetry in the “falsely English vein”, should be consigned to the waste paper basket. She had no doubt mastered the English language and the “prosody of the West.” But he made it clear to her that what was needed was not a “rechauffé of Anglo-Saxon sentiment in an Anglo-Saxon setting, but some revelation of the heart of India, some sincere penetrating analysis of native passion of the principles of antique religion and of such mysterious intimations as stirred the soul of the East long before the West had begun to dream that it had a soul.” Gosse beseeched Sarojini not to write of English robins and skylarks and of “village bells” calling “parishioners to church”, but to “set her poems firmly among the mountains, the gardens, the temples, to introduce to us the vivid populations of her own voluptuous and unfamiliar province; in other words, to be a genuine Indian poet of the Decan, not a clever machine-made imitator of the English classics.”<sup>22</sup>

Sarojini immediately accepted his advice with the “docility and the rapid appreciation of genius.” She started writing verse with an exclusive Indian background, and the success of her books, published in 1905, 1912 and 1917, are only too well known; she gave Edmund Gosse the credit.

Sarojini now became so absorbed in poetry, and her homesickness increased so alarmingly, that her health broke down and she achieved no academic distinctions at King’s College or at Girton. Her mind frolicked with the clouds and the spring and summer haze; but her soul was sad and here “she burnt the dear dreams that are dead.” In a forest she sought rest and escape; for outside there was the “war of the world and the strife of the throng.”

At this time, Sarojini refers to her favourite philosophy: “We will conquer the sorrow of life with the sorrow of song.” Always, this ecstasy of singing remained as a standby, but tinged with

<sup>21</sup> *The Bird of Time*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

a secret longing she could not satisfy. Later, when the poem *In the Forest* was published, the *Indian Social Reformer* commented: "Mrs. Sarojini Naidu's lines, *In the Forest* are full of poetic beauty. It would seem as though we are at last to have a successor to Toru Dutt. The haunting pathos of these exquisite lines belong only to one whom nature has endowed with the 'vision and the faculty divine.'" <sup>23</sup>

And thus Sarojini sang away her days in England, fretting and longing no doubt to be with one from whom she had been separated, and with her parents. Her early poems written in England always tended to be escapist. In the magic wood of sleep she saw visions of Love and Peace and Truth, and in a song written in the woodlands of Girton in November 1896, Sarojini's heart was sad, "for its dreams like the fluttering leaves" had vanished and why should she remain behind?

Then again, in a poem written to the students of Girton College in 1896, she exclaimed: "Children, ye have not lived!" She was certain that some resistless hours would wake their hearts "to hunger after love". And so much in love was Sarojini at the time that she called out to love, "like the magic of wild melodies, let thy soul answer mine across the seas."

While in Cambridge, the young poetess was to meet her other great friend and critic, Arthur Symons; as she impressed Gosse, Symons too was enthralled by this child of the mystic East who could not only write verse but possessed the joyful gift of laughter. Sarojini also met members of the Rhymers' Club who further influenced her and made her understand "the verbal and technical accomplishment, the mastery of phrase and rhythm" of English verse, without which she could not have translated her visions and experiences into melodious poetry.

She had such large black eyes that often her friends in England noticed only these luminous lotus pools in her fragile sensitive face. "She was dressed always in clinging dresses of Eastern silk, and as she was so small, and her long black hair hung straight down her back, you might have taken her for a child. She spoke little, and in a low voice, like gentle music; and she seemed, wherever she was, to be alone," remarked Arthur Symons. <sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in *The Indian Ladies' Magazine*, August 1901.

<sup>24</sup> *The Golden Threshold*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

Sarojini's health soon completely broke down in England. Some biographers even suggest that she suffered a slight nervous breakdown, and though she was known "never to be unhappy" illness soon overcame her ardour, and Sarojini had to leave the damp climate of England and go to Switzerland. Here she delighted in the mountain air; but went on to Italy, a country which completely enthralled her. "Is this a country of men or of Gods?" she asked. "Is this earth or heaven?" and she wrote: "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.' I long to catch the subtle music of their fairy dances and make a poem with a rhythm like the quick irregular wild flash of their sudden movements. Would it not be wonderful? One black night I stood in a garden with fireflies in my hair like darting restless stars caught in a mesh of darkness. It gave me a strange sensation, as if I were not human at all, but an elfin spirit."<sup>25</sup>

Sarojini's "wild free" nature found more joy in Italy than in England. In Florence, she was overcome with the beauty of the country and cried: "God! how beautiful it is, and how glad I am that I am alive today!" Arthur Symons says that he was told by her that she was drinking in the beauty like, "wine, golden and scented, and shining, fit for the gods; and the gods have drunk it, the dead gods of Etruria, two thousand years ago. Did I say dead? No, for the gods are immortal, and one might still find them loitering in some solitary dell on the grey hillsides of Fiesole. Have I seen them? Yes, looking with dreaming eyes, I have found them sitting under the olives, in their grave, strong, antique beauty—Etruscan Gods!"<sup>26</sup>

She was much impressed by the women and while in the Cascine she writes: "The beautiful worldly women of the West, taking the air so consciously attractive in their brilliant toilettes, in the brilliant coquetry of their manners" are a "little incomprehensible." They are "profound artists in all the subtle intricacies of fascination," but were these "incalculable frivolities and vanities and coqueries and caprices" an essential part of their charm? They in their turn were overcome with the presence of this dream girl of

<sup>25</sup> *The Golden Threshold*, *op. cit.*, pp. 20, 21.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21, 22.

the East. They fluttered about her, "petting her as if she were a nice child, a child or a toy," not dreaming that she was saying to herself sorrowfully: "How utterly empty their lives must be of all spiritual beauty *if* they are nothing more than they appear to be."<sup>27</sup>

So "Sarojini sat in our midst, and judged us," remarked Arthur Symons, and few knew what was passing behind that face like "an awakening soul," to use one of her own epithets. Her eyes were like deep pools, and you seemed to fall through them into depths below depths." She seemed to have exercised a magic spell over her European friends. Symons felt that "this child of seventeen" seemed to exist on "large draughts of intellectual day." She was wise and would listen to the "troubles and agitations" of others as if she was "a wise old woman." She possessed a "passionate tranquillity of mind, before which everything mean and trivial and temporary caught fire and burnt away in smoke."<sup>28</sup> She seemed to have been the natural offspring of ancestors who had not only been great scholars but who were said to have practised yoga and drunk deep of the mystic lore of wise Indian sages. Symons says of Sarojini: "And along with this wisdom, as of age or of the age of the race, there was what I can hardly call less than an agony of sensation." She was transported by "pain or pleasure," and these feelings might have been "held in a flower's cup or the imagined frown of a friend." In fact, Sarojini's intensely passionate nature, her laughter and sadness, her "strange wisdom", her sympathy for others, caused more than a sensation abroad. She was a mystic child of the East who cast an unforgettable and profound spell on the western world.

## 7 *Marriage*

Sarojini Chattopadhyaya returned to India in September 1898, and married Dr. Govindarajulu Naidu in December the same year. Her love for him had never waned during those three years abroad, when it was hoped she would have forgotten what every-

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>28</sup> *The Golden Threshold*, *op. cit.*, pp. 16, 17.

one thought was a childish passion. It had proved as steadfast as the Northern Star.

Dr. Naidu was in every way an eligible husband for the young nightingale. He was the son of a Military Doctor and he had been married at the age of eighteen to a very young girl and had lost her in less than a year. He had then been sent to England for medical studies and had returned a successful Doctor. He soon proved to be invaluable in the service of the Nizam's Government and built himself a highly respectable name. His love for Sarojini was deep and sincere, and his regard for her had not changed at all during the three years of separation. No one could stop the marriage and it became a landmark in the progress of social reform when intercaste marriages were almost unknown. Eighteen years earlier, when Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, a Konkanasth Chitpawan Brahmin had married a Bengali Kyastha, a furore had been created. When Sarojini married, no such open opposition was voiced, except that the socio-traditional structure of Bengal and the South was slightly shaken. But Sarojini's marriage with Dr. Naidu laid the foundation for intercaste and interprovincial marriages.

The question arose as to how the bride and bridegroom, of two different castes, could be united. Fortunately, Keshab Chandra Sen had introduced the Brahm<sup>o</sup> Marriages Bill which was passed through his own efforts on March 19, 1872 (Act III of 1872 which legalized Brahm<sup>o</sup> marriages). It allowed a civil marriage between two Indians regardless of caste. But both the parties had to deny that they were Hindu, Mohammedan, Christian, Parsee, Buddhist, Sikh or Jain. It was under this Act that Dr. Govindarajulu Naidu, M.B.C.M. (Edin.), Medical Officer to His Highness the Nizam's Imperial Service Troops, was married to Sarojini Chattopadhyaya, on December 2, 1898. The Act of 1872 had been introduced in Hyderabad as one of Aghorenath's efforts to bring about reform and break up caste prejudices. Little did he imagine, perhaps, that his own daughter would be among the first to be married under this form of civil registration.

An interesting account of the wedding which took place actually in Madras, appeared in an Indian newspaper: "Mrs. Ram Mohan Roy, a Brahm<sup>o</sup> lady of culture and refinement, acted as the bridesmaid and added grace and beauty to the solemnity of the occasion.

The ceremony opened with a prayer by Mr. S. Somasundaram Pillai, B.A.; and after the prescribed rituals had been gone through, Rao Bahadur Pandit Veerasalingam Pantulu Guru<sup>29</sup> officiated as the Minister for the sacred occasion. After the Minister's charge to the happy couple regarding the responsibilities of life, Dr. Aghorenath gave away the bride and united the pair in holy wedlock in due form, the marriage being solemnized in the presence of Mr. F. D. Bird, the Registrar of Marriages of Madras Town. Rao Bahadur Pandit Veerasalingam Pantulu Guru then pronounced the benediction. Before the several guests dispersed, some refreshments were served and partaken with great cheers amidst toasts and replies in perfect harmony without any distinction of caste. During the short time they spent in the Brahma Mandir the couple received the congratulations of all friends present and drove off to the Capper House Hotel, where Dr. Govindarajulu Naidu had been staying.

"This interesting event must be regarded as unique in many respects, and as marking an epoch in the history of the reform movement in this country. The bridegroom belongs to the Balija community, whereas the bride is a Brahman by birth; the former is a Madrasi, whereas the later is a Bengali; and both are England returned Hindus. Dr. Govindarajulu Naidu, M.B.C.M., completed his medical course in England, and his wife, a Matriculate of the Madras University, spent a couple of years there to receive higher education."<sup>30</sup>

Sarojini, as a young bride of nineteen settled down happily in Hyderabad and created a unique home for Major Naidu. Four children were born to her, Jaya Surya (1901), Padmaja (1902), Ranadhira (1903), and Leilamani (1904). Her home was full of the laughter of children and love, and near her dwelt her parents. No one could have been happier than this young poetic mother. She wrote a poem, *Tō My Children* which was published in *The Golden Threshold* in 1905. Her eldest son, Jaya Surya aged four,

<sup>29</sup> Pandit Veerasalingam Pantulu was a leading reformer of South India, somewhat in the category of Keshab Chandra Sen of Bengal. The Pandit and his wife were renowned for their broad and tolerant views and for the great social services they rendered to India.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in *Wrongs of Indian Womanhood*, by Mrs. Marcus B. Fuller, Oliphant Anderson and Ferrier 1900, London and Edinburgh, pp. 219, 220.

was the "Sun of Victory" who was to be the "Sun of Song and Liberty", Padmaja, aged three was the "Lotus Maiden" who could claim all the sweetness of her name, Ranadhira, aged two, was the "Little Lord of Battle", who would be "Lord of Love and Chivalry" and Leilamani, aged one, was the "Limpid Jewel of Delight". Sarojini led a blissfully contented life in Hyderabad. Her joy was all the greater, as her husband realized her genius, not only as a poet but as an orator. He allowed her freely to develop both these talents, for despite revelling in her home life, there seemed to have been longings within her which she could not satisfy, and for which she was compelled to have an outlet. Her ill health curbed her exuberance to a great extent and therefore there were always the joy and the pain, the ecstasy and the tears, the glad lyrics and the sad dirges in her poetry and life. Ill health was her greatest handicap and in the quiet solitude of her inmost being, she gave herself a thought of self pity at times, though outwardly she seldom revealed this.

There was an unquenchable longing which Sarojini always possessed—a thirst which seemed at times to parch her soul. Was it the dreaming of a genius for truth and a glimpse of heaven? Was it a craving for a love which a mere human being could not satisfy? Sarojini, in the midst of her married happiness realized that the shades of immortality which she felt as a child had vanished to a certain extent. The time when "earth, and every common sight" seemed "apparelled in celestial light, the glory and the freshness of a dream" had passed, and the "things which she had seen she could now see no more"; but she was always striving to find this glory and celestial light, even in the midst of mundane domestic and political activities. With marriage and the pain and pleasure of love fulfilled, of motherhood, and the pride of house-keeping, had also come the disillusionments and anxieties which anyone who chooses to take up the responsibilities of a housewife must experience. At this time also, Sarojini felt the longing to serve her country and only those who have undertaken the arduous task of serving humanity and the home can realize the tremendous courage that is needed to adjust a private and public life, to reconcile oneself to service outside the domestic walls without feeling qualms of anxiety and even guilt. Most women succumb to these anxieties and feelings of duty and stay "rustically at home". But Sarojini

knew something more was needed, and she braved public opinion and private fears and shouldered her burdens, which were beginning to crowd in upon her at this time, with great courage. She had something to give to India, and she gave it.

Writing to Arthur Symons, she says: "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!'" And she writes again, "I too have learnt the subtle philosophy of living from moment to moment. Yes, it is a subtle philosophy though it appears merely an epicurean doctrine; 'Eat, drink and be merry, for to-morrow we die!' I have gone through so many yesterdays when I strove with Death that I realised to its full the wisdom of that sentence that it is to me not merely a figure of speech, but a literal fact. And tomorrow I might die. It is scarcely two months since I came back from the grave; is it worthwhile to be anything but radiantly glad? Of all things that perhaps life or my temperament has given me I prize the gift of laughter as beyond price."<sup>31</sup>

Soon after her marriage, Sarojini seemed to have evolved a philosophy which she followed all her life. This was to serve others with all her strength, to be able to face the hardest and most difficult situations with courage and conviction, to be prepared to live in utter simplicity if the need so arose; but always to be a living example of a well-dressed happy woman, exulting in the colour and glory and even a few of the luxuries which life may afford, and ever to steal glimpses of a poet's world of fantasy and to see the "angel faces smile."

Sarojini in her home was a gracious hostess, for ever welcoming her friends with deep warmth and love. Margaret E. Cousins once visited Sarojini's Hyderabad home in 1916. She writes: "I well remember the delightful scene of coolness and culture that greeted my jaded senses as I entered her beautiful drawing room, where the perfection of artistic taste had known how to combine the rich effects of eastern colour in carpets and crafts with the comfort of western lounges and modern conveniences. And here there were tall vases or wide bowls full of the most beautiful white

<sup>31</sup> *The Golden Threshold, op. cit., pp. 19, 20.*

lotuses I had ever seen." Sarojini was ill and in bed. Mrs. Cousins was however astonished that from her bedroom so much work was done and that sickness did not quench her ardent desire for service.<sup>32</sup>

## 8 *A Poet's Fancy*

During the first few years of her married life, Sarojini lived in a world steeped in romance and indulged in flights of fancy which led her into fantastic worlds of idealism. She was at this time almost a mystic, seeing visions of splendour in halls of gold, but also, often and paradoxically, despairing of an inner joy. Always there was a longing, a desire for something higher than what the world could give. Her ivory tower was draped in purple and gold. But a young woman looked out of the trellized window—wanting what? "Dwelling in the midst of those to whom the oppulent loveliness of this earth is an ultimate end, all the sweeter for a knowledge of its perishable charm, and the delights of this material world with its dramatic experiences, a satisfying ideal all the dearer for a consciousness of its evanescent quality, she was forever possessed by an intolerable desire to penetrate to the hidden eternity at the core of the most trivial accidents of human destiny, the most fleeting moment of the radiant and mutable world." These words, written by Sarojini of Nilambuja, may well apply to herself.

In a *Fantasy of a Poet's Mood*, a delicate prose poem called *Nilambuja*, Sarojini weaves a pattern of colours and ideals around a young girl, "a lyric child standing in the desert of her own lonely temperament." This woman walked "alone on the shores of a lake that shone like a great fire opal in its ring of onyx-coloured hills." She moved in "slumbrous rhythm," in perfect time with the "cadence of the waters."

The figure was "strangely attractive", and embodied all the colour and beauty enfolded in the heart of a girl who sought the world beyond, "till she caught from their inaccessible fires the soaring flame of a manifold enthusiasm, a myriad-hearted passion

<sup>32</sup> *The Awakening of Asian Womanhood, op. cit.*, pp. 116, 117.

for humanity, for knowledge, for life, above all, for the eternal beauty of the universe." Here was Sarojini Naidu herself, a girl of twenty-three, married four years, a proud mother, a happy wife, enriched with the exotic fragrance of life in England, Switzerland, and Italy, back home to serve and sing. Here was a bud blossoming into flower, its petals opening their delicate beauty to the warm glow of the golden sun. Sarojini, in this lovely early fantasy of hers, was voicing her own dreams, hopes and ambitions. "Thenceforth she had moved in the shadow of a perpetual mystery, consumed with a deep intellectual hunger, an unquenchable spiritual thirst, for ever seeking the ecstasy of Beauty in the voice of the winds and the waters, in the ethereal glory of dawn upon the mountains, in the uttered souls of poets and prophets, the dreamers and teachers of all ages and every race."

Nilambuja could well be Sarojini herself just stepping out into the world. Her background of life in Hyderabad is painted in all its glory; the gold and silver and colour of a society which indulged in a purdah world, of palaces and luxurious homes, of bright sunshine, the songs of birds, the scarlet and rose and orange of blossom-laden gardens and the vistas of ambitions, dreams and programmes of active constructive work. Nilambuja saunters along the shores of a lake. She is beautiful, her lovely eyes flashing from "a sensitive oval face", revealing the "lyric soul within." In true South Indian style, the black tresses of her hair are coiled about the nape of her neck, enfolding "a faint odour of incense fumes" and "wreathed with sprays of newly opened passion flowers." Her throat is enclosed with the "dusky fire of amethysts", and "the sombre flame of her purple draperies embroidered in threads of many coloured silk and silver", accentuate perfectly "the golden hues, so luminously pale, of her warm, brown flesh." Could any picture be more glamorously oriental, almost cloying and too exotic for the normal world? One wants to drink deep of the intoxicating wine of Sarojini's words and when one has imbibed the rich potion one feels like swooning in delightful dreams.

Nilambuja walks on alone. She leaves the shore of the lake and threads her way through a garden—"a shadowy fantasy among its winding shadows." She enters a courtyard "of oleanders and pomegranate trees." Here she is in the familiar world of the Purdah Nashin. The hall is dimly illuminated with lamps made of "wicks

steeped in copper vessels of sandal oil". The girl pauses and a smile of pleasure pierces "the rapt spirituality of her face." She sees a group of girls lounging about in "raiment of gold and scarlet and green". Some are embroidering fabrics of "amoral mist", others lie back on cushions crushing spices between their teeth, others sing love songs. A typical picture is drawn here of a familiar woman's world so common in the princely India of the early Twentieth Century. Nilambuja is welcomed, but after loitering for a second to play with the pigeons she passes on up a corridor to her own room leaving the luxurious hall of women behind. The others wonder why she does not dally with them; but she is so "inexplicably removed from their flower-like existence." She opens the windows of her room which are hung with draperies of purple and gold, the doorways decorated with "lilac-tinted lotus buds." Torches illuminate the dim recesses with their flames, incense filling the room with "cerulean smoke." Ornaments of ivory and "fretted silver" gleam from dim recesses. Like a shrine dedicated to "a goddess of mystery and dreams", the room is apart, away from the turmoil and human contact of the rest of the dwelling.

"The dreamer" stands alone. Here is her temple of dreams. She leans out into the darkness. She tries for expression, the memories of her childhood pursuing her. The souls of poets and prophets, of dreamers and teachers suffuse her. Dwelling in a material world, she forever possesses "an intolerable desire to penetrate to the hidden eternity at the core of the most trivial accidents of human destiny, the most fleeting moment of this radiant and mutable world."

Her childhood, though ardent, has vanished, and now here stands a "lyric woman." She longs for love and life mingled with the "urgent and ultimate need of the poet-soul for a perfect sympathy with its incommunicable vision, its subtle and inexpressible thought."

Nilambuja listens to the laughter below—the music and revels. She pauses and smiles a smile that has in it "the profound sadness of invisible tears." She has lost count of the passing years and has withdrawn into the "loneliness of her soul's ecstasy for beauty." "And the dreamer so insatiable for immortality, a woman full of tender mortal wants"; weeps for her "unfulfilled inheritance of joy."

## 9 *Hyderabad*

Life in the city of Hyderabad formed the colourful and oriental background for Sarojini Naidu's poems. When Edmund Gosse advised Sarojini to stop writing about things English and to concentrate instead on her own country, she chose Hyderabad and Secunderabad, with their picturesque Hindu-Islam culture, as subjects ideal for lyrical portraiture. Only those who have lived in these twin cities can realize the deep charm and fascination of these once princely towns. Here was the Char Minar, here sparkled the wide expanses of the Hussein and Ganga Sagars, here reposed the Victoria Garden, the Salar Jang Museum and countless ancient monuments. The little river, Musi, gurgled through the city and half a dozen bridges spanned its quiet flowing waters. The Tombs of Golkonda revived memories of romantic heroes and heroines and Sarojini loved the city and its environs with all the passion of her young and poetic nature. Even the Nizam was a glamorous prince, to whom she presented a poem at a Durbar held at the time of Ramzan.

Her verses open a window onto the life of this fascinating city where gardens bloomed with her favourite flowers, the Champa the Gulmohar and the Asoka, and where palace halls were filled with incense and inlaid with gold and precious stones.

Sarojini adored the Mussalman culture of her home town where "the tradition of Islam has truly been carried out for two hundred years, that tradition of democracy that knows how out of its legislation to give equal rights and privileges to all communities whose destinies it controls." On another occasion she says: "The first accents I heard were in the tongue of the Amir of Kusru. All my early associations were formed with the Mussalman men and Mussalman women of my city. My first playmates were Mussalman children." She steeped herself in Islamic poetry and culture.

"What is there so beautiful in all the wide and manifold realms of literature as that immortal lyric of Rumi?" she asked. She found the "lyric genius of Islam" here. Sarojini could never drink deep enough of the beauty of Hyderabad, set like a priceless gem,

uniting Hindu and Moslem, in the heart of India. How she loved her birthplace. She exclaimed:

“See how the speckled sky burns like a pigeon’s throat  
 Jewelled with embers of opal and peridote.  
 See the white river that flashes and scintillates,  
 Curved like a tusk from the mouth of the city gates.”<sup>33</sup>

This river was the Musi, and over its romantic domain one must

“Hark, from the minaret, how the Muezzin’s call  
 Floats like a battle-flag over the city wall.”

And among the minarets and domes were the “trellised balconies, languid and luminous” from which faces gleamed, “veiled in a splendour voluminous.” On the streets the “leisurely elephants” wound their way “swinging their silver bells hung from their silver chains”. Gay cavalcades paraded around the Char Minar, blending “with the music of cymbals and serenades” and night fell over the city bridge, “majestical, borne like a queen to a sumptuous festival.” Here in the midst of this charm and beauty, Sarojini built her home, “the Golden Threshold”, which today is a hotel, and no longer the romantic abode which so many have praised.

The Golden Threshold, when Sarojini made her home there after her marriage, was a cosy shelter to which she returned often with relief from her arduous travels. Here she found solace and comfort and the security of her gentle Doctor-husband, Major Govindarajulu Naidu. In the verandah, as is the custom in many South Indian homes, hung a swing, and within, the songs of caged birds mingled with the chants of bulbul and koel without. How Sarojini loved her home! Writing to her great friend Jawaharlal Nehru before she became Congress President in 1925 she says: “I am writing from The Golden Threshold sitting on my own carved blackwood couch with Ras Taffari, Pavo Nourmi, Nicolo Pissano and Dik Dik Mahjong—the four-footed rulers of the house luxuriously stretched all around me.”<sup>34</sup> Outside, the “sun

<sup>33</sup> *Night fall in the city of Hyderabad, The Golden Threshold*, p. 90.

<sup>34</sup> *A Bunch of Old Letters*. Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1958, p. 42.

birds and honeybirds” chanted their songs, and the flaming Gulmohars and Scarlet Roses were in bloom. What a world of love and beauty!

Then again, the lovely suburbs of Hyderabad forever fascinated Sarojini, who revelled so much in the historic past. Let us follow her to the royal tombs of Golkonda: Here she mused and her “dreaming spirit” heard “across the wind’s unquiet tides, the glimmering music of clashing spears” and “the laughter of royal brides.” Centuries could not destroy these strongholds of kings, while each new year the bulbuls sang “their songs of renascent loves”. Aghorenath loved to take visitors to Golkonda, and his daughter Sarojini often acted as guide if he could not go himself. Once, he proudly showed a Bengali family a poem scribbled on an immortal wall of the famous tombs by Sarojini when she was only nine—a poem so mature that the guests exclaimed in wonder at the genius of the child. This family long remembered the courtesy and hospitality shown by Aghorenath and his family and by Sarojini and her husband when they visited Hyderabad in the first decade of the twentieth century. After a lapse of half a century, Mrs. R. C. Gupta, who was a girl at the time, and one of the party who had visited the Chattopadhyayas and Naidus, exclaimed with enthusiasm: “You must always remember one thing—that the Chattopadhyayas were simple.”

“Simple, cultured and generous,” I said.

“The whole world knew that they were cultured and generous,” she remarked, “but few knew how simple they were. Despite all their learning and popularity they were most simple. There was that grand old man heavily bearded, with his black Nizam’s cap—looking so much like a Moslem that when he first came in to greet us, I really thought he was one—welcoming us to his lovely, simple home. And he told me: ‘I am making gold.’” So Aghorenath’s passion for alchemy was no secret. He told one and all about his hobby.

And the purdah world—how Sarojini, despite all her efforts to break this tragic wrong meted out to women, loved the pulsing fertile energy of the women who dwelt in their fairy palaces like orchids in hot houses. Indeed, almost all the women and girls Sarojini depicts in her lyrics lived in a world within a world. It was from such a realm that she found the woman who swayed

“like a flower in the wind of a song.” Here, there was a romantic glamour that few who lived outside could ever fathom. Here, women revelled in their own beauty and thought nothing of saying so:

“When from my cheek I lift my veil,  
The roses turn with envy pale.”

This was the comment of Princess Zeb-un-nissa in praise of her own beauty. Sarojini’s queen Gulnar “sat on her ivory bed” and “around her countless treasures were spread”, while the Purdah Nashin lived her life as in a “revolving dream”, sheltered

“From thieving light of eyes impure,  
From coveting sun or wind’s caress,”

Here lived the women behind the veil, “guarded and secure” behind “carven lattices.”

It was in a world of sheltered oriental splendour, as described again and again in her poems and speeches, that Sarojini dwelt when she stayed at home in Hyderabad, though she was as free as the wind itself to wander where she pleased. The world of Hyderabad was particularly beautiful, for the Purdah Nashins of pure Persian origin, with their delicate beauty and fair transparent skins were a delight to Sarojini’s eyes. They gathered at purdah parties and in their homes dressed in gorgeous raiment, carrying filigreed *pan* boxes in their henna-tinted hands. Their eyes sparkled, vying with diamonds and the scent of flowers and perfume exotic, heavy, filled an already incense-laden room. Those of us who have tasted of the doubtful charm of this lost world cannot find its equivalent today. That realm of sequestered beauty has disappeared with the veil of time, never to return, and while one is thankful that women like Sarojini Naidu fought for the freedom of women and won it, one also regrets, rather wistfully perhaps, that one can never again see that world in which Sarojini Naidu so often revelled, though she frankly criticized its useless existence and inertia. Always, however, she felt a longing for this purdah world. When she broke away from it and entered the arena of political reality, she wrote:

“Therein I treasure the spice and scent  
 Of rich and passionate memories blent  
 Like odours of cinnamon, sandal and clove,  
 Of song and sorrow and life and love.”

Did Sarojini Naidu exult in two forms of existence? One in the glare and turmoil of political agitations, youth movements, and women’s emancipation, and the other in the sweet-scented, heavily-curtained drawing rooms of a secret woman’s world?

There was sorrow too in this exquisite world in Hyderabad. Tragedies of young loves shattered, of death and pain! But whither have fled the women with their fingers tinted with henna which had been ground in “mortars of amber and gold”, red lips stained with the juice of pan, black tresses “gem-tangled”, standing on “trellised balconies”? Where are the languid and luminous faces? Foreign lipsticks and cosmetics and perfumes have superseded the oriental charms of henna and attar and incense. Dead are the queens and their followers and the paradoxically simple joys of a simple love and simpler faith. Life was luxurious, exquisite no doubt, but unsophisticated, single-hearted in purpose and sweetly romantic.

From the latticed balconies Sarojini often stepped out onto the street and asked the merchants what they sold. Before her enthralled gaze were displayed:

“Turbans of crimson and silver,  
 Tunics of purple brocade,  
 Mirrors with panels of amber  
 Daggers with handles of jade.”<sup>35</sup>

The vendors weighed out “saffron and lentil and rice” “sandalwood henna and spice”, and “chessmen and ivory dice” while the goldsmiths fashioned “wristlet and anklet and ring,” and “scabbards of gold for the king.” Fruitmen sold “citron, pomegranate, and plum”, musicians and magicians cast their spells upon the market place, while flower girls wove their garlands for the “brow of the bridegroom” and the bier of the dead.

One wonders how Sarojini ever spent so much time outside

<sup>35</sup> *In the Bazaars of Hyderabad, The Bird of Time*, p. 62.

this beloved haunt of hers in prisons and political camps, before crowded audiences and on boycotting campaigns. No wonder Sarojini wrote to Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru: "I wish you could share the delight—the real delight of being in Hyderabad boating on the Mir Alam, or lounging and loafing around and meeting the most cosmopolitan society in India, which needless to say, haunts The Golden Threshold even unto 4 generations. . . . Why don't you too go on strike and hide here?"<sup>36</sup> This was the world Sarojini sought often and found far too seldom when she was on her wanderings, and when she had stepped down from her ivory tower into the battle ground of politics and the freedom struggle; but when she was a young bride, it was all hers, though she soon cried out:

"Yet must I go where the loud world beckons,  
 And the urgent drum-beat of destiny calls,  
 Far from your white dome's luminous slumber,  
 Far from the dream of your forest walls,  
 Into the strife of the throng and the tumult,  
 The war of sweet Love against folly and wrong;  
 Where brave hearts carry the sword of battle  
 'Tis mine to carry the banner of song,

The solace of faith to the lips that falter  
 The succour of hope to the hands that fail,  
 The tidings of joy when Peace shall triumph,  
 When truth shall conquer and love prevail."<sup>37</sup>

## 10 *Early Fields of Service*

Sarojini's flight into the world of social service began at the turn of the century, when she felt an urge to look further afield than her home town. So far, after her return from abroad, she had been content to confine her energies to relief and social work in Hyderabad, but the urge to serve soon carried her away from home, even

<sup>36</sup> *A Bunch of Old Letters, op. cit.*, p. 43.

<sup>37</sup> *The Young Isle of Janjira, The Bird of Time, op. cit.*, pp. 79 and 80.

before her first child, Jaya Surya was born. By 1900, Sarojini was beginning to feel the call of the nation. There was much work ahead; she could not continue rustically at home. Her craving for travel—always a much loved hobby of hers—also tempted her to visit other parts of India, and one of her first journeys away from Hyderabad was to Bengal. Mrs. P. K. Sen (Sushama) remembers meeting her in 1900 in her grandfather, Ramesh Chandra Dutt's house, soon after this great poet-historian-reformer had presided over the Indian National Congress held at Lucknow in December, 1899. Sarojini came to him to show him her first verses, and also to recite some of them to him. She also wished to see Mr. Dutt's translation into English verse of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, which had been published in England. Mrs. P. K. Sen tells me that from that time she found a new sister in "Sarojinidi who was slim, with dark penetrating eyes—not really pretty, but very attractive."

Sarojini's activities from the beginning of the century took on a magnitude which only her energy could combat. Soon, she was seen in all parts of India, flitting hither and thither. In 1903, she went to Madras and delivered a lecture at a public meeting held under the auspices of the Historical Society at Pachaiyappa's College on "True Brotherhood." This subject obsessed her throughout her life, making her more an internationalist and a citizen of one world, than just a patriot.

One can picture Sarojini, a mere girl of twenty-four, slender, dark-eyed, facing her audience undismayed. She called on the students to establish unity and give up all provincial and communal feelings. Her beautiful voice reverberated through the crowded hall: "Having travelled, having conceived, having hoped, having enlarged my love, having widened my sympathies, having come into contact with different races, different communities, different religions, different civilisations, friends, my vision is clear. I have no prejudice of race, creed, caste or colour." Unity in every sense was essential to nationalism. She pleaded: "Until you students have acquired and mastered that spirit of brotherhood, do not believe it possible that you will ever cease to be sectarian—if I may use such a word—that you will ever be national." One wishes that Sarojini Naidu could be here today, to repeat such forceful words for the furtherance of Indian integration.

Sarojini had attended the Indian Social Conference a little before she delivered this lecture, and many resolutions had been passed on national integration. She hoped that ten years later such resolutions would not be necessary and that the whole country would be one. To broaden the mind and travel widely both abroad and in one's own country was one of her passions. To the students she cried: "If facilities come your way, travel; because the knowledge that comes from living in contact with men and minds, the inestimable culture that comes through interchange of ideas, can never be equalled and certainly not surpassed by that knowledge between the covers of text books." What would Sarojini say today when travel abroad is almost impossible because of exchange difficulties? Shelley advocated "liberty", Keats the "brotherhood of man", but there was no point in reading these things alone. "I say that it is not your pride that you are a Madrassite, that it is not your pride that you are a Brahmin, that it is not your pride that you belong to the South of India, that it is not your pride that you are a Hindu, but that it is your pride that you are an Indian."

But they had to go beyond India and extend their interest and love to the welfare of the world and not be limited and narrowly national, "because if the ideals be only for the prosperity of your country, it would end where it began, by being a profit to your own community and very probably to your own self."

Even a sweeper could be a patriot. "You can find in him a moralising spirit that can inspire your mind. There is not one of you who is so humble and so insignificant that can evade the duties that belong to you, that are predestined to you and which nobody but you can perform. Therefore each of you is bound to dedicate his life to the up-lifting of his country." Then she journeyed up along the east coast to Calcutta, and attended a large ladies' meeting at Bethune College at which the Maharani Gaekwar of Baroda presided. Sushama Sen remembers sitting next to her at the meeting. "Sarojini was to make one of her early speeches," she remarked. "She kept looking at her notes (later she never carried a paper and always spoke extempore) and she told me that she felt nervous. When she got up to speak all nervousness vanished; she spoke without consulting a paper for an hour, and took the house by storm—there was thunderous applause."

In December 1904 Sarojini Naidu journeyed to Bombay to attend the 18th Session of the Indian National Conference. Here she met most of the reformers and leading thinkers of the day. His Highness the Gaekwar of Baroda, The Hon'ble Mr. Justice Chandavarkar, Mr. C. Y. Chintamani and many others were present. Among the women was Ramabai Ranade, who later presided at a ladies' gathering held at Framji Cowasji Institute.

A great part of the deliberations of the main Conference was confined almost entirely to the emancipation of women, including such problems as women's education, the social status of women, polygamy, widow remarriage, child marriage, the purdah system and careers for women. At the ladies' gathering Ramabai Ranade made an illuminating speech on the status of women, of the various tasks they had before them to help their sisters to overcome the shackling customs which bound them down to outworn traditions. She beseeched women to visit local hospitals and help the women patients, to plead for the increase of girls' schools and the raising of standards of living and to start Orphanages and Homes. Here was a pioneer woman standing before Sarojini Naidu, herself ardent and straining at the reins like a young charger ready to start her career of work. Though Sarojini seemed to have been silent at this particular meeting in Bombay she recited a patriotic poem—*Ode to India*—which was highly appreciated. One can imagine the rapt attention of the ladies as they listened to this young woman standing before them, her deep black eyes resting on the shy faces of the purdah audience before her, and reciting:

“O young through all the immemorial years!  
Rise Mother, rise, regenerate from thy gloom,  
And like a bride high-mated with the spheres,  
Beget new glories from thine ageless womb.

The nations that in fettered darkness weep,  
Crave thee to lead them where great mornings break,  
Mother, O Mother, wherefore dost thou sleep?  
Arise and answer for thy children's sake!

Thy future calls thee with a manifold sound  
To crescent honours, splendours, victories vast;

Waken, O slumbering Mother, and be crowned,  
Who once wert empress of the sovereign past."

Very soon, because of her keen social consciousness, and her dynamic energy and desire to right all wrongs, Sarojini Naidu became a leader of Indian women, and at that time, in the first decade of the twentieth century, when the position of Indian women was anything but happy, Sarojini, with her brilliant oratory and poetry, caused a stir and upheaval which resounded throughout India.

Her knowledge of ancient India was profound enough to compare old and new conditions. She addressed gatherings of men, strongly pleading with them to give their wives the freedom which was their birthright and which they possessed in ancient India. Women and men must complement each other. Women must help men and be their companions. In this respect, Sarojini Naidu really founded the Women's Movement, in India, as an institution. Hitherto, individuals like Pandita Ramabai, Ramabai Ranade and others had fought for the same cause; but they had not organized a national Women's Movement as Sarojini Naidu had, a movement which soon gathered so much momentum that even the Statutory Commission later admitted that "the women's movement in India holds the key to progress, and the results it may achieve are incalculably great."

Sarojini's activities soon became "a great social force" in the country. An Englishman writing of women in India remarked: "She now lives in Hyderabad, the great veiled city, where the women behind the purdah are scholars in Persian and Arabic, besides being well-read in the best literature of the East. Here Mrs. Naidu holds a unique position, as a link between the English and Indian social elements . . . she lives in a city where poetry is in the air, surrounded by love, beauty and admiration, and her influence behind the purdah is very great."

It was not only in Hyderabad, but in all parts of India that Sarojini's voice was being heard reciting her own lyrical verses, and speaking as with the tongue of an angel electrifying audiences, creating a renaissance spirit and arousing national and international enthusiasm wherever she appeared. She was not only the "queen of society", sparkling in drawing room parties, her brilliant

repartee and sense of humour vying with the greatest queens in European courts; but she stood slender and beautiful before packed audiences, dark, animated eyes holding her listeners in their spell, her melodious voice calling them to service and to surrender their lives to humanity, the cause of universal brotherhood, and national freedom.

PART TWO

*The Rapture of Song*

To priests and to prophets  
The joy of their creeds,  
To kings and their cohorts  
The glory of deeds;  
And peace to the vanquished  
And hope to the strong . . .  
For me, O my Master,  
The rapture of song!

GUERDON

From: *The Bird of Time*



## I *The Golden Threshold*

By 1905, Sarojini had composed a number of poems which had appeared in various periodicals, both in England and India, and had been greatly appreciated. At last her friends and critics persuaded her to publish them in book form. Her first volume of poetry, *The Golden Threshold* (William Heinemann, London), was published in 1905. Arthur Symons introduced his young Indian friend to the English-speaking world and the book was dedicated to her other English friend and critic thus: "To Edmund Gosse, who first showed me the way to the Golden Threshold." The dates under the dedication are London, 1896 and Hyderabad, 1905.

Edmund Gosse himself, in his introduction to this book remarked: "Mrs. Naidu is, I believe, acknowledged to be the most accomplished living poet of India—at least of those who write in English, since what lyric wonders the native languages of that country may be producing I am not competent to say. But I do not think that any one questions the supreme place she holds among those Indians who choose to write in our tongue. Indeed, I am not disinclined to believe that she is the most brilliant, the most original, as well as the most correct, of all the natives of Hindustan who have written in English."<sup>1</sup> Edmund Gosse had previously introduced Toru Dutt to the western world and had also written an introduction to her book. He had remarked of her: "When the history of the literature of our country comes to be written, there is sure to be a page in it dedicated to this fragile exotic blossom of song." He much appreciated Toru Dutt and when he praised Sarojini Naidu with superlatives he must have kept Toru Dutt's beautiful verse in mind and yet given his unstinted praise to Sarojini. Did he think then, that Sarojini Naidu was the better poet of the two Indian women? As a lyrist Sarojini perhaps was the more pleasing, but did she reach beyond the lilt-music of her verse? Toru Dutt, though simple was more ma-

<sup>1</sup> *The Bird of Time*, *op. cit.*, pp. 1 and 2.

ture, even though she died at the early age of twenty-one. If she had lived longer, there is no knowing what poetic heights she may not have reached. But as Edmund Gosse himself pointed out, she would have been younger than any of the recognized European writers if she had lived. "The pathos of unshed tears, which we feel when we read of Joan of Arc, of Keats, of Chatterton, of Ophelia, extends to Toru Dutt, and her short life of ecstasy."

Sarojini Naidu, one feels, never matured into more "substantial poetry". Her verse was of the moment and slight. Few of her poems exceed the length of the short lyric, even though as a child she wrote long poems. Why did she not, in later life, develop this early frenzy and create more contemplative, substantial verse? Was it because she was caught up in the whirl of politics and service to her country too early? Poetry was by no means her only love, as it was Toru Dutt's. It was only the first part of her life which was dedicated to *The Rapture of Song*, song that was ephemeral, full of delicate music and exotic word pictures, very pretty and even beautiful. At times it reached a mystic quality and some of it was even included in an anthology of mystic English verse. Her first book, *The Golden Threshold* certainly took the English world by storm. Today, if Sarojini published her poetry it would in all probability not find a place among the post-war realistic verse which sells now. Nissim Ezekiel, in his review of her latest book of verse, *The Feather of the Dawn*,<sup>2</sup> remarked that "the English, encouraged by Edmund Gosse, granted her a season or two of favour and then dropped her irrevocably into oblivion."<sup>3</sup> But Sarojini lived for a much longer time in the hearts of her admirers, and until the publication of her third book, *The Broken Wing*, in 1917, she was very much in favour in the English critical world, as will be seen from some of the reviews of her first three books. Nissim Ezekiel also remarked: "It was Sarojini's ill-luck that she wrote at a time when English poetry had touched the rock bottom of sentimentality and technical poverty. By the time it recovered its health she had entered politics, abandoning the possibility of poetic development and maturity."<sup>4</sup> But without disparaging Sarojini's verse, I cannot help feeling that it was her good fortune that she did write in the first

<sup>2</sup> Asia Publishing House, 1961.

<sup>3</sup> & <sup>4</sup> *Sunday Standard*, February 11, 1962.

two decades of the twentieth century. In the weightier and more tragic post-war atmosphere, so sophisticated and cynical, Sarojini would hardly have made a mark.

It was Arthur Symons who suggested that Sarojini's poems should be collected and published. He said: "It is at my persuasion that these poems are now published. The earliest of them were read to me in London in 1896, when the writer was seventeen; the later ones were sent to me from India in 1904, when she was twenty-five, and they belong, I think, almost wholly to those two periods."<sup>5</sup>

The few years which Sarojini spent at home in Hyderabad, after which she commenced her arduous flights across the length and breadth of India to attend meetings and deliver speeches, were tinged with the romance of early married life, the love of motherhood and the enthusiasm of youthful patriotism.

Arthur Symons felt that the poems written up to 1905 possessed an "individual beauty of their own." He realized their intrinsic worth and wrote accordingly to Sarojini; but she hesitated to publish her poems for she was humble to the core: "Your letter made me very proud and very sad", she wrote. "Is it possible that I have written verses that are 'filled with beauty', and is it possible that you really think them worthy of being given to the world? You know how high my ideal of Art is; and to me my poor casual little poems seem to be less than beautiful—I mean with that final enduring beauty that I desire."<sup>6</sup>

In another letter to Arthur Symons, she wrote: "I am not a poet really. I have the vision and the desire, but not the voice. If I could write just one poem full of beauty and the spirit of greatness, I should be exultantly silent for ever; but I sing just as the birds do, and my songs are as ephemeral." But is Sarojini so "ephemeral"? The test of a classic writer is that he or she should be read and appreciated after a hundred years. Half the scheduled time has passed. Sarojini is still read, and a book of poems—*The Feather of the Dawn*—was recently published. There is also a constant demand for the republication of her full works. A volume published in America is out of print as also the *Spectre and the*

<sup>5</sup> *The Golden Threshold*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> *The Golden Threshold*, *op. cit.*, pp. 9 and 10.

*Flute*.<sup>7</sup> Even fifty years hence, Sarojini's poems, slight though they may be, will still be enjoyed. Is she a classic then? Perhaps not in the true weighty classical sense. But the "Nightingale of India," the *Bharat Kokila*, as Mahatma Gandhi christened her, will continue to sing in the voices of reciters for many more years to come.

It was astounding that so young a girl received such praise and yet remained simple, and unsophisticated. Sarojini's poems revealed the "Rare temperament of an Eastern woman who expressed herself through a Western medium. There was an Eastern magic in them."

Though critical of her poetic worth, Sarojini was nevertheless so intoxicated with the rhythm and romance of life, that lyrics sang in her mind and overflowed from her exotic and passionate nature into song. She wrote in 1904: "Do you know I have some very beautiful poems floating in the air, and if the gods are kind I shall cast my soul like a net and capture them this year. If the gods are kind—and grant me a little measure of health. It is all I need to make my life perfect."<sup>8</sup>

Arthur Symons felt that "it was the desire of beauty" that made her a poet. Her eyes "turned towards beauty as the sunflower turns towards the sun, opening wider and wider until one saw nothing but the eyes."<sup>9</sup>

According to him Sarojini had matured early and lived through "all a woman's life". There was, however, something else, something impersonal about her. Despite constant conflicts and great physical suffering, Sarojini could remain composed and possessed, "that fixed contemplation, as of Buddha on his lotus-throne."

But was Arthur Symons right in conceding "the peace of Buddha" to Sarojini? Her energy always kept her on the move, and one could not, under any circumstances, imagine her in composed reverie, still and quiet, smiling a message of Nirvana to the world. She herself, in *The Golden Threshold*, in the last poem, *To a Buddha Seated on a Lotus* said:

"For us the travail and the heat,

<sup>7</sup> Kitabistan, Allahabad, 1948.

<sup>8</sup> *The Golden Threshold*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

The broken secrets of our pride,  
 The strenuous lessons of defeat,  
 The flower deferred, the fruit denied;  
 But not the peace, supremely won,  
 Lord Buddha, on thy lotus throne."

And finally she pleaded:

"How shall we reach the great, unknown  
 Nirvana of thy lotus-throne?"

There was great turmoil always in Sarojini's heart and mind, for her interests were manifold; but she nevertheless did possess a calmness in the midst of the storm, and this tranquillity stood her in good stead in her troubles and toils as a Satyagrahi and in prison. There was in her more the wisdom of the ancient race she claimed to represent than in her own wisdom; but the two were always cleverly mingled. Her intensity of feeling and quicksilver attitude towards life mingled harmoniously with the calm of her ancient tradition.

## 2 *A Best Seller*

The moment *The Golden Threshold* was published in September 1905 in London, it became a best seller. The first edition was sold out before the end of the year and the second edition was immediately bought up. A journal entitled *Men and Women of India* remarked: "For over ten years, Sarojini's verses have been appearing in various periodicals, both English and Indian, among the latter *The Indian Ladies' Magazine*, our bright little Madras contemporary which had the proud privilege of presenting to the world for the first time some of the finest efforts of her (Sarojini Naidu's) muse." *The Indian Ladies' Magazine* was among the very first English journals for women in India and was edited by Sarojini Naidu's friend Kamala Sathianadhan, herself a pioneer Indian woman and the first woman graduate and M.A. of the South. Sarojini presented her with all her books of poems.

The London papers also went into raptures over the poems.

The London *Times* stated that Mr. Arthur Symons had made the acquaintance of this Hindu lady some years earlier, and quoted his introductory passages, commenting on her wisdom, passion and humour. "We find them all in her poems but chiefly remarkable, considering her nationality, is her passionate delight in the beauty of the sounds and the words of our tongue and the lilt of our measures. She revels in the swing of her verse. . . . Her poetry seems to sing itself, as if her swift thoughts and strong emotions sprang into lyrics of themselves. There are the same unity and spontaneity about such poems, as that 'to a Buddha Seated on a Lotus', in which her wisdom has play. . . . It is a far cry from that to her descriptive poems—motion and sight turned to music—or to the quaint and charming little songs to her four children. In this case the marriage of Western culture with the Eastern has not proved barren. It has given the poet new eyes with which to see old things. The result is something unique which we need not hesitate to call poetry."<sup>10</sup>

*The Manchester Guardian* had an equally glowing review: "It is a considerable delight to come across such genuine poetry as is contained in *The Golden Threshold*—by Sarojini Naidu. Its simplicity suggests Blake, it is always musical, its Eastern colour is fresh and its firm touch is quick and delicate."<sup>11</sup>

*The Review of Reviews* of October 1905 wrote: "Not for many months has there been so rich a harvest of poetry as that garnered during the last month. In the forefront I must place Sarojini Naidu's exquisitely musical collection of Oriental lyrics and poems. This little volume should silence forever the scoffer who declares that women cannot write poetry. . . . It seems remarkable that the writer of these remarkably fine verses is only 26 years of age. To read Miss E. T. Fowler's verses *Wise and Otherwise* after this Indian girl's songs is so great a contrast as to be hardly fair to the English writer whose poems seem pale in comparison. It is like passing from the gorgeous hues of the tropics to the stiff puniness of a suburban garden."<sup>12</sup>

*T.P.'s Weekly* announced: "A book of verse of undeniable beauty and distinction. . . . Sarojini Naidu's work is remarkable, opening a window through which the West may see the East if it will." *The Morning Post* said: "There are some small poems des-

<sup>10</sup>, <sup>11</sup> & <sup>12</sup> Quoted in *Men and Women of India*, May 1906.

cribing the daily life of the East which have an astonishing vividness. It is a rare art which gives the true effect of poetry in what is, after all, only the accurate statement of what the eyes have seen. . . . The book is one not merely of accomplishment, but beautiful verse, it is the expression of a temperament."<sup>13</sup> *The Academy* praised *The Golden Threshold* as a book "full of beauty. . . . What is as delightful as surprising in its individuality: a perfection of its own that owes little to anyone. . . . Not for a very long time have we seen a volume of poetry so full of promise and real achievement."<sup>14</sup>

Appreciations were also voiced in the *Athanaeum*, *Daily Chronicle*, *Spectator* and the *Saturday Review*, to mention but a few. Mme. Liza Lehmann, the renowned composer set fifteen of Sarojini's songs to music and intended to produce a cantata of all the songs in London. "A great honour, indeed to the youthful producer."

In India a tremendous stir in the world of Indo-English writing took place. "The World has expressed its admiration in no unstinted terms, of the exquisite beauty" of the poems in *The Golden Threshold* and "even the diffident poetess must be convinced that her act was far from indiscreet."<sup>15</sup>

By 1905, the "Nightingale of India" was well launched in her country and abroad and before long her songs reverberated throughout the length and breadth of India. Praise poured down on her from every part of the world. An Indian woman wrote: "The voice of Toru Dutt is hushed. Sarojini is charming us by her sweet lyrics."<sup>16</sup>

"Sarojini has a great horror of false sentiment and cant; she tries to keep away from all tinsel and glitter. None of those who read her poems can deny that they satisfy us in that respect. They ring true to the ear. Real inspiration is in much of her poetry; and there is scarcely one of her poems of which the technique and the rhythm and rhyme is not perfect. The thoughts are beautiful, the language is charming. We welcome this new volume with great interest and look forward to the reading of it with much pleasure."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> <sup>14</sup> & <sup>15</sup> Quoted in *Men and Women of India*, May 1906.

<sup>16</sup> *The Indian Ladies' Magazine*, September 1905.

<sup>17</sup> *The Indian Ladies' Magazine*, October 1905.

Already, however, Sarojini's ivory tower was being attacked by the varied interests of the world. Her country called her, the wails of wronged womanhood beseeched her to step down from her hidden world and help them, the youth of India urged her to give them a message of hope and courage, and Hindus and Moslems cried out for unity and brotherhood. How could she indulge in the mere singing of songs? And so she stepped down from her sanctuary cautiously and even reluctantly at first, for the power of the muse within her was strong as yet, and for another twelve years she reigned almost supreme as a songstress. The call of the downtrodden nation suffering in "fettered darkness" was too strong, however, and Sarojini felt she must serve her *Bharat Mata*, her Mother, and in agony she cried: "Mother, O Mother, wherefore dost thou sleep?" She would descend to the world of reality and wake her sleeping sisters!

Despite all the adulation and praise which flooded in, Sarojini still doubted her own poetic worth and was humble in assessing herself. She ever sought the criticism of her friends. In February 1906, she wrote the following letter to Ramesh Chandra Dutt, the man she admired so much:

Dear Mr. Dutt,

I don't know if you remember me at all, but I had the pleasure of meeting you several times in London, and I think you know my father, Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya. I believe this will be enough of a re-introduction for me to request that you will do me the honour to accept *The Golden Threshold* as the gift of a poet to a poet, and an Indian woman to one of the great men of modern India. I need scarcely tell you that if you can find time to read my little book how valuable your criticism would be to me.

I have been so fortunate as to win the generous approval of the leading English journals, and the book has just gone into a second edition. Will you be so good as to obtain for me permission of the Maharaja Gaekwar to send him a copy of *The Golden Threshold*. I had the honour of meeting him several times in Bombay last year.

Believe me.

Sincerely yours,  
Sarojini Naidu

Mr. Dutt presented Sarojini with a copy of his *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* in verse and she replied on March 25, 1906, from Hyderabad:

Dear Mr. Dutt,

I realise what a much finer, more lasting, more fruitful achievement it is to have made accessible to the world, in this splendid and noble version, the grandest epics of the centuries, than the tinkling little verses such as I had the audacity—it seems to me so now—to send you.

Believe me,

Sincerely yours,  
Sarojini Naidu<sup>18</sup>

### 3 *Early Speeches*

Sarojini Naidu ranks among the best speakers in English whom India has ever produced. She started her oratory early in life in the midst of domestic work, the bearing of children, and the writing of poetry.

Speaking at the anniversary of the Young Men's Literary Association at Guntur on July 5, 1915, Sarojini remarked: "Today, after fourteen years of speaking to young men and young women all over the country, I come to this centre of the Andhra Country to speak with the citizens of the Andhra Province."<sup>19</sup> According to her own words, therefore, Sarojini started public speaking when she was but a girl of twenty-two and about the time when her eldest child, Jaya Surya was born. Her early patriotism was no doubt enlivened by Gokhale's words to her at the age of twenty-three in 1902. He had told her: "Consecrate your life, your talent, your song, your speech, your thought, your charm, to the Motherland." She followed this advice implicitly in every way.

Sarojini had practised speaking from childhood. She used to gather her brothers and sisters around her even as a girl in her home, and stand on a chair and tell them stories while they sat around her, gaping and wonder-eyed at her beautiful flow of words and magic manner of rendering a story. Thus, she trained early for her public life.

<sup>18</sup> *Life and Work of Ramesh Chandra Dutt, C.I.E.* by J. N. Gupta, M.A., I.C.S. J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., London, 1911, p. 438.

<sup>19</sup> It is significant that Sarojini named an Andhra Province when no such State existed and the Telugus were still included as a part of the Madras Presidency. Today, an Andhra Pradesh State exists in Free India.

As her main subjects were national freedom, the emancipation of women, messages to the youth of India, and Hindu-Moslem unity, she was in great demand in all parts of India the moment it was realised that a young Indian girl with a golden voice was available. Sarojini concentrated mostly on these four subjects, which were the burning topics of the day.

She was heard speaking in Calcutta in 1905. At this time she met many of the future leaders of India and plunged into politics. She spoke against foreign rule and in favour of Hindu-Moslem unity and also championed the cause of peace and unity. Calcutta was, at the time, the centre of political activity, and Sarojini was fired with the patriotic zeal which prevailed in Bengal over the proposed partition of the province. This was the year when Lord Curzon had decided to carve Bengal into two, and the Bengalis were naturally indignant. They felt this move was deliberately meant to break up the unity of Bengal and to disrupt the solid front of opposition to the Government which was just beginning to be built up. The announcement regarding partition was made on August 7, 1905, and a mammoth meeting was called of the citizens of Calcutta to discuss the boycott of all foreign goods as a protest. Thus did the great Swadeshi movement start on October 16, 1905. (The Bengal Partition Bill had already been passed into law on September 29, 1905). The day was known as *Rakhi Bandhan* Day at the suggestion of Rabindranath Tagore. The coloured thread bound on the wrists of friends and relations was to be a symbol of unity and good wishes, binding together the Swadeshi fraternity, and also expressing its sorrow and opposition to Partition. It was a day of mourning and fasting. Meetings were held everywhere to overrule the splitting up of Bengal. British cloth was stacked in market places and burnt. Students abandoned schools and colleges and non-co-operated with the Calcutta University which was named *Golamkhana* or the factory to train slaves on the model of London city clerks. A small band started to organize a syllabus in courses of "national education" which resulted in the "National Council of Education of Bengal." National Proclamations were read at meetings pledging the boycott of foreign goods and opposition to partition. British prestige was openly flouted and police authority mocked. Surendranath Banerjea was named the leader of Bengal. Bengali lite-

rature developed and Bankim Chandra Chatterji's *Ananda Math*, written many years earlier was re-published and re-read and translated into English. The song *Bande Mataram* from the book became widely popular. The dramas of Dwijendra Lal Roy were acted and led to great excitement. Rabindranath Tagore, Smt. Sarala Devi Chowdhurani and others composed ardent national songs which created a storm hitherto unknown in Bengal. Sarala Devi was a pioneer leader among women and a life-long friend of Sarojini Naidu's. Her national songs must have deeply stirred the young poetess. At meetings, Sarojini would always go and join the choir of ladies singing patriotic songs, which she greatly loved. Mrs. Sushama Sen, again comments about this time: "In 1906, at the Indian National Congress held in Calcutta, when the Swadeshi Movement was at its height, the impression of Sarojini's speech is unforgettable. What enthusiasm and fire there was in her oratory! Then she jumped down from the platform and joined us in the choir, singing Rabindranath Tagore's immortal national songs, and Bankim Chandra's *Bande Mataram*." Histories were written praising Hindu-Moslem rule and condemning British autocracy. There was not only a political rising but a tremendous spirit of renaissance which coloured and excited the life of Bengal into this whirlpool of political activity. Sarojini was drawn to her own province at this time and often visited Bengal. Students' conferences had been started and regular sessions were held in Benares and Calcutta. Bihar also held annual conferences presided over by "well-known men like Sharfuddin, Hasan Iman, Dr. Sachidananda Sinha, Parmeshwar Lal, Deep Narain Sinha and Braj Kishore Prasad of Bihar and Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu, Mahatma Gandhi and C. F. Andrews from outside."<sup>20</sup>

In 1906, Sarojini spoke at the annual session of the Indian National Congress in Calcutta where Rajendra Prasad, served as a volunteer. The session was a great success despite the splitting up into rightist and leftist groups. The former included Sir Pherozshah Mehta, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Surendranath Banerjea and Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya. To the latter group belonged Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai, Bipin Chandra Pal, Aurobindo Ghosh and others. Dadabhai Naoroji, who stood between the two groups was invited to return to India from England in

<sup>20</sup> *Autobiography*, Rajendra Prasad, Asia Publishing House, 1957, p. 49.

order to preside over the session. Rajendra Prasad comments: "Luckily I was put on duty in the Congress pandal and I was able to hear all the discussions of the Subjects Committee. At the open session, doing duty elsewhere, I was not able to hear the Presidential speech. It was in this session that I heard the speeches of Sarojini Devi, Pandit Malaviya and M. A. Jinnah for the first time."<sup>21</sup>

Dr. Rajendra Prasad the future President of India, was strongly drawn to the Congress in 1906, as one could well imagine he would be, considering the brilliant galaxy of leaders he met and his own desire to serve the country; he did not, however, join the Congress formally until 1911 when he was elected a member of the All-India Congress Committee at the annual session in Bihar. He remained a member of the committee till his last days.

It is a matter of wonder that though Sarojini Naidu was only five years older than Rajendra Prasad (he was born in 1884) she was already an established speaker and leader and he but a volunteer; but from that day, the ways of the two leaders lay on the same track. They worked together for the freedom movement, and both later became ardent followers of the Mahatma.

While in Calcutta in 1906 Sarojini Naidu seems to have extended her interests to the Brahmo Samaj for she spoke at the Theistic Conference held in Calcutta and delivered a lecture at the Prayer Hall of the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj on January 3, 1906, Pandit Sib Nath Sastri, who presided, introduced the speaker. She spoke on the "Personal Element in Spiritual Life" and felt that only by the "light of the spirit" could any political and social results be achieved. The glories and grandeurs of Greece had perished for want of "this light of the spirit." But the hope for salvation in India lay in the spirit. Her civilization was highly spiritual "and the powers of the spirit," she cried "though they may be dimmed, could never die". Each one in the audience was "an indispensable spark in the rekindling of the manifold fires of national life". She quoted Omar Khayyam:

"I set my soul into the invisible,  
Some letter of that after life to spell,

<sup>21</sup> *Autobiography*, Rajendra Prasad, *op. cit.*, pp. 50 and 51.

And by and by my soul returned to me  
 Answered, myself am heaven and hell."

No one was so frail as not to contribute "to the divinity of the world." Citing Napoleon, when he was taunted for his lack of ancestry, Sarojini said that he replied: "I am the ancestor." Every human being had to contribute towards world progress to justify his existence. Plato said: "Man, know thyself." It was the duty of each human being "to be the prism of the love of God." Thus spoke Sarojini, deeply moving her audience. She particularly appealed to the young on this occasion. "Even as it is your privilege to be the heirs of the glorious yesterdays of the world it is even more your privilege and responsibility to be the stewards and trustees of tomorrow. You are the inheritors of unfulfilled greatness, and we look to you to complete worthily the work that your fathers have begun."

Sarojini urged her audience to develop a sense of unity. "Turn where you will, to the scriptures of the Hindus, or the mandates of Zoroaster, the Koran of the Mahomedans, to the teachings of Christ or of Lord Buddha, you will find this great point of unity among them, that in all these religions the greatest emphasis is laid on essential points. First, terrible, individual responsibility of every human being for his own destiny; and, secondly, the unique and incommunicable personal relationship with its Master Spirit." In true democratic fashion, Sarojini stressed the need for the growth of the individual. All human beings, no matter how humble or small were "necessary to the divine scheme of eternal life."

#### 4 *Emancipation of Women*

In 1906, Sarojini addressed the Indian Social Conference in Calcutta on "The Education of Indian Women". This speech caused widespread interest. She moved an Amendment urging the Hindu community to supplement "every effort of Government in the direction of Female Education." The wording in the Amendment of "Hindu" was changed by Sarojini to "Indian", as she felt there should be "no distinction of caste, creed or province." To

Sarojini it seemed a paradox, at once touched with humour and tragedy, that on the very threshold of the twentieth century it should still be necessary for women to stand upon public platforms and pass resolutions in favour of what is called "female education" in India—of all places in India, which at the beginning of the first century was already a great civilization and had contributed to the world's progress radiant examples of women of the highest genius and widest culture. "But as by some irony of evolution the paradox stands to our shame," she cried, "it is time for us to consider how best we can remove such a reproach, how we can best achieve something more fruitful than the passing of empty resolutions in favour of female education from year to year." She felt that the whole movement of striving for a common national ideal should be centred round the "women question". But she regretted the fact that there was not even "unanimous acceptance" of the fact that the education of women was essential. Sarojini cited an interesting argument between men and women on the subject of educating women, which was being carried on in *The Indian Ladies' Magazine*. "Many of you will remember that, some years ago, when Mrs. Saththianadhan first started *The Indian Ladies' Magazine*, a lively correspondence went on as to whether we should or should not educate our women.

"The women themselves with one voice pleaded their own cause most eloquently, but when it came to the men there was division in the camp. Many men doubtless proved themselves true patriots by proving themselves the true friends of education for the mothers of the people. But others there were who took fright at the very word. 'What,' they cried, 'educate our women? What then will become of the comfortable domestic ideals as exemplified by the luscious *halwa* and the savoury *omelette*? Others again were neither 'for Jove nor for Jehovah,' but, were for compromise. 'Teach this, they said, 'and not that.'"

The reference to *halwa* and *omellette* was to the spirited article which appeared in the pages of this pioneer little magazine regarding women's education. While enlightened ladies clamoured for women to take up higher studies, men wondered who would cook them *halwa* and omelettes if wives read Shakespeare.

Sarojini Naidu, in her speech in 1906, was indignant. "Does one man dare to 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 what you are; because your fathers, in depriving your mothers of the immemorial birthright, have robbed you, their sons, of your just inheritance. Therefore, I charge you, restore to your women their ancient rights, for as I have said it is we, and not you, who are the real nation builders, and without our active co-operation at all points of progress all your congresses and conferences are in vain."

On December 31, 1906 one of the first conclaves of women took place in Calcutta at Bethune College, under the auspices of the Indian Ladies' Conference. This meeting was held to discuss and exchange ideas on the various problems concerning the home, society, education and life in general. It was opened by her Highness the Maharani of Baroda and there was no dirth of other Maharanis for they included those of Mysore, Nattore, Mayurbhanj, Cooch Behar, and Dighapythia. The Conference also included other prominent ladies. After the Maharani of Baroda read her presidential address, Sarojini Naidu urged women to keep pace with men, and emancipate themselves.

Immediately she was back in Hyderabad, Sarojini presided over a meeting of the Hindu Social Reform Association, held in the Mahboob College Hall, Secunderabad. The chief speaker was Mrs. Levering, M.D., and the subject of her talk was, "The Condition of Indian Women." The meeting was well attended by all communities and special accommodation was provided for zenana ladies. Sarojini Naidu introduced the lecturer in a few chosen words and dwelt on the appropriateness or otherwise of an American lady speaking on the condition of Indian women.

While Mrs. Levering herself praised Indian women, Sarojini did not flinch from condemning the reactionary practices which prevailed at the time. Some of the audience took objection to her strong denouncement of the wrongs meted out to women; but the castigation Sarojini inflicted was none the less severe. She fearlessly condemned evil customs, such as infant marriage, *vara sulkam*, *kanya sulkam*, nautches, extravagant expenditure on social and religious occasions and the glaring disparity of age between girls

and men when marriages were arranged. She mentioned having heard that her remarks on social reform on past occasions had offended the leaders of Secunderabad, and she insisted that she would give expression to the same remarks at the risk of offending them if they happened to be present. She attacked the individual "Mr. You" and fearlessly exposed the short-comings of those who preached but never practised what they preached. She praised the men of ancient India and commented on the recognition of women's rights. *Suttee* if performed was done in love and regret for the beloved and then she pertinently asked: "Do men of our days deserve *suttee*? What sort of men do we find now? They are not men at all. They can be called the degenerate descendants of ancient heroes."

*Suttee* was condemned by one and all and Sarojini Naidu was no exception; but in one of her poems she romanticized the women who offered themselves on the flames of their husbands' funeral pyres. Not that she condoned this barbaric martyrdom; she merely highlighted the love which induced women to such false sentiments. The wife cries before immolating herself:

"Life of my life; Death's bitter sword  
 Hath severed us like a broken word,  
 Rent us in twain who are but one . . .  
 Shall the flesh survive when the soul is gone?"<sup>22</sup>

Sometimes in her romantic moods, Sarojini unduly praised customs she herself strongly condemned during her long years of reform and social service. It was in this mood too that even the *Purdah Nashin* was lauded, and in order to understand this attitude one must remember that Sarojini was living in the midst of a *Purdah* world which had its own fascination. The *Purdah Nashin* dwelt in a dream world, a life of isolated, single-hearted purpose:

"From thieving light of eyes impure,  
 From coveting sun or wind's caress  
 Her days are guarded and secure .  
 Behind her carven lattices,

<sup>22</sup> *Suttee, The Golden Threshold, op. cit., p. 46.*

Like jewels in a turbaned crest,  
Like secrets in a lover's breast."<sup>23</sup>

It was no wonder then that Mr. James H. Cousins, though a great admirer of Sarojini, suggested that she had perpetuated the "Door Mat" attitude of Indian Women which may have had an adverse effect on the emancipation of women.<sup>24</sup> But Sarojini's poetic effusions can scarcely be said to reflect her real views on life. As regards the condemnation of the evil practices of Suttee and Purdah there were no two opinions. Despite her poems, Sarojini worked throughout her life for the emancipation of women and could even be said to have "created" the twentieth century modern woman in India.

In March 1908, a meeting of men and women was held in Bombay to celebrate the Jubilee of *Stree Bodha*, a Bombay Gujerati monthly. Many Mahomedan ladies were present "in a gallery behind the screens." For the first time in Bombay Mahomedan ladies were to speak. Sarojini Naidu was also a speaker and rendered "an eloquent address in English," stressing the need for women's education which would bring about the social reform, so badly needed. She felt the purdah system was one great stumbling block in the way of social reforms in this country.

The celebrations of the Jubilee of *Stree Bodha* lasted for a week and Lady Cowasji Jehangir, Mrs. Akbar Ali and Sarojini Naidu, "the well-known Bengali poetess, who made an earnest appeal for the abolition of the purdah system," were among the speakers. Later, about five hundred Hindu, Mahomedan and Parsi girls, gathered from various schools of Bombay, marched in procession through the streets and assembled in the Town Hall and gave an entertainment.

On December 3, 1908, Sarojini attended the Session of the Indian National Social Conference held at Madras in the Congress pavilion. The pandal was filled with a large audience composed of all classes and creeds, including Mr. Justice, N. G. Chandavarkar, Dr. (later Sir) C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyar, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya and many distinguished men and women.

<sup>23</sup> *The Purdah Nashin, The Golden Threshold, ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>24</sup> *The Renaissance of India—the Poetry of Sarojini*, by James H. Cousins, p. 256.

The Hon. Mr. Justice Sankaran Nair presided, and among other speakers, Sarojini Naidu moved a resolution regarding Hindu widows, as follows: "This Conference invites all communities concerned to give their earnest endeavours to save Hindu widows from the customary disfigurement, to ameliorate their condition by providing them with educational facilities and a widow's Home after the model of Professor Karve's so that they may become better qualified than now to be sisters of mercy and useful and respected members of society, and also by placing no obstacles in the way of their remarriage."

Sarojini felt it was a national disgrace that it was necessary to have had such a resolution listed on the Agenda. Delegates had met three days earlier in Council and discussed how to achieve political freedom. How could this be possible "when at the very core of their social organisation they had a degrading cancer? It seemed incredible to any thinking mind that it was possible for the sons of a country that had produced a law-giver like Manu who taught the ideals of justice, a country that had produced Lord Buddha who taught the ideals of love, to have so far forgotten and to have fallen so low that they had lost the instincts of their chivalry to which the Hindu widow had a claim, first for the weakness of her sex, and next for the sake of her suffering." (cheers).

A public meeting was also held on this occasion under the auspices of the Pachaiyappa's College Historical Association. Sarojini Naidu had already spoken for this Association in 1903. The pandal was packed to capacity despite the inclemency of the weather. The subject was the ideals of women's education, and after Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya's speech, Sarojini Naidu remarked that she was painfully troubled by the condition of girls in the country. Women were a potent factor in the political evolution of a nation; but while men were advancing and imbibing new thoughts women were sadly lagging behind.

Sarojini Naidu then attended the Theistic Conference in Madras. She was praised as a highly educated lady who felt Indian women, if they so wished, could vie with any women of the world. The Madras audience was taken by surprise to "hear such force and wisdom, such hope and courage, from the mouth of a woman", for this was the first time that they had heard a woman of their

own race speaking to them with that "vigour which is born of a strong conviction." Sarojini Naidu had called Lord Morley's reforms "little things", and felt that the country need not have been so grateful when greater privileges could have been conceded. Her speech was very forceful, and she was congratulated by the Madras public for being an Indian woman who could feel and hope as she did, and who had set before her the glorious object of uplifting the women by doing all in her power to attain that object.

During this time of Conferences in Madras, Mr. Justice Sankaran Nair, C.I.E. and members of the Madras Hindu Social Reform Association were "at home" to meet Mrs. Divarkarbai Kamalakar who had just returned from England after qualifying for the medical profession. It was a brilliant function and took place in Mr. Nair's palatial residence in Egmore, Madras.

Mrs. Kamalakar in her speech said she felt that with women like Mrs. Ali Akbar in Bombay, Mrs. Sathianadhan in Madras, Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, "the sweet warbler" in Hyderabad, and Mrs. Rukhmini Ammal in Mysore, Indian women were not in any way inferior to the women of other countries.

Hindu ladies of Madras then met at the Victoria Hall under the auspices of the Bharat Mahila Parishad Sabha—"a Sabha formed for ladies chiefly to discuss and consider the various scopes of prosperity during their lives." The sponsors in Madras were assisted by Sarojini Naidu. Seven hundred Hindu ladies, fifty English ladies, including Lady Benson, and ten Moslem ladies were present. Maharani Gajapathi Rao took the chair and Sarojini Naidu practically carried through the Conference and made it a promising beginning—for this was the first time a ladies' Conference was ever held in Madras. Papers on problems affecting women were read in various languages.

Sarojini met that other great Indian woman, Dr. (Mrs.) Mutthulakshmi Reddy in Madras for the first time in the early part of 1909. Both Dr. and Mrs. Naidu went down for the momentous happenings in Madras in December and stayed with Dr. Nanjunda Rao, a wizard in medicine, who so aptly combined the Ayurvedic and Allopathic sciences that his cures in Madras became almost akin to miracles. One can imagine how Sarojini Naidu must have exulted in the company of Dr. Nanjunda Rao, for they were

both artists in their own ways. The Doctor invited Mrs. Mutthulakshmi Reddy to meet Dr. and Mrs. Naidu at his house. Mrs. Reddy writes of Sarojini: "I was surprised to see her simplicity and childlike nature. She was a true woman in her manners, likes and dislikes. She was fond of jewels and saris. She loved to wear necklaces, bangles, pendants and lace-bordered saris. She was so full of the joy of living that she would borrow silver anklets from the daughters of Dr. Rao and wear them on her ankles and walk about in her room! She was slim, lovely and agile.

"I heard her speak at the Session about women's problems in our country and she made a great impression on me. I myself was a student, not fond of jewels, and was surprised at her simplicity and love of jewels like any other woman; yet she was not ordinary. She would often talk about her children, and she was indeed a very loving mother. This was in 1909. I came to know her better later on, more and more as a great orator, a great poetess, politician, patriot, a President and patron of the A.I.W.C. and above all a peace-maker."

Sarojini, for her many lectures in the chief cities of India on social, religious and national progress, for her flood relief work and her work during the plague epidemic in 1911 in Hyderabad, was awarded the gold Kaiser-i-Hind medal. She had by now laboured extensively for the women's movement and the welfare of Indian students and for general relief measures.

### 5 *The Bird of Time*

From 1911 onwards till her father died in 1915, Sarojini spent a great deal of her time between Calcutta and Hyderabad, for by this time Aghorenath had moved to Lovelock Street in Calcutta. Mr. Prabhat Chandra Ganguli, son of the great reformer, Dwaraknath Ganguli, and friend of Aghorenath, remembers meeting Sarojini for the first time in Calcutta in December 1911. Her association with Calcutta society, especially among the Brahmo community of Bengal, is therefore long standing, because her parental home was based here after Hyderabad. Friends in Calcutta, or the children of friends, speak of their beloved Sarojini with affectionate regard, a regard equalling that of friends who

knew her in Hyderabad or the U.P. In Bombay too Sarojini, is still much loved, for she became a frequent visitor there, later having rooms reserved for herself in the Taj Mahal Hotel. Her connections with Madras and her friendship there are as well-remembered, for she worked side by side with Annie Besant, and made many lasting friends, including Dr. C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyar, the members of the Theosophical Society, Dr. (Mrs.) Mutthulakshmi Reddy and Kamala Satthianadhan. In fact, Sarojini is loved everywhere, and of course, Delhi claims her also as a most illustrious daughter.

Even as early as 1911 she was a much coveted and sought after person, says Prabhat Chandra Ganguli. He requested her to address the young members of the Brahma Samaj at the Students' Weekly Association. She readily agreed but could not keep her word due to the sudden breakdown of her health and voice. She wrote the following beautiful letter to him which is still much treasured. It shows again Sarojini's love for young people.

Dear Mr. Ganguli,

I am indeed sorry to disappoint you about Saturday, but I am afraid my health would not permit me to speak again for some time. I told you that speaking was a great physical strain on me and I am quite upset since my effusion on Sunday. Otherwise, I would gladly have kept my promise to address the Students' Weekly Association. I hope to visit Calcutta soon and if you still wish me to give the address, I shall be most happy to do so. In some measure, to make honourable amends for my shortcomings on the occasion, will you let me send you a copy of my new book of poems (*The Bird of Time*) which will be out very soon for your library as a token of the deep interest I always feel for the students of all places. I hope all of you will find something in my verses of more permanent value and interest than in my spoken words which are but passing themes, light as air and soon forgotten.

Yours sincerely,  
Sarojini Naidu

Mr. Ganguli adds that Sarojini not only kept her promise but readily agreed on other occasions to speak whenever he requested her. Her remarkable and memorable address on Raja Ram Mohan Roy in the City College and her address at the first Social Service Congress at the University Institute Hall were instances he remembers with gratitude. "On both the occasions the halls were so full that the audience over-flowed into the open grounds of Col-

lege Square and the meeting had to be rearranged. Such was the pull to hear the Nightingale-voiced orator speak, speech which to many of us was song.”

Mrs. Sushama Sen reminisced as follows to me: “Sarojinidi’s father, Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya was one of the first ardent Brahmos, and was associated with the Tagores of Jorasanko and the seers of Lily Cottage the home of Keshub Chandra Sen in Calcutta. Aghorenath and his wife with Sarojinidi—her sisters and brother Harin,—were the popular guests at the homes of the England-returned élite society of Calcutta, and we often met them at musical soirées. These songs remained with Sarojini to her last days, for later, whenever we met at Delhi or Simla, she made my sister Protima (Lady B. L. Mitter) and me sing her favourite songs, and she joined in heartily.”

Sarojini Naidu published her second book of verse entitled *The Bird of Time, Songs of Life and Death and the Spring* in May 1912. This book had no less a literary critic to write the foreword than Edmund Gosse himself. The book was dedicated:

“In token of life-long Homage and Affection to  
My Father  
Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya  
and  
My Mother  
Srimati Varada Sundari Devi.”

Edmund Gosse wrote the Introduction only at the command “of a dear and valued friend,” for he felt that “an introduction can only be needed when the personage to be ‘introduced’ is unknown in a world prepared to welcome her but still ignorant of her qualities. This is certainly not the case with Mrs. Naidu, whose successive volumes, of which this is the third, have been received in Europe with approval, and in India with acclamation.” Though the world so far was really acquainted mostly with *The Golden Threshold*, her previous volume, the earliest poems, *Songs*, by S. Chattopadhyaya had been published privately in Hyderabad, in 1896, of which little is known today.

Edmund Gosse remarks that Sarojini had been gracious enough to declare that he had introduced her to writing English. He felt

that Sarojini was "in all things and to the fullest extent autochthonous. 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 addresses itself to the expositions of emotions which are tropical and primitive and in this respect, as I believe, if the poems of Sarojini Naidu be carefully and delicately studied they will be found as luminous in lighting up the dark places of the East as any contribution of savant or historian. They have the astonishing advantage of approaching the task of interpretation from inside the magic circle, although armed with a technical skill that has been cultivated with devotion outside of it."<sup>25</sup>

The note of girlish ecstasy "so noticeable in her previous poems, had passed", according to Edmund Gosse and a "grave music" had taken its place. She had lived "and this is another facet of her eminent career—in close companionship with sorrow; she had known the joy and also the despair of consolation. The sight of much suffering, it may be, has thinned her jasmine-garlands and darkened the azure of her sky. It is known to the world that her labours for the public weal have not been carried out without deep injury to her private health. But these things have not slackened the lyric energy of Sarojini; they have rather given it intensity. She is supported, as the true poet must be, by a noble ambition. In her childhood she dreamed magnificently; she hoped to be a Goethe or a Keats for India. This desire, like so many others, may prove too heavy a strain for a heart that

*'S'ouvit comme une fleur profonde  
Dont l'auguste carolle a prédit l'orient.'*

But the desire for beauty and fame, the magnificent impulse, are still energetic within this burning soul."<sup>26</sup>

Sarojini wrote to Edmund Gosse: "While I live, it will always be the supreme desire of my soul to write poetry—one poem, one line of enduring verse even. Perhaps I shall die without realizing that longing which is at once an exquisite joy and an unspeakable anguish to me." Edmund Gosse ended his introduction by saying that her "apprehension" was needless.

<sup>25</sup> *The Bird of Time*, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6 and 7.

The title for *The Bird of Time* was taken from Omar Khayyam's immortal lines:

"The Bird of Time has but a little way  
To fly—and lo! the bird is on the wing."

Reviews of *The Bird of Time* though not so prolific as those which greeted *The Golden Threshold* were nevertheless warm and enthusiastic. *The Daily Chronicle* commented: "She had more than a profusion of beautiful things." *The Bookman* noted that she possessed "her qualities in heaped measure", and the *Yorkshire Post* declared: "Mrs. Naidu has not only enriched our language but has enabled us to grow into intimate relation with the spirit, the emotions, the mysticism and the glamour of the East."

Sarojini Naidu left for England in May 1912 because of her ill-health, and in 1914 she was made a member of the Royal Society of Literature, an honour which had hitherto never been paid to an Indian woman.

## 6 Gopal Krishna Gokhale

Sarojini Naidu's early friendship with Gopal Krishna Gokhale, India's steadfast, moderate, gentle patriot, seems to be the foundation on which her political life was built. It was he, perhaps, who first persuaded her to step out of her ivory tower. He was Sarojini's *guru*, and her own reminiscences of him, published in the *Bombay Chronicle* soon after he died on February 19, 1915, and later brought out as a booklet, speak for themselves. The passing of this great man, member of the Public Service Commission, Founder of the Servants of India Society, member of the Legislative Assembly, President of the Congress and representative of Indians in South Africa, left a great gap in the heart of India, and especially in that of one of India's ardent daughters, Sarojini Naidu. His last words were: "This side of life has been good to me. It is time that I should go to see the other."

As early as 1902, Sarojini had been asked by Gokhale to devote her life to the service of her country. When she proposed the resolution on Women's education in Calcutta at the All-India

Social Conference in 1906, something in her speech moved Gokhale so much that he wrote to her later: "May I take the liberty to offer you my most respectful and enthusiastic congratulations? Your speech was more than an intellectual treat of the highest order. . . . We all felt for the moment to be lifted to a higher plane."

Thus began a friendship which influenced and coloured the whole life of Sarojini Naidu.

There was something rich, generous and majestic about Gokhale, and the character of Sarojini in many respects tended unconsciously to pattern itself on this great man's nature. Perhaps the meeting-ground of these two astounding personalities was the platform of broad tolerance. Mahatma Gandhi said of Gokhale after their first meeting: "He gave men an affectionate welcome, and his manner immediately won my heart. With him too this was my first meeting, (He had just met Lokmanya Tilak) and yet it seemed as if we were renewing an old friendship. Sir Pherozeshah had seemed to me like the Himalaya, the Lokmanya like the ocean. But Gokhale was as the Ganges. One could have a refreshing faith in the Holy River. The Himalaya was unscalable, and one could not easily launch forth on the sea, but the Ganges invited one to its bosom. It was a joy to be on it with a boat and an oar."<sup>27</sup>

Soon Sarojini and Gokhale were fast friends. Sarojini writes: "An acquaintance begun on such a happy note of sympathy, grew and ripened at last into a close and lovely comradeship which I counted among the crowning honours of my life. And though it was not without its poignant moments of brief and bitter estrangement, our friendship was always radiant, both with the joy of spiritual refreshment, and the quickening challenge of intellectual discussion and dissent." Sarojini goes on to speak of the harmony between them. Both were interested in Hindu-Moslem unity and the abolition of indentured labour; there "was the ever-deepening bond of our common love for the motherland, and, for a short span, there was also the added tie of a tender dependance, infinitely touching and child-like on such comfort and companionship as

<sup>27</sup> *An Autobiography or the Story of My Experiments with Truth* by M. K. Gandhi, Navajivan Publishing House, Edited by Mahadev Desai, Ahmedabad, 1940, p. 220.

I, with my own broken health, could render him through long weeks of suffering and distress in a foreign land." This was in England in 1914.

Sarojini met Gokhale many times between 1907 and 1911 during the former's flying visits to Bombay, Madras, Poona and Delhi. "After each meeting," writes Sarojini, "I would always carry away the memory of some fervent and stirring word of exhortation to yield my life to the service of India. And, even in the midst of the crowded activities of those epoch making years, he found leisure to send me, now and then, a warm message of approval, of encouragement, when any poem or speech or action of mine chanced to please him or the frequent rumours of my failing health caused him anxiety or alarm."

In 1912, Sarojini spent a few weeks in Calcutta with her father. It was during these weeks that any real intimacy was established between Sarojini and her *guru*. "Hitherto I have always caught you on the wing," he said, "now I will cage you long enough to grasp your true spirit."

The *guru* and pupil had "long and delightful conversations" together, and Sarojini began to realize how great indeed was this man who had given his friendship to her. She was astounded that Gokhale was able to crystallize his dual personality into so supreme a single-hearted purpose. "It was to me a valuable lesson in human psychology to study the secret of this rich and paradoxical nature." There was the outer man as the world knew him, precise and brilliant and subtly intellectual, with "his unrivalled gifts of political analysis and synthesis, his flawless and relentless mastery and use of the consummate logic of co-ordinated facts and figures, his courteous but inexorable candour in opposition, his patient dignity and courage in honourable compromise, the breadth and restraint, the vigour and veracity of his far-reaching statesmanship, the lofty simplicities and sacrifices of his daily life," and every now and then, the inner man would peep out which revealed himself to Sarojini with its "impassioned hunger for human kinship and affection, in all the tumult and longing, the agony of doubt and ecstasy of faith of the born idealist, perpetually seeking some unchanging reality in a world full of shifting disillusion and despair."

Sarojini felt that this harmony of the practical worker and

“dreamer of dreams” originated from Gokhale’s Brahminical ancestry “which centuries before had evolved the spirit of the Bhagavat Gita and defined true Yoga as wisdom in action.” But he also had the Brahmin’s resentment of the “least question of ancient monopoly of power.” Sarojini then cited an incident which occurred at the All-India Conference in Calcutta in December 1911, regarding Depressed Classes. She had remarked that “the denial of their equal human rights and opportunities of life was largely due to the tyranny of arrogant Brahmins in the past.” Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya was also present at the meeting and he teased his daughter “on the phrase which appealed to both his sense of humour and equity”. Sarojini continued: “But, to my surprise, I found that Mr. Gokhale regarded the word ‘arrogant’ almost as a personal affront! ‘It was no doubt a brave and beautiful speech,’ he said in a tone of reproach, ‘but you sometimes use harsh, bold phrases.’ Soon after discussing an allied topic, he burst out saying ‘You—in spite of yourself—you are typically Hindu in spirit. You begin with a ripple and end in eternity.’ ‘But,’ I answered, a little nettled, ‘when have I ever disclaimed my heritage?’ ”

Gokhale was not, however, blind to the evils of the caste system and the plight of the untouchables despite his Brahmin heritage. On the problems of untouchables he remarked: “I think all fair-minded persons will have to admit that it is absolutely monstrous that a class of human beings, with bodies similar to our own, with brains that can think and with hearts that can feel, should be perpetually condemned to a life of utter wretchedness, servitude, and mental and moral degradation. . . . We may touch a cat, we may touch a dog, we may touch any other animal, but the touch of those human beings is pollution. . . . How can we possibly realise our national aspirations, how can our country ever hope to take her place among the nations of the world, if we allow large numbers of our countrymen to remain sunk in ignorance, barbarism and degradation?”

These weeks in Calcutta were rich with memories. One morning, Gokhale asked Sarojini when he was feeling depressed about national affairs: “What is your outlook for India?”

“One of hope,” replied Sarojini.

“What is your vision of the immediate future?” persisted Gokhale.

“The Hindu-Muslim Unity in less than five years,” was Sarojini’s quick reply given with joyous conviction.

“Child,” said Gokhale, with great yearning sadness in his voice. “You are a poet, but you hope too much. It will not come in your life time or in mine. But keep your faith and work if you can.”

In March 1912, Sarojini met Gokhale for a few minutes at a party in Bombay given by Sir Pherozeshah Mehta for the members of the Royal Commission. *The Bird of Time*, which had just been published, was attracting much praise and interest, and in a short conversation with Sarojini, Gokhale who seemed to have always had a distrust towards poetry remarked: “Does the flame still burn brightly?”

“Brighter than ever,” replied Sarojini.

Shaking his head doubtfully he replied: “I wonder. I wonder how the storm of such long duration will withstand excessive adulation and success.”

But we know that Sarojini, despite the adulation which came to her right through life, never changed her humble attitude. She was never intoxicated with praise.

She addressed the “new historic session,” of the Muslim League a week later on March 22, 1912 in Lucknow. It was called “to adopt a new Constitution which sounded the keynote of loyal co-operation with the sister community in all matters of national welfare and progress. The unanimous acclamation with which it was carried by both the older and younger schools of Mussalman politicians marked a new era and inaugurated a new standard in the history of modern Indian affairs.”

From Lucknow Sarojini went to Poona without a break, as she was due there on March 25, 1912. On the 20th morning she walked with the Hon. Mr. Paranjape from Ferguson College to the Servants of India Society. Mr. Gokhale whom Sarojini called “The world famous leader of the Indian National Congress” was weak and suffering from his old illness (diabetes) but he was busy as usual, and was reading the journals which criticized and commented on the Muslim League and its new ideals. On seeing his friend, Gokhale remarked: “Ah, have you come to tell me that your vision was true?”, and began eagerly to question Sarojini. He “seemed almost impatient of my words about the real underlying *spirit* of the Conference. His weary and pain-worn

face lighted up with pleasure when I assured him that, so far at least as the younger men were concerned, it was not an instinct of mere political experience but one of genuine conviction and a growing consciousness of wider and graver national responsibility that had prompted them to stretch out so frankly and generously, the hand of good fellowship to Hindus, and I hoped that the coming Congress would respond to it with equal, if not even greater cordiality."

Gokhale answered: "So far as it lies in my power, it shall be done."

After an hour Gokhale became exhausted with the "excitement of the happy news" Sarojini had taken to her friend, and he begged her to visit him again in the evening. Sarojini returned to the Servants of India Society in the evening, and found Mr. Gokhale "strangely transformed," for he was "bright and smiling and a little pale, but without any trace of the morning's langour and depression."

"What," almost screamed Sarojini Naidu, as Gokhale was preparing to lead the way upstairs, "surely you cannot mean to mount all those steps, you are too ill."

Laughing he replied: "You have put new hope into me. I feel strong enough to face life and work again."

Gokhale's sisters and two charming daughters joined them on the terrace for half an hour "with its peaceful view over sunset hills and valleys, and we talked of pleasant and passing things."

Sarojini says this was her only glimpse of Gokhale's domestic life. After the women left, Sarojini and Gokhale sat on in the gathering dusk in silence. Suddenly Gokhale's "golden voice" broke through to tell his friend how great a privilege it was to serve India. He cried: "Stand here with me, with the stars and hills for witness and in their presence consecrate your life and your talent, your song and your speech, your thought and your dream to the motherland. O poet, see visions from the hill-tops and spread abroad the message of hope to the toilers in the valleys." As she said good-bye, Gokhale repeated: "You have given me new hope, new faith, new courage. Tonight, I shall rest. I shall sleep with a heart at peace." Sarojini never failed her friend in his wish. She gave herself wholly, in every respect to the service of her country.

She left for London two months later, in May 1912, and found herself in London after an absence of fifteen years. Mr. Gokhale had also gone to England and amongst the many friends who greeted her, Gokhale was the first. To her surprise he had donned European garments and even a top hat. Sarojini stared at him and cried: "Where is your rebellious turban?"

However, she soon got accustomed to Gokhale's "new phase". He was now a "social Gokhale who attended parties and frequented theatres, played bridge and entertained ladies at dinner on the terrace of the National Liberal Club, a far cry from the terrace of the Servants of India Society."

Gokhale, despite his weak health, worked hard on the Royal Commission, and was preoccupied with Indian affairs in South Africa, which were at the time reaching a crisis. Sarojini stayed at the home of Sir Krishna Gupta and Gokhale often visited her. He loved cherries and Sarojini provided him with these in abundance. She would say to him: "Every man has his price and yours is—cherries!"

Mr. M. A. Jinnah had just then founded the London Indian Association, a new student organization and Sarojini was very interested in its work. Mr. Jinnah was actively supported by the Indian Students in London. They wanted a centre where they could focus their 'scattered student life' and also a common place where they could meet. The students wanted Gokhale—"the incomparable friend and servant of India"—to give them his sympathy in their new venture. At first Gokhale refused to speak as he had been ordered by the doctors not to exert himself. But Sarojini had already rashly pledged his support and she beseeched him all the more: "You not only defy all laws of health," grumbled Gokhale, "but incite me also to disobedience and revolt. Besides," he continued with flashing eyes, "what right had you to pledge your word for me?"

"The right," replied Sarojini "to demand from you at all costs a message of hope for the young generation."

On August 2, 1913, Gokhale delivered his lecture, a "magnificent inaugural address at Caxton Hall in the presence of a large and enthusiastic audience of students and set before them those sublime lessons of patriotism and self-sacrifice which he alone so

signally, among the men of his generation, was competent to teach with authority and grace."

Gokhale left England soon after this meeting for South Africa. He sacrificed his health by doing this and in December wrote from his sick bed to Sarojini that his efforts had met with the support of a "united India to the call of her gallant heroes fighting for right and justice in a far-off land."

Gokhale returned to England in the spring of 1914, in a precarious condition of health. He was first confined to bed but he paid a visit to Sarojini on the day he was allowed to leave his rooms as Sarojini was herself too ill to go and see him. He informed Sarojini that he had not much longer to live.

"With the utmost care," he said, "they think, I might perhaps live for three years longer."

Soon Sarojini recovered and accompanied Gokhale on short motor drives. This being the only recreation he was allowed. "On mild days, as we sat in the soft sunshine under the budding trees of Kensington Gardens he would talk to me with that sure instinct of his for choice and graphic phrases with much distinction. He would say: 'Give me a corner of your brain that I can call my own;'" and in the corner allotted to him by Sarojini were treasured many precious memories. From him she learnt the "range and variety of his culture" and his "fastidious preferences for what Charles Lamb has called the delicacies of fine literature."

It was Gokhale who made Sarojini meet and work for Mahatma Gandhi's war work in London in 1914, when the First World War broke out. Gokhale himself was scheduled to meet the Mahatma but was detained in Paris due to his failing health and Sarojini had her historic meeting with Gandhi. It was Gokhale who interested his ardent young friend and admirer in the Royal Commission, the Viceregal Council and the National Congress, because he himself was so involved in their work. Without boasting, he proudly averred that he could "mould heroes out of common clay." Like Pygmalion, he shaped every form and feature of the young men of his day. It is even believed by many that he fashioned Gandhi first into a hero and leader. Certainly he had an immense influence on the Mahatma in his younger days and says of him: "He had fine sincerity a little marred by hasty judgment," he was free "from all sectarian prejudice which will make him the

best ambassador of the Hindu-Moslem unity." Here was a cherished wish of both Gokhale and Sarojini, that Hindus and Moslems should draw together in true and close brotherhood. In fact, it can boldly be said that first Gokhale, and secondly Sarojini Naidu, and finally and most emphatically, Mahatma Gandhi, were the three great champions of this cause, and if their precepts and practices had been followed, India may still have been united and undivided. Gokhale was particularly interested in compulsory education "which he felt, was the only solid basis on which to found any lasting national progress; the Hindu-Moslem question which, he said, could be most effectively solved if the leaders of the sister communities would deal in a spirit of perfect unison with certain fundamental problems of equal and urgent importance to both the high privilege and heavy responsibility of the young generation whose function it was to grapple with more immense and vital issues that his generation had been called upon to face; and of course, the future of the Servants of India Society, which was the actual embodiment of all his dreams and devotion for India."

Gokhale's health gradually grew worse, and soon the short motor drives that he indulged in with Sarojini and the trips to Kensington Gardens came to an end. He was forbidden to leave his room or to receive visitors. Sarojini was fortunate enough to be allowed to see him daily for a few hours till his departure to Vichy. She wrote: "In his whimsical way he would call me the best of all his prescriptions. To my usual query on crossing the threshold of his sick-room. 'Well; am I to be a stimulant or a sedative today?' his invariable reply was, 'Both'. And this one word most adequately summed up the need of his sinking heart and over-burdened brain through these anxious and critical weeks."

Between Gokhale's first and second visits to Vichy he spent a quiet time in a cottage at Twickenham as the guest of Mr. and Mrs. Ratan Tata. He was devotedly attended by Dr. Jivraj Mehta, of whom Gokhale once said: "He will go far and be a leader of men." Gokhale was sent to Vichy twice from England and when Mahatma Gandhi arrived in England from South Africa at Gokhale's summons, the latter was in France, and due to the outbreak of war on August 4, two days before Gandhiji landed in England, Gokhale had been delayed in France and could not

cross over to England to meet his friend. Gokhale returned to England later and was able to stand the strain of his work on the Royal Commission but felt himself an exile. He developed a nostalgia for India and home. "His conversation during these days was steeped in allusions to the old Sanskrit writers whose mightly music was in his very blood."

Sarojini saw him for the last time on October 8, 1914, and she sailed for India two days later. She said: "Something, maybe, of autumnal sadness of fallen leaves and growing mists had passed into his mood; or, maybe, he felt the foreshadowing of the wings of Death. But as he bade me farewell, he said, 'I don't think we shall meet again. If you live, remember your life is dedicated to the service of the country. My work is done.'"

He arrived in India early in December. His last letter to Sarojini was written a day before his fatal illness and he spoke of "his health being now stationary and his coming visit to Delhi." But it was to be otherwise. He died on February 19, 1915. "The self-same stars that he had invoked one year ago to witness the consecration of a life to the service of India kept vigil over the passing of this great saint and soldier of national righteousness. And of him, surely, in another age and in another land were the prophetic words uttered: 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.'"

Sarojini wrote a tribute to Gokhale entitled *In Memoriam* which appeared under Gokhale's portrait in Mr. Wacha's brochure on Gokhale. She, however sent it earlier to the Editor of the *Indian Social Reformer* saying she would first like it to be published in that paper.<sup>28</sup>

"Heroic heart! last hope of all our days!  
 Need'st thou the homage of our love or praise?  
 Lo! let the mournful millions round thy pyre  
 Kindle their souls with consecrated fire  
 Caught from the brave torch fallen from thy hand,  
 To succour and to save our stricken land;  
 And in a daily worship taught by thee  
 Upbuild the Temple of her Unity."

<sup>28</sup> *Speeches and Writings of Sarojini Naidu*, 2nd Edition, G. A. Natesan and Co. Madras, p. 2.

Later Sarojini wrote a poem *In Gokhale's Garden* which was published in *The Feather of the Dawn*.

## 7 *Meeting with Gandhi*

"I asked some of Gandhi's oldest friends and associates when he had first been called 'Mahatma' ", remarked Vincent Sheean. "(I had an impression derived from something I had read in America, that Tagore called him by the name in a telegram along about 1918 and thus helped to establish it). None could remember. Mr. Nehru said: 'I met him first in 1916 and he was Mahatma then.' Sarojini Naidu said: 'I met him in 1914 and he was already Mahatma then.'"<sup>29</sup>

Gandhi therefore was the "great soul" from Sarojini's very first meeting with him. He, his wife Kasturba and Mr. Kallenbach sailed for England on July 8, 1914, from South Africa. They travelled third class and lived on nuts and fruit. They arrived in England on August 6, 1914, two days after the beginning of the Great War. Gandhiji who had journeyed all the way to London to answer his friend Gokhale's summons was unable to meet him for the time being, as Gokhale was delayed in Paris. Mahatma Gandhi had left South Africa a victor and a hero after the conclusion of the Satyagraha struggle there. Gokhale now wanted Gandhi back in India via London. Gandhi did not really know what to do with himself in London as there was no knowing when Gokhale would be able to come to London and until Gokhale arrived a few weeks later, he was on his own to plan his programme. So he had a conference with Dr. Jivraj Mehta and others who were studying at the time in England. Bhupendranath Basu, Jinnah, Lajpat Rai and others were in London on a deputation of the Indian National Congress in connection with the proposed reforms of the Indian Council. Two days after Gandhiji's arrival a reception was held in his honour at the Cecil Hotel by his British and Indian admirers. Dr. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Mr. Jinnah and Sarojini Naidu paid him glowing tributes as the hero of the

<sup>29</sup> *Lead Kindly Light*, by Vincent Sheean, Random House, New York, 1949, p. 35.

South African struggle. English statesmen, including the Prime Minister and Secretary of State sent apologies for their absence. A meeting of Indian residents in Great Britain was called and Gandhi spoke to them regarding an idea he had formed that Indians should help England in the war. Many objections were raised and some felt that as they were slaves themselves they could not co-operate with their masters. But Gandhi did not agree. He felt that despite the difference between Indians and the English they had not been "reduced to slavery." He even felt he could convert the British by helping them in their time of trouble. His sense of honour was high. He would not embarrass Britain when she was in trouble. "I thought that England's need should not be turned into our opportunity, and that it was more becoming and far-sighted not to press our demands while the war lasted," he remarked. On the contrary, his country should help Britain. He invited volunteers and there was a good response. Gandhiji then immediately wrote to Lord Crewe putting forward his suggestions for an Indian Voluntary Corps. A letter dated August 14, 1914, signed by Gandhiji, Kasturba Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu, Major N. P. Sinha, Dr. Jivraj Mehta and fifty other Indians was sent to Mr. Roberts, the Under Secretary of State for India. It ran as follows: "It was thought by many of us that during the crisis that has overtaken the Empire and whilst many Englishmen, leaving their ordinary vocations of life, are responding to the Imperial call, those Indians who are residing in the U.K. and who can at all do so should place themselves unconditionally at the disposal of the authorities." The letter continued that many Indians had responded and they also offered their services to the authorities. "We venture to trust that the Rt. Hon., the Marquis of Crewe will approve of our offer and secure its acceptance by the proper authority. We would respectfully emphasize the fact that the one dominant idea guiding us is that of rendering such humble assistance as we may be considered capable of performing, as an earnest of our desire to share the responsibility of membership of the great empire if we would share its privileges."

Lord Crewe hesitated but soon realized the Mahatma's sincerity and even loyalty and accepted the offer. Preliminary training was immediately started. There were 80 volunteers. After a short course in first aid for six weeks, at the end of which all the volun-

teers except one passed, they were put through Military Drill and other training. Gandhiji admired the spirit of the Londoners at this time. There was no panic and all were busy helping to the best of their ability. All "able-bodied adults" began to offer their services for training as combatants. There was work for the old and the infirm as well. Women also proved themselves most useful. They employed themselves in cutting and making clothes, and rolling bandages for the wounded. The Indian Corps chartered the use of Indian women, among whom were Kasturba Gandhi and Sarojini Naidu.

While in London Sarojini was a member of the Ladies' Club, the *Lyceum*, the members of which undertook to make as many clothes for the soldiers as they could. Sarojini threw herself wholeheartedly into the work. "This was my first acquaintance with her" writes Mahatma Gandhi. "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. I welcomed her demand and with the assistance of friends got as many clothes made as I could manage during my training for first aid."<sup>30</sup>

Sarojini describes her first meeting with Gandhiji in a much more romantic and spectacular manner. To her, this was a red-letter day, an event which changed the whole course of her life, which took her away from the honeyed drawing rooms of scholars and poets and placed her before a beggar-saint who from then on with his magnetism claimed almost her whole attention. From their first meeting in London in the autumn of 1914, Sarojini, the poetess and orator for thirty years became one of Mahatma Gandhi's closest friends and disciples and strongest supporters among women. Sarojini writes: "Curiously enough, my first meeting with Mahatma Gandhi took place in London on the eve of the Great European War of 1914. . . . When he arrived fresh from his triumphs in South Africa, where he had initiated his principle of passive resistance and won a victory for his countrymen, who were at that time chiefly indentured labourers, over the redoubtable General Smuts. I had not been able to meet his ship on his arrival, but the next afternoon, I went wandering around in search of his lodging in an obscure part of Kensington and climbed the steep stairs of an old, unfashionable house, to find an open

<sup>30</sup> *The Story of My Experiments with Truth, op. cit., p. 426.*

door framing a living picture of a little man with a shaven head, seated on the floor on a black prison blanket and eating a messy meal of squashed tomatoes and olive oil out of a wooden prison bowl. Around him were ranged some battered tins of parched ground nuts and tasteless biscuits of dried plantain flour. I burst instinctively into happy laughter at this amusing and unexpected vision of a famous leader, whose name had already become a household word in our country. He lifted his eyes and laughed back at me, saying: 'Ah, you must be Mrs. Naidu! Who else dare be so irreverent? Come in', he said, 'and share my meal.'

"'No thanks,' I replied, sniffing, 'What an abominable mess it is.' In this way and at that instant commenced our friendship, which flowered into real comradeship, and bore fruit in a long, long loyal discipleship, which never wavered for a single hour through more than thirty years of common service in the cause of India's freedom."<sup>31</sup>

In her broadcast on October 2, 1947, on the occasion of Mahatma Gandhi's 78th birthday, Sarojini again recalled this historic meeting and added: "And so laughingly, we began a friendship, that has lasted, grown, developed through all these many years. He was Gandhi, as yet a curiosity to the world. They knew that he was someone distinguished, that he had won a great moral victory over a small issue, great to him, in South Africa, in a contest with Lt. Gen. Smuts. The issue today against General Smuts is of a vast magnitude but Gandhi had won on a great moral principle. Who is this Gandhi, who is it, today, that he represents the supreme force in the world?"

Sarojini Naidu never forgot this meeting with Mahatma Gandhi, for she repeated it over and over in her speeches and in interviews with journalists and biographers.

She agreed entirely with Mahatma Gandhi at the time to help in the war effort, for like her leader, she did not wish to embarrass the British in the time of their trouble. But gradually during the years of war the Home Rule Movement developed and Congress began to play a more prominent part in the struggle for freedom. It was felt that many injustices were perpetrated by the British

<sup>31</sup> *Mahatma Gandhi*, by H. S. L. Polak, H. N. Brailsford, Lord Pethick-Lawrence, with a foreword and appreciation by H.E. Sarojini Naidu, Governor of the U.P. Odham's Press Ltd., London, 1949.

Raj in India which forced even high-principled people like Mahatma Gandhi and Sarojini Naidu to change their attitude and throw the whole force of their dynamic energy into the non-violent struggle for India's freedom. Sarojini was among the first women to join the national movement, and she was one of its leaders from its very inception.

She saw much of the Gandhis before she left England for India on October 10, 1914. "It thrilled me," she confessed, "that men of all nations—Eastern and Western—gathered in his home, proof that true greatness speaks in a universal language and complete universal admiration." Sarojini loved Kasturba apart from having the most reverent admiration for her. She described her as "a kindly gentle lady, with the indomitable spirit of the martyr." Kasturba was "busy at a hundred small housewifely tasks, like any other woman, and not the heroine of martyrdom." Sarojini soon began to feel a protective interest in Mrs. Gandhi and a great unbreakable bond established itself between the small courageous woman whose god was her husband, and the more dynamic active worker, who travelled to all parts of India and became the Voice of the Congress.

## *8 The Indian Scene Again*

Gopal Krishna Gokhale returned to India soon after Sarojini and he was followed by Mahatma Gandhi, who reached Bombay early in 1915. Gandhiji was ordered to leave England as soon as possible because of a severe attack of pleurisy which almost proved fatal. When Sarojini returned to India she immediately contacted Mahatma Gandhi; but she never saw Gokhale again. He died in February. Before this great tragedy befell the nation, another poignant event occurred which deeply affected Sarojini. Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya died a few days before Gokhale and not knowing his own impending fate, Gokhale wrote the following letter to Sarojini in sympathy. "I wish I had been anywhere near so that I could have gone to see you personally. I do hope your grief will break into songs that will abide." "These words were written on February 12, with no apparent premonition of his

own fast approaching end," remarked Sarojini Naidu. The letter reached her on the "sad occasion of her father's *sradh* ceremony in Calcutta."

Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya died in his home in Lovelock Street, Calcutta, and Sarojini was not there when he breathed his last. She was in Hyderabad. On the day of the death Harin relates a strange story.<sup>32</sup> He was at a party given by Sarojini at The Golden Threshold and suddenly an old beggar woman appeared at the gate and cried: "I shall not ask for alms of you. He who gave generously has gone, gone, gone. The giver has gone." The beggar woman then disappeared, much to the astonishment of those present at the party, and a telegram was delivered soon after, saying that Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya had passed away. Renendranath, his third son, was in Calcutta, and performed the funeral rites.

As soon as the telegram was received in Hyderabad, Sarojini, Suhasini, the youngest sister, and Harindranath left for Calcutta, and their mother received them with the words: "Here is your father alive, your mother is dead." She shed no tears, but her hair had become snow-white since her husband's death. A year later she herself died. During that year of living death, after Aghorenath had passed away, Varada Sundari was quiet, calm and resigned. Her youngest children were still in their teens, not much older than Sarojini's own children. Much sorrow had visited Sarojini Naidu, but 1915 was nevertheless an arduous year for her. Mahatma Gandhi had by now established his Satyagraha Ashram near Ahmedabad, for he had promised Gokhale not to take up politics in India till he had rested for a year, and it was during this time that he developed the simple austerity of ashram life.

After the death of Gokhale, the Hon. Mr. V. S. Srinivasa Sastri, the "golden-voiced orator", as he was generally known, became President of the Servants of India Society, and Sarojini wrote to him on the occasion of the Tenth Anniversary of the Society. To the many greetings and congratulations from all parts of India on this anniversary which were at the same time mingled with sorrow and melancholy at the absence of the Founder and leader of so philanthropic a Society, Sarojini added to the garland of greetings "a pendant of fresh blown buds" in the shape of the

<sup>32</sup> *Life and Myself, op. cit.*

“Children’s Tribute to the great Gokhale”.<sup>33</sup> She wrote: “Sometimes I think that the supremest service of this incomparable servant of India to his country lies in the everlasting inspiration of his death, more even than in the actual achievement of his lifetime: for it has already proved a miraculous divining rod over the hidden springs of national feeling everywhere.” Even in a “self-centred city, like Hyderabad, so proudly traditional and isolated from the outside world,” the loss of Gokhale was much felt. Men and women of all classes, creeds and castes had “assembled to give expression in six different languages to their sorrow, and the Mussalman ladies vied with the Hindu ladies in the eloquence and sincerity of their mourning.” But most touching to Sarojini was the tribute of the children of Hyderabad “for one whose life so abundantly fulfilled all their desire and capacity for hero worship.” Hyderabad possessed a Dramatic Association of young Hindu and Mussalman children, a society well aware of the need of the country. Eight months earlier they had answered Mr. Gokhale’s “golden voice” on behalf of the Indians of South Africa. Men and women gave wealth and jewels for the good cause; young patriots, according to Sarojini Naidu, “coined their love and talent into gold and gave a goodly contribution in response to their hero’s call for aid.” After his death, his inspiration no less fired their enthusiasm for he was enshrined in their young hearts. At the time of the anniversary of the Servants of India Society, these ardent souls went to Sarojini Naidu and one of them said: “We wish to make our contribution to your Gokhale Memorial Fund. We will stage a play.” On June 9, a play was accordingly staged in front of a large and representative audience, including a number of Purdah Nashins, and the play was brilliantly performed. It was composed by Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, Sarojini’s seventeen year old brother and was a fantasy from the Arabian Nights. Harindranath has since become a famous playwright and poet.

A sensation was caused in Hyderabad. Sarojini comments in her letter to the Hon. V. S. Srinivasa Sastri: “The staging was beautiful, and everything was as perfect as they could render it, not only for the honour of art, but for the honour of the cause for which they were giving their time and talent, the honour of

<sup>33</sup> *Speeches and Writings of Sarojini Naidu, op. cit., p. 36 et seq.*

Gokhale's memory." Earlier, when Gokhale himself had met Harin, he had exclaimed: "This child's genius gives me electric thrills." Six hundred rupees were raised for the Gokhale Memorial Fund, to be used to build a local memorial and Sarojini Naidu ends her letter: "And so the generations are linked together by the continuity of ideals and a common love inspired by a great and selfless spirit."

Soon after her return to India, Sarojini started her lecture tour of Andhra. She addressed a meeting on the anniversary day of the Andhra Jatheeya Kala Sabha, Masulipatam with Shri Sankaran Nair in the chair. In this address Sarojini stressed the need for "National Consciousness". "For years now it has been my great privilege to be more and more closely identified with what is known as the younger generation," she remarked. "In almost every great city of India I have come into joyful and intimate comradeship with the young men who are going to make the history of tomorrow. In the different cities of India, I have come closely in touch with what is called the 'new spirit' in India—with what has mostly been called the Indian Renaissance." Sarojini felt that it was good for Indians to go to England for their studies, "For it is England that is the training ground of Indian patriots."

Sarojini praised the dignity of labour. She was glad she was giving away medals "to those who are leaving to work with their hands, to recognize the dignity of manual labour, as it should stand side by side with the dignity of scholarship." She remarked: "This, coming from me with traditions of scholarship behind me, should count for something, because it means that those who in the past considered that self-expression was merely a monopoly of intellectual authority have begun to realize that there are other and various forms of such self-expression." Sarojini felt that everyone should be Indians and not cling to other labels. Service to the motherland was supreme in every form from the sweeper onwards. "More and more young men are beginning to realize that the dignity of India does not consist merely in having degrees of Oxford and Cambridge or in becoming Lawyers, Doctors or Government servants, but depends also on having that expert knowledge of arts, science and industry which alone can give back to India her once central place in human civilization."

On July 5, 1915, Sarojini Naidu spoke at the fourteenth

anniversary of the Young Men's Literary Association in Guntur, on the "Ideal of Civil Life." She spoke particularly now to the young. "All over India today," she remarked, "there is a new spirit awakening that thrills the heart of the young generation from end to end, from North and South, East and West, the spirit that is called the renaissance, not a new spirit but a spirit reborn and revitalized in the past that held exactly such ideas and dreams that taught by precept and example, such principles as you wish to fulfil in your life for the service of your country, whether you go to Bengal and speak with young men with the passionate spirit of ideals, whether you go to the Mahratta country and see those intellectual youths with their spirit focussed and ready for any sacrifice, and if you go to South India and see those vigorous and intellectual types of eyes drinking every word set before them, you realize the young spirit is the same, though it speaks in different vernaculars."

The value of the individual held tremendous importance for Sarojini. She was therefore a true democrat. Every man and woman counted and Sarojini accentuated this aspect of an individual's worth again and again. "I want you all to remember that the greatness of a country will not lie in its great men, but in its average good men, who realize the daily life of purity, truth, courage in overcoming such obstacles that stand in the way of progress by giving equal opportunities to all human beings, of all castes and creeds and not to withhold from any man or woman his or her God-given inviolable right to live to the fullest capacity. That is the meaning of social reform."

Sarojini Naidu's activities covered a varied field during 1915, and she seems to have been away from her home for almost the whole year. Her tour was mostly confined to various parts of Andhra during this year. Inspired by Gokhale and Gandhi, she was now giving more and more of her time to national service, even though her political career had not as yet been fully launched. After speaking at the Young Men's Literary Association at Guntur, she delivered a lecture at the A.E.L.M. College Hall in July on "Unlit Lamps of India." She appreciated the fact that the men of India were capable of giving women the same chances which she had possessed. It was obvious that despite recognizing the wrongs under which women suffered, and their low status in life,

she admired greatly the serene domestic nature of women and felt there was "not a single house where spiritual ideals did not survive in the richest vitality", they were "living ideals that make the names of the women of our country and literature so immortal." But Sarojini, while revelling in the Golden Age of Ancient India, never forgot the present. It was "now" that she lived!

During her tour of Andhra, Sarojini visited a small ladies' club started in Pithapuram by the Rani of Pitapuram and Kamala Sathianadhan. Sarojini spoke to an orthodox audience of ladies and insisted that the time was "ripe when not men but women themselves should learn to recognize the sacred and inalienable trust and responsibility of their womanhood, in shaping the destinies of the country."

August 1915 found Sarojini in Bombay. That she had the strength to travel the length and breadth of India despite her poor health was indeed a great miracle, but her urge to speak, to deliver her message to all parts of India, was her main object at the time. She spoke to the Students' Brotherhood in Bombay on "The Message of Life" on August 21, 1915. The Students' Brotherhood had invited Sarojini sometime earlier to deliver the annual address; but she had hesitated, "not because her health did not permit but because of the poverty of the spirit that had not enough wealth to give to so many hungry and clamouring spirits. But considering it to be her duty as well as her privilege, she accepted the invitation." "The Message of Life" was one of unity and brotherhood.

During the year 1915, Sarojini still showed an interest in the war effort and read her renowned poem *The Gift of India* at the Hyderabad Ladies' War Relief Association in December 1915. Some of the lines in these verses are indeed very beautiful. Sarojini was a born and natural giver, and she rejoiced in the fact that India's sons were risking their lives to help India's rulers. It was not only a matter of rejoicing, however, but of sorrow as well, that so many stalwart men were sacrificed in the Great War.

"Is there ought you need that my hands withhold,  
 Rich gifts of raiment or grains of gold?  
 Lo! I have flung to the East and West  
 Priceless treasures torn from my breast,

And yielded the sons of my stricken womb  
To the drum beats of duty, the sabres of doom.”

Yes, Bharat Mata had offered her sons to protect other lands;  
but

“When the terror and tumult of hate shall cease  
And life be refashioned on anvils of peace,  
And your love shall offer memorial thanks  
To the comrades who fought in your dauntless ranks,  
And you honour the deeds of the deathless ones  
Remember the blood of thy martyred sons.”

This poem was published as a small booklet and widely distributed. It was Sarojini’s patriotic gift not to the British Empire, but to her own India.

During the Session of the Indian National Congress in 1915, Sarojini read her poem *Awake*. This poem, also with another was sold at a function held by the School of Printing Technology at Jadavpur in 1962, when Sarojini’s daughter, the Governor of West Bengal, Smt. Padmaja Naidu, held a meeting to collect funds for the Defence of India. Smt. Padmaja Naidu recited the poem.

During the years 1914-1915 Sarojini seemed to have travelled widely in India. She again addressed students at the Madras Students’ Convention on December 17, 1917, at Gokhale Hall. Mrs. Annie Besant presided. Two days later she was speaking to Moslem students at the Young Men’s Muslim Association in Madras on “The Ideals of Islam”. The Hon. Mr. Yakub Hasan presided. The next day she spoke to teachers in the same city at the Teachers’ College, Saidapet, and the same day she spoke to students again on “The Hope of Tomorrow.” It was an open air lecture at Gowri Vilas, Royapettah, and James H. Cousins, Theosophist and poet, presided. On December 21, Sarojini Naidu gave a lecture on “The Congress League Scheme” at the Madras Special Provincial Conference and at the Madras Presidency Association on the 22nd on “Co-operation Among Communities.” At the Law College, she addressed students again, with the Principal, Mr. Arthur Davies in the Chair.

From the South, she journeyed to the North, no doubt enjoying immensely the beautiful climate changing to spring. The varied

landscape and the Indian scene from the seashore of Madras to the mountains of the Punjab must have greatly delighted her. She delivered an address before an audience of students of the Kanya Maha Vidyalaya at Jullunder on March 30, 1918, on the "Emancipation of Indian Women", and the next day at a prize distribution of the same institution, she spoke on "A Vision of India's Future Women."

On April 6, Sarojini spoke at Bradlaugh Hall, Lahore on "National Education of Women." She thundered from her platform: "You talk of Indian womanhood, you talk of the courage and devotion that took Savitri to the very realms of death to win back her husband's soul, yet to the Savitris of today you deny that power to win back the national life from the depths of death."

In May 1918, Sarojini was back again in Madras, and spoke at the Madras Provincial Conference in Kanjeevaram at which she presided. Madras seemed to have attracted her greatly, for in July she again came to the city and addressed the gathering at the opening of the National School for girls in Mylapore.

On September 1, 1918, Sarojini travelled all the way to Bombay to attend a special Congress meeting. Here she passed a resolution on "Equal qualifications between men and women." In between Sarojini had travelled to Bijapur and passed a resolution at the Provincial Conference on "Women's Franchise." The resolution ran: "That this Conference welcomes the requisition from the ladies of Bombay inviting the support of this conference for women's franchise in India, and franchise should be given to women at the same time as to men under suitable conditions, and recommends that this resolution may be forwarded through the Provincial Congress Committee to the Congress." The resolution was eloquently moved and unanimously passed.

The end of the year 1918, saw Sarojini Naidu in Delhi where she spoke at the All India Social Conference held in the Congress Pandal on December 18.

How Sarojini travelled so extensively has always been a matter of wonder. She kept in constant touch with friends and families, politics and personalities, society and social work, Congress and communities, sustaining through it all a prolific energy, tremendous good cheer, an astounding capacity for work and a melting love for humanity.

## 9 *Early Friendships*

Sarojini Naidu, from earliest childhood was rich in her friendships, and as she came more and more into the political field, her love and regard for her fellow workers increased greatly. She was a true friend in need and a saga could be written of her friendships alone—so warm exciting and alive were her human relations. She treasured individual contacts more than even her poetry or her politics. There lay her genius, the art of making and keeping friends.

Dr. C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyar has told me that when the agitation for Indian Independence began and Dr. Besant came out with her clarion call, Sarojini put aside her literary and domestic activities and plunged into the struggle for women's emancipation and for self rule in India. During the years 1915 to 1919, Dr. Besant, Sarojini and Dr. C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyar were in continuous contact and mutual co-operation. Sarojini then established herself in Bombay, and associated enthusiastically with leaders like Jinnah and Umar Sobani. The latter was a devoted friend, and to him she addressed some poignant lines published in the latest volume of her works, *The Feather of the Dawn*. Umar Sobani was a rich Moslem philanthropist of Bombay and among the first of that community to join the non-violent struggle started by Mahatma Gandhi. He died on July 6, 1926, and Sarojini wrote the following verses to him—*To Umar*:

“You were not of my kindred or my creed,  
 O kingly heart, but closer still you stood  
 In gracious bond of tender brotherhood  
 Than they who blossomed from my father's seed.  
 Alas! what bitter destiny decreed  
 I, who stilled the fierce, blind fangéd brood  
 Of pain that mocked your proud, sad solitude,  
 Should be afar in your dire, ultimate need?

I stand beside your narrow resting place,  
 I call and call, you will not answer me,  
 Does the earth lie too heavy on your face,

Or is the silence of your year-long sleep  
 Too dear, too incorruptible, too deep  
 For friendship, pardon, grief or memory?"<sup>34</sup>

Towards the latter part of 1915, Sarojini returned from her extensive tours in Andhradesh, Bombay and other parts of India, and one of her first duties was to preside at the memorial meeting held to mourn the death of Sir Pherozechah Mehta, at the Bai Pherozebai Hall in Secunderabad on November 28, 1915. Sir Pherozechah and Lady Mehta were among Sarojini's good friends. Sir Pherozechah was known as the uncrowned king of Bombay, and his death came as a great blow to Sarojini. It meant the loss of another leader in the same year as Gokhale, her dear friend and *guru*. At the condolence meeting, Sarojini stressed the fact that Sir Pherozechah had been an outstanding figure in the Bombay Presidency and had "represented the vitality of the nation." He was an Indian first, though a Parsi, and was proud to be one and "never afraid of popular displeasure or censure." He "laid his life at the altar of his motherland." He possessed "indomitable courage" and loyal friendship.

When Sir Pherozechah died, Sarojini cried: "Who can sufficiently extol the sweetness of the man and that invincible sense of chivalry? Who will sum up the tenderness of his heart that made him the champion of women? . . . He was the golden link between the experience of the older and the enthusiasm of the younger generation."

One of the earliest friendships Sarojini formed, which was to last her all her life, was with the little woman, Kasturba Gandhi. Sarojini first saw her when she visited Gandhiji in London in connection with her work. Gandhiji was eating his frugal meal and Kasturba was in the background, busy as usual in tending to the comforts of her husband. Sarojini was instantly overcome by the sight of this small serene woman, and so impressed that she wrote an interesting letter about her new friend to Lady Mehta soon after her return from England in February 1915. She said: "I venture to write to you as I see by the papers that you are the presiding genius of the forthcoming function to welcome my friend

<sup>34</sup> Umar—*The Feather of the Dawn*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

Mrs. Gandhi home again.”<sup>35</sup> Sarojini felt that though Bombay was specially privileged to accord a personal welcome, the women of India as a whole should desire to honour “one, who, by her race, qualities of courage, devotion, and self-sacrifice has so signally justified and fulfilled the high traditions of Indian womanhood.”

Sarojini realized that she was one of the few people who were privileged to share the intimate home life of the Gandhis in England. Two or three memories of this brief and happy period in London are profoundly cherished by her. Kasturba Gandhi held a special magnetism for her. This little woman born and bred in an orthodox family, and yet a strong and positive partner to her valiant husband was strangely fascinating. Sarojini said of her: “This kindly and gentle lady, whose name has become a household word in our midst, with her broken health and her invincible fortitude, the fragile body of a child and the indomitable spirit of a martyr” was indeed the spirit of Indian wifehood.

The first meeting of these two great women is vividly described by Sarojini in the letter to Lady Mehta: “It was on a rainy August afternoon last year that I climbed the staircase of an ordinary London dwelling house to find myself confronted with a true Hindu idyll of radiant and ascetic simplicity.” There was the “great South African leader who, to quote Mr. Gokhale’s apt phrase, had moulded heroes out of clay,” and his wife, “busy and content as though she were a mere modest housewife absorbed in a hundred details of household service, and not the world-famed heroine of a hundred noble sufferings in a nation’s cause.”

On the occasion when a great meeting of all nationalities took place Kasturba “sat by her husband’s side, simple and serene and dignified in the hour of triumph as she had proved herself simple and serene and dauntless in the hour of trial and tragedy.” In one hand Kasturba had “held aloft the lamp of her country’s honour” in another she had worked “at rough garments for wounded soldiers,” thus accomplishing the task of “a wife beside her husband.”

Kasturba had been away from India, in South Africa, for a long time and longed to return to her home. This detour via England in 1914, was a great strain on her, for she fretted for her children

<sup>35</sup> *Speeches and Writings of Sarojini Naidu, op. cit., p. 18.*

and her country. And yet Sarojini wrote: "When her husband soon after felt the call, strong and urgent, to offer his services to the Empire and to form the Ambulance Corps, that has since done such splendid work, she reached the high water-mark of her loyal devotion to him for she accepted his decision and strengthened his purpose with a prompt and willing renunciation of all her most dear and pressing desires. This is to me the true real meaning of *sati*." And it was this ready capacity for self-negation that made Sarojini recognize anew that the true standard of a country's greatness lay not so much in its intellectual prosperity as the underlying spiritual ideas of love and service and sacrifice that inspired and sustained the mothers of the world.

Sarojini always pointed out that the men of India should learn to realize that it is through their own lives and character that women could find an opportunity to fulfil their high ideals of womanhood. Almost every woman in India is a hero worshipper, and her hero is her husband. That husband, as Mahatma Gandhi did, must inspire his wife to bring out all her potential qualities of greatness. When a husband is unworthy of the ideals of his wife, then he has failed her. Great men were needed in order to bring to birth the seed of greatness in women.

But how did Sarojini herself then, become so great a woman? Did her husband bring out this greatness? Perhaps not, for he was the quiet stay-at-home and the ideal physician, a healer of humanity; but he was happy and large-hearted enough to realize the genius in his wife, and he encouraged her to fulfil her aspirations and allowed her ample opportunity to accomplish her mission in life. His own life was exemplary—a great doctor, a man of integrity and a philanthropist, he must have been a source of continued inspiration of goodness and kindness to his wife; but she was the active partner, even though a woman—and he stood by and gave her his blessings.

Sarojini, in her frequent visits to Bengal, soon got to know the Tagores and became an intimate visitor to Jorasanko, Tagore's ancestral home. She was also a friend of C. F. Andrews, and they shared much in common because of their mutual interest in Indentured Labour. On March 15, 1919, Sarojini was asked to speak at the unveiling of Rabindranath Tagore's portrait by the Editor of the *Hindu*, Mr. Kasturiranga Iyengar at the Hall of the

Students' Home in Madras. "Charlie" Andrews was to have spoken, but he was unavoidably detained and Sarojini Naidu was asked to take his place. She adequately praised the poet and remarked that she was in England when his *Gitanjali* won world fame. She truly understood Bengal's and the world's great poet, when she exclaimed: "For one to adequately understand the real meaning of his mystic genius, one must take into account the traditional mysticism, and the traditional spirituality of Bengal. Every race had its own traditional genius that transmitted itself from age to age. Genius, like character, beauty, and many other things in life was due largely to environment. The beauty born of the murmuring of Bengal forests, of those green fields and wide rivers and the dank July clouds of Bengal had been transmitted into the glory and scenery of Rabindranath's poetry."

Tagore's heritage, according to Sarojini was of "purely religious instincts of a Brahmanical race. A great ancestor of his was one of the great spiritual reformers of modern days. When they analysed the quality, the significance and mission of his genius, they went back to the foundations of the mystic reform of Vaishnavite Bengal which today has given to the world beauty that was not of one race and ideals that were not of one nation. All beauty was one and universal." At a time when the world was torn with conflicts and hatreds, Rabindranath Tagore had "brought back the message that spirit alone was essential. His religious teaching was a message of deliverance to the western world which was lost in the greed for material and temporal power."

Sarojini was in England when Tagore's *Gitanjali* "spread his fame across the horizon of western life like a rainbow." These poems were not surprising to Indians, said Sarojini, because "they were accustomed to his teaching as it formed part of their undeniable inheritance, but to the west it went as the simple, direct, immortal and memorable message." It carried a message of simple renunciation.

Sarojini Naidu intensely loved Tagore when she cried: "To him the laughter of a child had a divine meaning and a divine beauty," for to him children forever played "on the seashore of endless worlds."

Sarojini could never read Bengali and therefore, never read Tagore's poems in the original. Dr. B. C. Roy, often used to taunt

Sarojini about her ignorance of Bengali and once he said to her: "I feel that all Bengalis should read Tagore in the original and not in English translation." Sarojini replied that she could understand Tagore if his poetry was read out to her in Bengali and this was one of her favourite occupations. She adored Tagore's songs and was endlessly delighted with *Rabindra sangeet*. I have heard her at parties go into ecstasies over these songs and imploring ladies to sing to her. How wrapt was her face and dreamy her eyes when the soft sweet melodies of this great poet were chanted. Among her favourite songs were *Ananda Loke*, and I still remember her deep absorption, when at one of the last parties given to her in Bengal by Lady Protima Mitter in the winter of 1948, a few months before Sarojini passed away. She listened to the ladies sing: "If no one should hear your call—then walk on alone." This was also one of Mahatma Gandhi's favourite songs, *Akla Cholo Re*, and it was on the basis of these valiant words that the famous sculptor, Roy Choudhury, created Mahatma Gandhi's statue.

Sarojini's friendship for Tagore lasted throughout her life; she not only admired his poetry and songs, but greatly appreciated his paintings. In December 1933, Sarojini arranged a Tagore Week in Bombay and organized exhibitions of his paintings, dramatizations of his plays and lectures on his genius. Tagore himself arrived with fifty members from Santiniketan on December 23, and an exhibition was opened in the Town Hall. Two hundred and sixty paintings were on view. They included a hundred and sixty by Rabindranath Tagore, the others were by Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose.

Sarojini soon became a familiar and respected figure in Santiniketan and a Governor of Visva Bharati. She was treated as one of its inmates on her frequent visits, and when, as Governor of the U.P. she visited Santiniketan after 1947 the formality of having a body-guard with her annoyed her greatly and she could not tolerate having to be "protected" in a place which had formed part of her life.

On December 22, 1948, Sarojini Naidu paid her last visit to Santiniketan and lunched with Rabindranath Tagore's son Rathindranath at Uttarayan. Amar Nath Jha, Vice-Chancellor of Allahabad University, was there and gave her a copy of the ad-

dress he was to deliver at the Convocation the next day. Sarojini Naidu was the Acharya Devi and presided at the Convocation. Thus did Sarojini's connection with Santiniketan and her friendship with the Tagore family, continue till the very last.

## 10 *The Broken Wing*

Five years after the publication of her last book, *The Bird of Time*, Sarojini published her third important book of poems, *The Broken Wing*. There was great excitement among her friends and well-wishers before and after the appearance of this collection of poems. *The Indian Ladies' Magazine* noted: "It is probably under this title, *The Broken Wing*, that Mrs. Sarojini Naidu's new volume of poems will be published. The first poem of the collection is entitled *The Broken Wing* and it is interesting to know that the late Mr. Gokhale referring to Mrs. Naidu's indifferent health, said to her one day: 'Why should a song-bird like you have a broken wing?' It is expected the book will be included in Mr. Heinemann's autumn list." And so it was. Mr. Amar Nath Jha possessed a copy of *The Broken Wing*, sent from the library of Edmund Gosse himself. Pasted in it was a letter dated December 21, 1916 from William Heinemann to Gosse, saying: "Here-with another of your God-children. I had hoped to get the book out to Sarojini before Christmas, but it has been quite impossible. She ought to be pleased with it when she sees it."<sup>36</sup>

In this volume Sarojini stressed her ill-health, for she was at this time tired and worn out with her arduous tasks and her numerous journeys. But her spirit never faltered. In her poem, *Invincible*, she wrote:

"Oh fate, between the grinding stones of pain,  
Tho' you have crushed my life like broken grain,  
Lo! I will leaven it with my tears and knead  
The bread of hope to comfort and to feed

<sup>36</sup> *The Poetry of Sarojini Naidu*, by Dr. Amar Nath Jha, *Hindustan Review*, Special Sarojini Naidu Supplement, April, 1949.

The myriad hearts for whom no harvests blow  
Save little herbs of woe."

Here is a poem obviously melodramatic and a little prone to self pity. The rhymes are not found spontaneously, one feels, and yet there is a pathos which is touching and which is so much Sarojini Naidu!

But her moods quickly changed and soon she sang of her "flowering soul" and "in those two words we have the key to Sarojini Naidu's triumph over persistent physical disability. Under all and every adverse circumstance her soul would flower, and, like Robert Louis Stevenson, she wrote some of her loveliest verse when she was too feeble to rise from her bed."<sup>37</sup>

*The Broken Wing* was a richer, more mature work than the first two volumes of poems, just as *The Bird of Time* was from an older pen than *The Golden Threshold*. Sarojini was thirty-eight, experienced in the world of politics and social work, a petted darling of literary circles in India and England, a friend of Mahatma Gandhi, and a woman of poise and dignity who had suffered and knew she would suffer further, because of the life she was about to choose. By 1917, her mind had been made up. She would now gradually eschew poetry and offer herself to the service of her country, unhesitatingly and without reserve. She had to serve one master. Hitherto, she had revelled in the world of fancy, in her ivory tower she had dreams of ecstasy and love, but she would descend now and enter within prison walls and the battlefield of non-violent warfare.

At times one wonders why Sarojini after 1917 wrote nothing of great account. That she was still a poet she was well aware. When she visited America in 1929 she referred to herself as a "singer of songs", and often this was her title for herself. She was the "songbird"—and yet why did she not write any more songs? Was it because she had neither the strength, the time nor the inclination to babble of sweet nothings when there was so much more real work ahead, or was it because the new world of poetry, the T. S. Eliot regime, had dawned and she felt she would never gain a recognized place in it? And so, in 1917, Sarojini

<sup>37</sup> *Some Great Women of India*, by Kamala Satthianadhan, Longman's Indian Reading Books, 1930, p. 38.

wrote her last book of good lyric verse, and submerged herself in the national work ahead of her, without a pang, without a tear. Perhaps she had been wise to give up poetry at the time she did, for when T. S. Eliot's school of poetry emerged, Sarojini would certainly not have found a place for her rather Victorian lyrics.

The strange charm of Sarojini Naidu, however, was that she created ivory towers even inside prison walls. Though she may never have written poetry as happily and fluently as she did up to 1917, she nevertheless constructed an atmosphere of artistic ease wherever she went, and even when she sat in her easy chair in the midst of thirsty, hungry satyagrahis, there was the aura of the poet around her.

In *The Broken Wing*, before she broke her staff, burying it "certain fathoms" in the earth and drowned her book "deeper than did ever plummet sound", she allowed herself freely to float away in her dream world. Her rhyming and rhythm are also stronger than her previous verses, though still nothing much more than sweet lyrics. She is a watcher of life and a lover of the whole country scene:

"An ox-cart stumbles upon the rocks,  
 And a wistful music pursues the breeze  
 From a shepherd's pipe as he gathers his flocks  
 Under the pipal trees.  
 And a young Banjara driving her cattle  
 Lifts up her voice as she glitters by  
 In an ancient ballad of love and battle  
 Set to the beat of a mystic tune,  
 And the faint stars gleam in the eastern sky  
 To herald a rising moon."<sup>38</sup>

She suffered nostalgic dreams of the past. She now probably felt she had travelled far from the carefree days of her girlhood, presided over by that weird magician her father. In *Salutation* to his spirit she weeps:

<sup>38</sup> *June Sunset, The Broken Wing*, William Heinemann, London, 1917, p. 55.

“Farewell, farewell, O brave and tender sage,  
O Mystic, jester, golden-hearted child!”

Her lines to Gokhale also betray a longing for the past. In this volume Krishna plays a prominent part. The blue God haunts her and his music forever stirs her soul to restless longing. She asks:

“Why didst thou play thy matchless flute  
’neath the kadamb tree  
And wound thy idly dreaming heart  
with poignant melody?  
O where thou goest, I must go  
my flute-player, with thee.”

In this book too are verses to M. K. Gandhi and Jinnah. Strangely she brings these two builders of India and Pakistan into close contact in her book, and indeed in those halcyon days of Hindu-Moslem Unity, they were together.

Sarojini indulges in a “constellation” of love poems in *The Broken Wing*. Twenty-four verses form the Trilogy called *The Temple*, with the sub-title *The Pilgrimage of Love*. These are divided into three parts. The first, *The Gate of Delight* deals with Love’s fulfilment. Here, she tenders her life to her love and offers all to the object of her passion. This section contains eight poignant love poems including *The Offering*, *Ecstasy* and the *Vision of Love*, in which the poet loses all other consciousness except the fact that she exists in her beloved. The second part, *The Path of Tears*, brings out the anguish of all true lovers, who centre their devotion on one earthly object and feel the frustration and chaos which must follow, for human love is frailty and must meet with anguish. The woman realizes that her lover’s face has turned away and in her eight poems she pours out the agony of a lonely heart, of a girl who has given her all and still feels the parched hungry pangs of love unsatisfied. The opening poem, *The Sorrow of Love*, shows the woman who offers her love and craves its return but is repulsed. The second, *The Silence of Love*, shows the girl beseeching: “Give what you will, if ought be yours to give!” There is anger and resentment in the third, *The Menace of Love*:

“The Tumult of your own wild heart shall smite you  
 With strong and sleepless pinions of desire,  
 The subtle hunger in your veins shall bite you  
 With the swift and unrelenting fangs of fire.

When youth and spring-passion shall betray you  
 And mock your proud rebellion with defeat,  
 God knows, O Love, if I shall save or slay you  
 As you lie spent and broken at my feet!”

In the fifth poem of this group the flouted woman declares that death may even be welcome, for in the verse before, the lover had “plucked her heart and broken it”, he had “flung it down”. *Love's Guerdon* is too strong—then why should not death be the remedy? But her heart is less bitter and more reconciled in *Supplication*:

“Restore me not the rapture that is gone,  
 The hope forbidden and the dream denied,  
 The ruined purpose and the broken pride . . . .  
 Grant in the brief compassion of an hour  
 A gift of tears to save my stricken soul!”

The last part is the *Sanctuary*; the reaction comes and the girl gives herself up to martyrdom, asking to be crushed by her lover like a “lemon leaf or basil bloom”, to be burnt “like a sandal grain.” There are outpourings in the *Fear of Love*, *The Illusion of Love*, *The Worship of Love*:

“Let my soul die till naught but an intenser  
 Fragrance of my deep worship doth remain—  
 And every twilight star shall hold its breath  
 And praise thee for my death!”

The last of this part, *Devotion*, is short and very forthright:

“Take my flesh to feed your dogs if you choose  
 Water your garden-trees with my blood if you will  
 Turn my heart into ashes, my dreams into dust—  
 Am I not yours, O Love, to cherish or kill?”

Strangle my soul and fling it into the fire!  
 Why should my true love falter or fear or rebel  
 Love, I am yours to lie in your heart like a flower,  
 Or burn like a weed for your sake in the flame of hell."

These verses are criticized as "more rhetoric than poetry, more violence than strength." *The Temple* is also Sarojini's "greatest regulated success" . . . . "Apart from Mrs. Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, there is "no poetical sequence in English of such sustained passion addressed by a woman to a man."<sup>39</sup> In the opinion of some Sarojini Naidu lovers, however, *The Broken Wing* is disappointing. James H. Cousins, in his chapter on Sarojini Naidu in *The Renaissance of India*, remarks that in "its preoccupation with love, it appears to go off into a cul-de-sac and in the pursuit of this particular phase of her art, she sometimes achieves something that is perilously like insincerity, and an emotional untidiness that occasionally mars her art." "Our poetess has flung herself into an emotional exaggeration that obscures the clear vision of the spirit, and she pays the penalty in positive ugliness" in such lines as when she offers her "flesh to the dogs".

A strange morbidity seems to have enveloped Sarojini at this time. Being very much a subjective poet, one is tempted to ask—What is troubling her? Was it because of some great emotional disturbance that Sarojini suffered at this time? Was it from some unknown frustration? Was it because of some disappointment? But her life shows no trace of any such calamities, unless one realizes that even though her poetry may be subjective, she never in her life made a frank confession to another human being. She lived in supreme dignity, always comforting others but laughing away her own passions and pains and seldom seeking sympathy and burdening others with her sorrows. Friends such as Gokhale may have guessed at this inner sadness for once he said: "Do you know, I feel that an abiding sadness underlies all that unflinching brightness of yours. Is it because you have come so near death that its shadows still cling to you?" Sarojini answered: "No, I have come so near life that its fires have burnt me."

Like the twenty-four poems in *The Temple*, Sarojini's life was

<sup>39</sup> *Indian Writing in English*, By K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, Asia Publishing House, 1962, p. 184.

one of sadness and gladness, of tears and laughter, of pain and pleasure, but in the end the love which reigned in her heart was more for a mystic lover, than a human being, until God and The Eternal Spirit won a supreme victory—and in His love she found the real love she sought all her life—therefore her strange comingling of the lighter side of life with something deep and unfathomable, which expressed itself in her undaunted devotion to the ascetic Mahatma Gandhi and led her away from the strife and trouble of life to the glory of eternal peace!

PART THREE

*Torn Red Banners*

“Can ye measure the grief of the tears I weep  
Or compass the woe of the watch I keep?  
Or the pride that thrills thro’ my heart’s despair,  
And the hope that comforts the anguish of prayer?  
And the far sad and glorious vision I see  
Of the torn red banners of Victory?”

From: *The Gift of India*



## I *Birth of the Freedom Movement*

When the Indian National Congress met for the first time in 1885 in Bombay, a few delegates felt confident that the British Raj would gradually build a representative government in India, conceding the right to the people to govern in their own interests. Year after year the Congress passed resolutions demanding reforms and fundamental rights, hoping ultimately to be granted self-government. But it became evident that this was not the object of the British Government, and gradually the Indian National Congress began to realize that a long struggle lay ahead before India could achieve freedom. The 21st Session of the Congress held in Benares in 1905 "lodged its formal protest against the Partition of Bengal". In 1907, the Minto-Morley reforms were forced on the people and were not appreciated. As the Freedom Movement grew, the Swadeshi Movement, boycott and National Education programmes began to be implemented; leaders began to emerge more and more prominently. Sarojini Naidu's political stature grew with the movement and she early became a leader of the Congress.

1915 was a landmark in India's political history, for in this year the whole policy of the Indian National Congress was re-orientated towards a stronger bid for self-government, and in 1916 a new set of Reforms was contemplated. At this time the Hindus and Moslems were working together for self-government; the two communities were the greatest of friends.

In April 1916, Lokmanya Tilak started his Home Rule League and six months later Mrs. Besant's Home Rule League awakened the country to the full consciousness of political freedom. She also inaugurated a daily paper, *New India*, and later a weekly, *The Common Weal*, and the cry of Home Rule began to ring through the country. Lokmanya Tilak who had served long terms in prison was now a hero and was receiving ovations and purses everywhere, and to add to the force of the movement Mahatma Gandhi emerged. He had so far kept himself in the background in fulfilment

of his promise to Gokhale not to dabble in politics for a year after his return from England in 1915, but now he was drawn into the vortex of the freedom movement. He attended the Congress Session of 1916, and found Sarojini Naidu playing a prominent part in these proceedings. She had already created a stir in Bombay in 1915 when she had recited her poem *Awake* at the Indian National Congress meeting. Sir S. P. Sinha, later, Lord Sinha of Raipur, had presided, and had insisted on an open declaration of British policy in India. From now on Congress was becoming more virile, and greatly more self-assertive, beginning to make positive demands. Sarojini's poem awoke many a dormant soul. In her lyrical manner she beseeched the women of the varied communal groups of India to unite as one and serve the Motherland. From 1916 onwards the freedom movement took on a definite pattern. Gandhi was up and about and Jawaharlal Nehru, young and straining at the leash was anxious to accomplish something more than the Moderates contemplated, among whom his father, Motilal Nehru, was so prominent a member. He was on the lookout for some concrete action. At this time, during the 1916 Lucknow Congress Session, Mahatma Gandhi met Rajkumar Shukla and was persuaded to visit Champaran to help the peasants. This district in Bihar, the land of King Janaka, was replete with indigo plantations. The Champaran tenant was forced by law to plant three out of every twenty parts of his land with indigo whether he wished to do so or not. This system was known as the *Tinkathia*. Shukla was an agriculturist who was indignant at the treatment meted out to peasants by the landlords. He wanted the *Tinkathia* system abolished. He followed Gandhi about until the latter consented to go to Champaran to look into the matter. "This man caught hold of me at Lucknow, where I had gone for the Congress of 1916," said Gandhiji; and there was certainly no escape. Rajkumar Shukla's persistence started the Gandhian movement in India, and the Congress Session of 1916 proved momentous in inspiring Mahatma Gandhi gradually to divert his interest from affairs in South Africa and to concentrate his energies on freeing India with his new technique. His satyagraha movement cast a magic spell on Sarojini Naidu, and the "little man" from that date became almost her object of worship and gradually claimed her attention, more fully than Gokhale had ever done.

Gandhiji went to Champaran led by the persistent peasant Shukla, and the British planters immediately opposed Gandhi's enquiries into the labourers' troubles. He was served with a notice to quit Champaran, which he refused to do. He was then summoned by the Government and obeyed their command, but he was so dignified and reasonable in his arguments that the case against him was withdrawn and he was allowed to continue his probe into the complaints of the Champaran tenants. A committee of enquiry was set up by government, which led to the Champaran Agrarian Act. Despite the planters' engineering a poisonous agitation against Gandhiji, he undertook a tremendous programme of social work in the district by inaugurating schools, medical aid and village welfare. He had definitely won his first experiment in Civil Disobedience. The planters' raj came to an end. Thus did Gandhiji's non-violent methods start in India, and the impression they made on the country was tremendous. The first direct application of Civil Disobedience took deep root and revolutionized the technique of fighting for freedom.

When Jawaharlal Nehru first met Gandhiji during the Christmas of 1916, at the Lucknow Congress Session, he remarked: "All of us admired him for his heroic fight in South Africa, but he seemed very distant and different and impolitical to many of us young men. He refused to take part in Congress or national politics then and confined himself to the South African Indian question. Soon afterwards, his adventures and victory in Champaran, on behalf of the tenants of the planters, filled us with enthusiasm. We saw that he was prepared to apply his methods in India also and they promised success."<sup>1</sup>

The Indian National Congress Session of 1916 also proved momentous for Jawaharlal Nehru in that he first met Sarojini Naidu there. She delivered some brilliant speeches, and created an atmosphere of intoxicating enthusiasm for freedom. Her life work now began in earnest. She was also proving a tremendous source of inspiration to the younger leaders of the day and she had a forceful effect on Jawaharlal Nehru at the beginning of his political career. Her presence at the Session was most outstanding. Nehru remarked: "I remember being moved also in those days by

<sup>1</sup> *An Autobiography*, Jawaharlal Nehru, John Lane, The Bodley Head, London, 1936, p. 35.

a number of eloquent speeches by Sarojini Naidu. It was all nationalism and patriotism and I was a pure nationalist, my vague socialist ideas of college days having sunk into the background.”<sup>2</sup> Dr. C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyar also spoke brilliantly during this Session.

Sarojini was asked by the President, Ambica Chandra Mazumdar to move the resolution on the Arms Act. It was proposed in the presence of the Lieutenant Governor, Sir James Meston and Lady Meston. Meston had previously been commended for his tolerant views by Gokhale, and his presence at the Congress, therefore, was no surprise to those who knew his progressive attitude. When the Governor and his wife entered the Congress pavilion some one else was speaking, but the President asked Sarojini to speak though she was scheduled for later. This was to show the Governor how well an Indian woman could express herself in English. She held the audience breathless for half an hour. The Mestons were quite overcome with her eloquence and invited her to lunch at Government House. Though the Arms Act was really a masculine subject, Sarojini felt it was quite within the purview of a woman to speak on it. She explained that women were passive creatures; but felt the need to know that their men could adequately protect them if the need arose. How could men defend their hearths and homes if they were not allowed arms? Sarojini started her speech with the words: “Your Honour, President and unarmed citizens of India. It might seem a kind of paradox that I, a woman, should be asked to raise her voice on behalf of the disinherited manhood of the country, but it is suitable that I who represent the other sex, that is, the mothers of the men whom we wish to make men and not emasculated machines, should raise my voice on behalf of the future mothers of India to demand that the birthright of their sons should be given back to them, so that tomorrow’s India may be once more worthy of its yesterday. . . . Who but a woman,” she questioned, “shall raise a voice for you who have not been able in all these years to speak for yourselves with any effect?” (Cries of shame). The Mussalman, the Rajput and the Sikh had the pride of their inheritance to wield arms and it was an insult to them and their manhood to be denied this right. It was casting a slur on the ideals of the British Empire “to prevent

<sup>2</sup> *An Autobiography*, Jawaharlal Nehru, *Ibid.*

millions of brave young men willing to carry arms in the cause of the Empire." (Hear, Hear). Sarojini then appealed to the representative of the Emperor to plead India's rights. "I come from a city where every man is privileged to carry arms," remarked Sarojini, India should take a lesson from that Native State . . . Sarojini reiterated again the theme of her poem *The Gift of India* and pointed out that Indians had fought in the battle fields of Flanders, France, Gallipoli and Mesopotamia. And "when the hour comes for thanks, shall we not say to them for whom they fought, 'when the terror and tumult of hate shall cease, and life is re-fashioned, and when there is peace and you offer memorial thanks to the comrades that fought in the dauntless ranks, and you honour the deeds of the deathless ones, remember the blood of your martyred sons,' and remember the armies of India and restore to India her lost manhood." (Loud cheers).

A speech was also delivered at the All-India Moslem League at Lucknow in December 1916, when Sarojini Naidu supported the Resolution on "Self Government." She felt that she had not really a right to stand on the platform except that she had been a comrade of the younger generation of Mussalmans, and a champion of the rights of Moslem women. Years earlier she remembered the historic occasion when the "young generation of Islam" passed a new constitution bringing Hindus and Moslems together in the common dream of self-government. Looking around the audience she missed now the faces of two friends who were sincere in their ideals. One of them was Pandit Bishnu Narayan Dhar and the other Maulana Mohamed Ali. "I miss today," she cried, "with an intense and passionate sense of loss the magnetic presence of my friend and your great leader, Mohamed Ali." (Loud applause). She also praised Mr. Jinnah and said: "In the Hon. Mr. Jinnah you have a President who stands as a focus between Hindus and Mussalmans, and it is so because Mohamed Ali persuaded him to become a member of the League. During the last few days we have been suffused with enthusiasm and the most enthusiastic response of the united people has been given to the Indian nation in their demand for self-government. . . . The scheme for the post war reforms would not have been possible but for the fact that we millions in India speak with one voice, because we are one undivided and indivisible whole. I am not a politician. I speak

to you as a lover of my country and I charge you, Mussalmans of India, to remember the high responsibilities of your desires. No one can give to you what you do not have the capacity to take.”

Sarojini's impassioned plea for self-government for a nation united as one, must have wrung the hearts and raised the hopes of many young Indian patriots of the time, and Jawaharlal Nehru was among those listening to this lady, just ten years older than himself. Later, Sarojini went to Allahabad and delivered an inspiring speech on January 15, 1917. She spoke in the compound of the *Leader* office, and the President on this occasion was Pandit Motilal Nehru, while the audience represented a large gathering of men and women, European and Indian. The subject was “The Vision of Patriotism.” Sarojini commenced with: “Do you not think it is enough to cow the boldest heart to silence, to see so many thousands of people gathered together in the expectation of hearing an oration which it is not within the limitations of my gift to offer? I trust since my voice has been overworked in your province, you will extend to me, to the very end of my speech, the courtesy of perfect stillness, because, though I may share the enthusiasm of the great patriot, Surendranath Banerjea, I have not been gifted with his voice.” But she was later compared to Surendranath Banerjea himself and to the golden-voiced orator Srinivasa Sastri.

Courtesy, Sarojini always demanded at her meetings, and her presence, from the time she, as a slim young woman, spoke on public platforms to audiences little used to women appearing in public, to the time when she uttered home truths and claimed freedom and justice in later days, always commanded the greatest respect.

An eye witness who was at Lucknow during the Congress Session of 1916, remarked that the event proved to be a veritable national festival. There prevailed absolute equality of caste, creed and province and a spirit of real brotherhood. The “harmony earnestness and enthusiasm” during that week were most apparent, for apart from the Annual Congress Session many other conferences and conventions were held in Lucknow. At three of them at least, distinguished women like Dr. Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu and the Dowager Maharani of Cooch Behar were present,

either presiding or speaking. The 1916 Congress proved to be a confluence of the streams of leaders meeting and inspiring each other in a spirit of independence for the first time. Certainly Mahatma Gandhi and Sarojini Naidu amalgamated their forces at this time, and it was during this auspicious session also that the young Jawaharlal Nehru began to stand by his older colleagues. The Freedom Movement had indeed been inaugurated.

## 2 *Home and the Soul of India*

Every now and then, one is permitted a glimpse of Sarojini's home-life and her love for friends and relations in the midst of her busy and turbulent public career. Her great delight was to snatch a fortnight here and a month there, to return to Hyderabad, her beloved city, and recuperate in the happy company of husband and children. In 1916, she had lost her mother. The swift passing of both her parents must have been a shock from which she could not easily recover; but she showed no sign of private grief in the midst of her lecture tours and work for the Congress, and the women of India. In June 1916, she was found at home by her great friend Margaret E. Cousins. The latter says that Sarojini Naidu first came into her life in the centre of her home, after which their friendship grew in "ever-widening circles of influence, power and service." Sarojini, to Mrs. Cousins, henceforth became "poetess, peacemaker, politician, and priestess of India's freedom in foreign lands." Sarojini's home, The Golden Threshold in Hyderabad, was a quiet bungalow set in the midst of a walled-in compound and nestling in the shade of noble trees. A marble plate with the legend "Golden Threshold" greeted one at the entrance of the house, in the verandah of which hung a huge swing, so common in South Indian homes. The Golden Threshold, is now a hotel, but perhaps, one day our national Government could convert this renowned building into a Memorial for Sarojini Naidu.

In June 1916, Sarojini invited Margaret Cousins to break her journey on her way from Poona to Madras at Hyderabad and stay with her. There were many important matters to talk about. In actual fact, the fate of the women of India lay in the hands of

these two great women at that time. It was they who formulated and shaped the Women's Movement. The Golden Threshold was a cool and cultured home, combining Eastern and Western comforts and modern conveniences; but, says Mrs. Cousins: "Alas! the queen of the home was still so weak after a recent attack of illness that it was to her bedroom I was brought to greet her, and found (what all know) that her work in the world has been done in spite of physical handicaps which drive anyone less high-spirited and less optimistic than herself into despair."<sup>3</sup>

The next morning, Sarojini read her poems to her friend which were to be published in the collection entitled *The Broken Wing*. They and other poems were of "a depth of emotional intensity that swept me off my feet" says Mrs. Cousins. "I remember especially the love and reverence which she poured into her poems to her father and her national *guru*, Gokhale." Long discussions were held by these two great women on racial problems and women's emancipation. Margaret Cousins felt Sarojini's "sympathetic understanding of the struggle of women then proceeding for political and economic freedom in other countries and heard her wise attitude to feminist problems of the East," so forcible that she cried out within herself: "She is greater than her poems. Her patriotism is the rival even while it is the inspiration of her poetry. For her country she would sacrifice even her beloved gift of song."<sup>4</sup>

Sarojini was the "cherished one in her household." Her "clever quiet husband with his sense of power" protected her, and "the admiration and petting given her by her children, the devotion and consideration shown her by her servants, all bearing eloquent tribute to her ideal character as wife, mother and employer" profoundly affected the ardent little Irish woman who visited her. "I felt I should be speaking French and not English to her," said Mrs. Cousins. "The silver ornaments on her dressing-table, of the French Empire design, the gestures she so often uses, slight mannerisms akin to pose, the foreign nuance in her accent, and her wit and vivacity, cause one to speculate romantically about her last incarnation and dream of her as the bright and shining star of some brilliant French salon at the height of France's glory. Or, rather, she is the Aryan type from which we can see how easily

<sup>3</sup> *The Awakening of Asian Womanhood, op. cit.*, p. 117.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

sprang the whole Celtic race. In appearance, save for her dress, she might easily be taken for an Italian, such is the similarity between the root-stock and its children of Europe.”<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, Sarojini’s soirées, which she held throughout her life, did remind one of French *salons*. These evenings were seldom for invited guests. All were welcome and all her friends dropped in. Delicate eats—*samosas*, *singaras*, sweets and cakes were for ever circulated, and cups of tea passed around; and there in the midst of the audience, Sarojini would reign supreme—laughing, extending her cheek to be kissed by her many good friends, retorting either with asperity or laughter, to remarks uttered—a figure for ever to be remembered!

Of all the endearing names Sarojini was given, she loved that of peace-maker the best, and her efforts to bring about Hindu-Moslem unity were second only to Mahatma Gandhi’s devotion to the two communities. “From that unity”, says Mrs. Cousins, “she stretched out hands of fellowship to the Western races.” She was one of the most cosmopolitan figures in India and her own home and the various other homes which welcomed her were always filled with people from all countries. Sarojini loved all things cheerful and happy and moved with people in an atmosphere of jovial good-fellowship. Sombre and austere company held no fascination for her. It was all the more astounding then, and a paradox one cannot easily understand, that Sarojini moved so harmoniously with those who in their patriotic zeal, paid no heed to the way they looked or dressed; that so many of her companions were so fond of white, when she loved colour; that she was a connoisseur of good food and adored a hearty meal, when her fellow-workers felt that politics and austerity must go hand in hand; that she loved fun and laughter, when her co-politicians felt that good jokes were almost anti-national. One wonders whether the whole freedom movement in India would have succumbed to a melancholic, joyless atmosphere if it had not been re-inforced by the life and laughter supplied by Sarojini. The equipoise of reasonable living and suppression of fads and inhibitions among the Satyagrahis were surely due largely to Sarojini, who was level-headed, enjoying life to the full while often taking on the role of a martyr—smiling in the face of hardships, and rational in the midst of almost fanati-

<sup>5</sup> *The Awakening of Asian Womanhood*, op. cit., p. 119.

cal dieticians and austerity-fans. In her very love for good living, she was far simpler than those who advocated simplicity and were often themselves the most complex characters. Sarojini was completely harmless, guileless and an angel of mercy, though some who knew her felt that at times a sharp remark or reprimand aimed at some unfortunate person was unjustified. Once, I asked her what she thought of a Congress worker whom we were discussing and she remarked: "She is a dedicated follower of Mahatma Gandhi, a woman of integrity and great sincerity; but she laughs too little. Give me someone with whom I can laugh."

Robert Bernays in his book *Naked Fakir*, comments on the great solemnity of a Congress meeting, and in a letter to his mother, written during the Karachi 1931 Session, says: "I go and see my 'girl' friend, Mrs. Naidu, daily. We drink sweet lemonade on the verandah. The other day, she was late and said she had been delayed by Gandhi." "I told him," she said, "that I was keeping you waiting and he said 'The boy Bernays is becoming a pet of yours.' 'What had you to say, Mrs. Naidu?', I asked. 'What if he is,' she said, 'that is what I told the little man—What if he is?'"<sup>6</sup> So Sarojini often relaxed in happy informality after a weighty political conclave.

At the Madras Provincial Conference at Kanjeevaram in May 1918, of which Sarojini was President "she held the balance straightly and sweetly by the high level of idealism, rather than of detail, to which she lifted herself and her office in that assembly," says Mrs. Cousins. "I thought her like a highly-wrought, bejewelled clasp of finest gold which held together the divided edges of Mother India's cloak of patriotism. In politics she essays to carry out Ruskin's idea of woman being the inspirer and guide rather than the dominator or leader. In this role she has been a most helpful member of the Subjects Committee of the National Congresses. Her experience and training in public administrative work of a national kind make it essential that all the new Reform Legislatures, even the most exalted, be freely open to women such as she, so that their services may be used in consolidating and expanding the instalment of national freedom given by the Reform Bill for which she worked so strenuously."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Naked Fakir*, by Robert Bernays, Victor Gollancz, London, 1915 p. 235.

<sup>7</sup> *The Awakening of Asian Womanhood*, op. cit., pp. 121-122.

Sarojini Naidu was not only an eloquent Public Relations Officer of the Congress, but she speedily became the “mother” and “sister” of the members of this august party. Due to her capacity for deep love and friendship, she was one of the cementing forces in the Indian political world. Any form of self-seeking and self-aggrandisement was ruthlessly discovered by her, but at the same time she formed lasting and most affectionate friendships with all the sincere workers. Her friendship with the members of the Nehru family began almost immediately on meeting them in 1916. A letter to Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in 1917, is revealing of this warm link. The letter was written on the occasion of the birth of his daughter, Indira Priyadarshini, in 1917.<sup>8</sup> It is dated December 17th and addressed from Madras: “On the Birth of Indira”.

Dear Jawahar,

I have not one single moment since hearing your good news to sit down and send a word of congratulation to you and Kamala or a blessing for my new niece. I do both now in a half second snatched from a day filled —as usual— with engagements. Madras has gone *mad*—O quite mad—and insists on sending me mad also.

If you are going to Calcutta you will find me at 7, Hungerford Street,<sup>9</sup> so don't fail to look me up. I am sending you a copy of “The Soul of India” which is my contribution to the Montagu Bombardment.

Love to all and a kiss to the new Soul of India.

Yours affectionately,  
Sarojini Naidu

Sarojini had not as yet begun to term herself Pandit Nehru's “sister”, but Indira, the new baby, became at once her niece, and her romantic imagination saw a future full of service lying ahead of this child.

At this time, Sarojini made a brilliant speech entitled: “The Soul of India.”<sup>10</sup> In it she traced the history of the heart of Hindustan through its four historical periods, Past, Middle, British and

<sup>8</sup> *A Bunch of Old Letters, op. cit.* p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> The home of Mr. S. R. Das. Mr. and Mrs. Das were among Sarojini's greatest friends, and “Bonnie” as the late Mrs. S. R. Das was called by her friends, was one of the most generous hostesses and warm personalities of Calcutta society.

<sup>10</sup> *The Soul of India*, by Sarojini Naidu, 1st Edition, Hyderabad, Decan, December 1917, 2nd Edition, The Cambridge Press, Madras, 1919.

Future. India's age stretched back to the earth's oldest empires. "India stands supreme amid the marvels of historic survival, and unique among the miracles of historic paradox." India held the living principles of national freedom and international federation. She could also boast of a sublime spiritual evolution which "through all the tumult and suffering of centuries of foreign invasion and domination" had "left the inmost Soul of India inaccessible and unconquered, endowed with a perennial vitality and an unmeasured power of ultimate self-renewal, able and ready after each dark epoch of political tribulation to fulfil the prophecy of her own Shri Krishna, and 'be born again and again' for the establishment of the national righteousness." India's "imminent tomorrow" gathered her inspiration from her "immortal yesterday." She had proved herself to be ideal in efficiency, civil and military organizations, "commercial enterprise", "matchless learning" and "magnetic art."

Sarojini went on to trace the old village democracies, ancient universities, caravan and seaways, all of which "conveyed to the furthest kingdoms of man not only the precious treasures of her sumptuous merchandise, but the priceless riches of her resplendent thought."

Ancient civil life interpreted the caste system differently from the ugly pattern it had taken on in present day India. "So bitter a source of strife and disunion, represented in that stately era a true division of labour; separate social guilds for united patriotic service." The priests were interpreters of wisdom, warriors, embodiments of "chivalry and valour as keen and dazzling as their swords," and then came the industrious tillers and traders.

"And—highest proof of a country's civilization—her womanhood enjoyed a freedom and franchise unknown in the modern world."

The ideal of world allegiance was foreshadowed in the Ashvamedha Horse sacrifice, and persisted with Ashoka and his Buddhist embassies, Akbar and Hindu-Moslem unity, especially when Akbar's heir married a Rajput princess. Subject races were admitted into an equal partnership as common trustees of a national weal. Akbar gave important posts to Hindus and created a great "union between the children of such widely differing origins, faiths and associations."

The British were a "bold and vigorous race with a glorious literature and a glorious heritage of freedom", but they "reaped in India a distintegration of all the national life and a decadence of the national culture." They betrayed ancient landmarks and obliterated arts and industries praised by the Greeks and Chinese and also ruined the dignity and discipline of patriotic labour. This deadly policy was still maintained. They practised political supremacy by a system of social aloofness and high-handed injustice and arbitrary colour bar. Education was unsuitable and inimical to the race. "For education to become the incorruptible living wealth of a nation must be self-evolved and an authentic expression of the national spirit. But this foreign education sold three generations of denationalized Indian youth into a blind intellectual bondage to the West."

But India would "arise again to her birthright of individuals and national liberty, the very breath of life." "The future is not veiled in the vague glamour of a dream, but lit with the solemn glory of a revelation."

"The Soul of India, self-redeemed and victorious, shall become again the mystic example of humanity, where the pilgrim nations of the earth may sojourn as of yore to share the universal invocation for that ageless peace which is the divinest flower of Life's attainment.

"Om, Shanti! Shanti!"

### 3 *Indentured Labour*

Indentured Labour was among the many subjects in which Sarojini Naidu took a deep interest at the time. She fought hard against "coolie-ism" in white colonies, and the plight in which women were placed as a part of Indentured Labour. She said: "Let the blood of your hearts blot out the shame that your women have suffered." The case of Indians in South Africa was one which greatly troubled Gokhale throughout his life. C. F. Andrews, after his illness in 1915, when he was convalescing in Simla, was also moved by the tragic fate of Indian labourers in Fiji and Natal. A vision came to him of a poor run-away coolie whom he had seen in Natal,

and the face of the coolie suddenly "appeared as the face of Jesus Christ."<sup>11</sup>

Since that time "Charlie" Andrews devoted himself to striving for the abolition of Indentured Labour. Mahatma Gandhi was the other great hero who more than Gokhale and Andrews gave his life to abolish the system, and wipe out the hideous segregation laws in South Africa. Sarojini Naidu identified herself with removing this grievance, not only because friends such as Gokhale, Andrews and Gandhiji were so interested, but because she poignantly felt the wrongs meted out to her countrymen and women as a direct insult to herself.

Gandhiji had begun his struggle in South Africa as early as 1893, when he had to travel to Pretoria by train and bought a first class ticket. In the Natal Province at Maritzburg, the little brown man was found in the compartment forbidden to coloured people, and was asked by the railway authorities to vacate. On his protesting, a policeman was called, and Gandhiji was thrown out onto the platform. This was one of Mahatma Gandhi's most painful experiences, and happened when he was twenty-four; it awoke him to the deep tragedy of racial prejudice. After this he determined to fight colour differences.

Indentured Labour in South Africa began in 1860 when labourers from India were sent across to be employed in the sugar, tea, and coffee plantations, because Negroes were reluctant to work. The term of service of Indian labourers was for five years during which time they were regarded more or less as serfs. At times they stayed on for five extra years as free working men. Their passage back to India was paid by the contractor; but many chose to settle in South Africa, and the growing population of Indians began to disturb the white population, for Indians were efficient and hard working. In 1894, therefore, the Whites thought it safer to alter and tighten the rules. An Indentured Labourer had to return to India at the end of five years or remain as a *serf* in South Africa. If he paid an annual tax of £3 for himself and each of his dependents, he could remain a free working man; but this tax worked out very high, and repatriation seemed the only alternative. In the meantime, a number of free men migrated to South

<sup>11</sup> *Charles Freer Andrews*, by Benarsidas Chaturvedi and Marjorie Sykes. George Allen and Unwin, London, 1949, p. 326.

Africa in trade and in the professions, like Gandhi himself. Some of these men acquired property. Those who could meet the wealth qualification were entitled to vote as free subjects of the Queen. But, by the 1894 Act, Asiatics were disfranchised under a special law passed by the Natal legislature. Other disabilities were prevalent. Indians had to carry passes if they were out on the streets after 9 p.m. In some States farming was forbidden to them. A £ 3 tax had to be paid in Transvaal for a residence permit, and even then, Indians were only allowed to live in the slums. In Cape Colony, they could not walk on pavements. Gandhiji was once kicked off a sidewalk. In fact, he felt that Indians were treated like beasts. After the Boer War, in 1902, when the British were victorious over the Dutch Settlers, the condition of Indians became worse. Jan Christian Smuts, a Boer General, became Finance and Defence Minister of South Africa. In 1906 he declared: "The Asiatic cancer, which has already eaten so deeply into the vitals of South Africa, ought to be resolutely eradicated." It was at this time that Sarojini Naidu was beginning to emerge from her ivory tower in Hyderabad. She must have avidly imbibed the stories of racial and colour prejudice which were flowing into India, and she must have been wide awake to the question of the treatment of Indians abroad. General Louis Botha made anti-Indian feeling even worse when he proclaimed in 1907 that if his Party was returned to office, he would undertake to drive out the "coolies" within four years. The term "coolie" was an added insult to the Indians. It seemed most paradoxical that in 1860 when Indians were forced to work as Indentured Labourers in South Africa and imported there for this purpose, that very Government should now seek to eject them. A moot question of the time was the encouragement by the Government of racial feelings and the legalizing of unfair practices. In 1896, Gandhiji decided to take his family to South Africa, and when he returned to India for this purpose he reported on the tragic conditions of his countrymen. Sarojini was then in England. She must have heard of the treatment meted out to Gandhiji in South Africa; he had scarcely been allowed to land in Durban when he returned. He was kicked and beaten. His family had already taken shelter in an Indian's house, and Gandhi was at last conducted there. The South Africans sang: "We'll hang old Gandhi on a sour apple

tree". Gandhi had to take refuge in a police station; but when asked by Joseph Chamberlain, the British Secretary of State for Colonies, to take the assailants to trial, Gandhi refused, because he wished to practise self-restraint. He even raised a Corps of Indian stretcher-bearers for the British side during the Boer War. The Ambulance Corps was much praised for the work it did when under fire, especially when it rescued the wounded and brought them to the base hospital. But feelings against Indians intensified after the Boer War. Gandhi still showed no resentment and again helped the British during the "Zulu" rebellion. The state of affairs against Indians, nevertheless, worsened and Gandhi introduced Satyagraha and first applied it in August 1906, when the draft of an Act requiring Indians—men and women and children over eight—to register and to be finger-printed was promulgated. If they failed to do this, they would be fined, imprisoned and deported. Gandhiji at a meeting in 1906, in Johannesburg, told Indians that this law was an affront to Indians. Three thousand pledged themselves to defy the law.

The Asiatic Registration Act was passed in July 21, 1907, and Gandhiji said: "Even a crooked policy would in time turn straight if only we are true to ourselves," and Indians refused to register. Smuts, however, promised that if Indians registered the Act would be repealed and trusting him, Gandhi gave in. Fellow Indians found fault with him for this simple trust and he was attacked and struck by an Indian; but he and some others registered, and he was astonished when Smuts did not keep his word. The fight was now really on, led by Gandhi. In 1908, two thousand Indians gathered and threw their registration certificates into a bonfire. It was compared to the Boston Tea Party. Hundreds went to jail.

In 1909, Gandhiji sent Mr. Henry Polak, one of his staunch followers and fellow workers, to India, and he himself went to England and returned at the end of the year. Gokhale then arrived in South Africa in October 1912 and wanted Gandhiji to return to India, but he refused. By 1913, Indians in South Africa suffered under three cruel grievances—a ban on Asian immigrants, the annual £3 tax to be paid by each Indentured Labourer who remained in South Africa as a free man, and a court decision stating that only Christian marriages were considered legal, thus making all Hindu wives nothing more than concubines. This last

ruling of the Cape Colony Supreme Court angered Indian women most and caused Sarojini Naidu to take up the cudgels on behalf of her sisters in South Africa. Tremendous resistance and hardships followed. Indian women marched across the border of Transvaal and Natal and openly courted arrest. Those not arrested, went to Newcastle and asked the miners to march to Charlestown. After the great march, Gandhiji was confined in prison; but his friends caused a furore in India and England, and great pressure was put on the Government of South Africa to come to terms with the Indians. On December 18, 1913, Gandhiji, Kallenbach and Polak were released and a commission was appointed to investigate the grievances. Prolonged negotiations took place between Smuts and Gandhiji and on June 30, 1914, on the basis of the Indian Relief Act which went into effect from July 1914, a settlement was reached. According to this Act, non-Christian marriages were declared valid, the £3 tax abolished, and a promise made that Indentured Labour would be stopped; Indians born in South Africa could enter Cape Colony, though they could not move freely from one South African Province to another. After this victory, Gandhiji sailed for England on July 18, 1914. He was feted and feasted before he left. In England he met Sarojini Naidu for the first time and they became fast friends, as already related. He was the hero, the champion of Indians, the one man to defy colour prejudice and to fight it with non-violent methods. Never had such an ideological concept been openly practised. Sarojini, young, enthusiastic, fell at the Mahatma's feet in spirit. Henceforth she became his devoted follower.

When both Gandhiji and Sarojini Naidu returned to India and the latter was busy touring various parts of the country and speaking on the various problems of the day, the question of Indentured Labour flared up again. It was becoming known that women emigrants to South Africa were treated with anything but respect and C. F. Andrews was asked by the Viceroy, Lord Hardinge, to help in preparing the Despatch of the Commerce Department to the Secretary of State protesting against the treatment meted out to women. This despatch, No. 41 (emigration), contained the following statement: "It is believed in this country, and it would appear not without grave reason, that the women emigrants are too often living a life of immorality in which their persons are at

the free disposal of their fellow-recruits and even of the subordinate managing staff." It was dated October 25, 1915, and published as a supplement to the Government of India Gazette of the November 18, 1916.

C. F. Andrews determined to investigate matters. He and his friend W. W. Pearson, sponsored by the Anti-Indentured Labour League of Calcutta and the Imperial Indian Citizenship Association of Bombay, left for South Africa. Before leaving they visited Emigration Depots in India and enquired into the methods of *Arkatis* or professional recruiters. It was felt that their methods of recruitment were most questionable. Among other ills Andrews found that women who were recruited, "for whom a higher rate was paid to the *Arkatis*, were secured by sheer kidnapping and intimidation. Andrews estimated that deceit of some kind was practised in 80 per cent of the cases, and the evidence given him in Fiji confirmed the estimate."<sup>12</sup> C. F. Andrews' and Pearson's investigations in South Africa led to Pandit M. M. Malaviya's motion for the abolition of Indentured Labour. He obtained a promise from His Majesty's Government for "the abolition of the system in due course." But soon it was believed that recruitment for indenture should continue for another period of five years despite the Gandhi-Smuts agreement reached in 1914. Lord Chelmsford had taken Lord Hardinge's place as Viceroy. C. F. Andrews wrote to the Viceroy but on not receiving a reply, challenged the Government in the public press. It was found that a pact with the colonial office had been made and that Indentured Labour was to continue. Indignation swept across the country and a nation-wide campaign to stop recruitment was started. Mahatma Gandhi became the leader, and he, Sarojini Naidu, Polak, Andrews and others travelled from city to city lecturing untiringly. Andrews visited Allahabad as did Sarojini, and the former pointed to Despatch 41, published a few months earlier and said: "The Government of India cannot write that Despatch and then agree to send Indian women to such a life for five years more." He appealed to women more than to men. His appeal was printed in many Indian languages and distributed in thousands at the Magh Mela, the great annual fair of Allahabad. A deputation of Indian ladies waited on the Viceroy and on April 12, 1917, the Viceroy

<sup>12</sup> Charles Freer Andrews, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

announced the cessation of all recruitment as a special war measure under the Defence of India Act.

But it was feared that recruitment may be revived and C. F. Andrews and others made sure that Indentured Labour must end. He saw Mr. Montagu, the Secretary of State, who was with the Viceroy in Delhi in March 1918, and laid before him the Medical Report of the Government of Fiji. Mr. Montagu read: "When one Indentured Indian woman has to serve three hundred men as well as various outsiders, the result as regards Syphilis and gonorrhoea cannot be in doubt," and he was so horrified that he uttered: "That settles it. Ask what you like."<sup>13</sup>

At last Indentured Labour was abolished.

Sarojini Naidu played no small part in the drama which ended in this abolition. Among her major efforts in this struggle were her many speeches at Allahabad. She spoke at public meetings along with Mr. H. S. L. Polak. "I have travelled far, gentlemen, to come to you tonight, only to raise my voice, not for the men, but for the women, for those women whose proudest memory is that Sita would not stand the challenge to her honour but called upon Mother Earth to avenge her." *The Indian Ladies' Magazine* of February 1917, commented: "The women of India should not remain silent, and while their men call meetings of protest, we should suggest a great women's meeting in Madras and in the chief cities of the Province to protest against the continuance of an iniquitous system which has been condemned as vile. We are glad to read Mrs. Sarojini Naidu's eloquent appeal for the abolition of a system which cannot be permitted to continue to smirch the fair name of this country."

Sarojini appealed to the women of India in passionate terms to fight for the rights and honour of their sisters in South Africa. After the Lucknow Congress in 1916, she toured India widely and delivered many speeches on Indentured Labour. In Allahabad she exclaimed: "Let the blood of your hearts blot out the shame that your women have suffered abroad. . . . I feel the dishonour offered to me in the dishonour to my sex. Is national righteousness possible when the men of India sit still and see such crimes? Is national righteousness possible till every man amongst you becomes a soldier of the cause, a devotee, a fanatic, everything and

<sup>13</sup> Charles Freer Andrews, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

anything which means destruction of the wrong and triumph of the right? Gentlemen, it is a stormy sea that we have to cross, a storm-tossed sea in a crowded boat that may or may not stand the burden of our sorrow, but like Khusru of old shall we not now say, even when the night is dark, when the waves are high, when there is a rush in the boat, when there is no pilot with us—

*'Nakhuda dar kashteeay ma gar na bashad gu ma bash,  
Makhuda dareem ma ra nakhuda darkar nest?'*

What though there be no pilot in our boat? Go, tell him we need him not. God is with us and we need no pilot."

#### 4 *Hindu-Moslem Unity*

Sarojini Naidu's poem, *The Call to Evening Prayer*, reflects her belief in the sacredness of all religions. The various invocations to God; the calls—"Allah ho Akbar", "Ave Maria", "Ahura Mazda" and "Narayana" are one to her. They praise the same great God, the spirit of Love. She says *In Salutation to the Eternal Peace*:

"Men say the world is full of fear and hate . . . .  
. . . . But I, sweet soul, rejoice that I was born . . . .  
What care I for the world's loud weariness? . . . .  
For my glad heart is drunk and drenched with thee  
O inmost wine of living ecstasy!  
O intimate essence of eternity!"

Hindu-Moslem unity was a part of her very life and Sarojini was deeply troubled at the many evidences of disunity which occurred periodically in India. In June 1913, she wrote as follows to Mr. G. Natesan, Editor of *Indian Review*, before she sailed for England: "One request I would like to make of you as an editor and leader of Indian opinion. I feel we have come to a very critical time in our history and that a great responsibility lies with those who are in the position of our leaders. You have

realised that the Mussalmans have definitely held out their hand to the Hindus. Be gracious, be wise, be brave when the Hindus hold out their hand to the Mussalmans at the next Congress. Do not analyse motives too closely, but take the proffered hand and hold it fast and so represent truly the Indian world as far as your influence reaches—and, I believe it reaches far. I am going away a very sick person—I believe my illness is of a serious nature, and I may be away in Europe for a year—but this is a request I am making to all my friends who lead public opinion.”<sup>14</sup>

Sarojini knew Urdu fluently, so much so that many felt it was a pity she did not write poetry in that language as she did in English. She admired Moslem culture and even the Moslem way of life. Despite her criticism of Purdah and her plea for the emancipation of women, she was, in Hyderabad, very much a part of the Moslem world. From earliest days, Mohamed Ali Jinnah, the Ali brothers and other Moslems were her devoted friends, and even when political barriers loomed large, Sarojini never lost track of her friendship with Jinnah. Sir C. P. Ramaswamy Iyer, reminiscing about Sarojini has written as follows: “Sarojini was very intimately associated with Jinnah and his activities as an Indian political leader, and perhaps, next to Gandhiji, the dominating influence on Sarojini’s life was that of Jinnah, although she was far superior to him intellectually and spiritually, the difference being between genius and talent.” She never stopped regarding Mr. Jinnah as a great son of India even when he was clamouring for partition. Once, in 1946, I remember going to see Mrs. Naidu and telling her that I had written a book on “Some Great Leaders.” She asked me if I had included Jinnah, and when I replied in the negative she was angry with me and immediately said: “But Jinnah is a great man. You should have included him in your book.”

On March 2, 1911, Sarojini Naidu attended the historic session of the Moslem League which met in Lucknow to adopt a new Constitution seeking loyal co-operation with Hindus in national and social matters. Sarojini wrote: “The unanimous acclamation with which it was carried by both the older and younger schools of Mussalman politicians marked a new era and inaugurated new standards in the history of modern Indian affairs.”

She always remembered Gokhale’s super-human efforts to estab-

<sup>14</sup> *Speeches and Writings of Sarojini Naidu, op. cit.*, p. 17.

lish strong Hindu-Moslem unity and felt this was possible only if "the leaders of the Sister Communities would deal in a spirit of perfect unison with certain fundamental problems."

Again and again, rightly or wrongly, Sarojini referred to Hyderabad as "the great Native state," the melting pot of the different races of India. From this city she came with a message of perfect unity to the whole of India. Neither was she averse to carrying back messages to her native state from other parts of India. Speaking at Masulipatam in 1915, she cried: "Today the great lesson that I shall carry always wherever I go is that I have found a living institution teaching the lesson of National Unity and the necessity of co-ordinating all forms of national work."

Sarojini, at the conference of the All India Moslem League at Lucknow in 1916, remarked: "I do not know what claim I have to stand before you today except that I have been for many years a faithful comrade of the young generation of the Mussalmans and champion of the women of the Moslem community and fought with their menfolk for the privilege that Islam gave long ago but which you denied to your womenfolk." She was, therefore, from earliest times a go-between for the two great organisations, the Congress and the Moslem League, which for so many years worked together. It was at this time that the Congress and League finalised the Lucknow Pact. So close had these two organisations grown that the Congress allowed the principle of separate electorates for Moslems, and the League waived its right of privilege to vote in both general and separate electorates. India could only be free if there was Hindu-Moslem unity, according to the two organisations.

We find Sarojini again at a public meeting in Patna on October 13, 1917, speaking as she so often did, to students, on Hindu-Moslem unity. The lecture was under the auspices of the Patna City Students' Association and the Honourable Rai Bahadur Krishna Sahay was in the Chair. "President and Brother Hindus and Mussalmans," Sarojini cried, "I feel today a peculiar sense of responsibility such as I have never felt before when dealing with a subject so intimately bound up with my life strings that I almost hesitate in trying to find words that might be wise enough to suit this occasion in this province at this juncture." She felt the Ganges, in whose sacred waters the Islamic army when they first came to India had "tempered and cooled their swords", should give her

inspiration. She remarked about the critical moment in national history; which she hoped would not "cause a cleavage between the two communities." There was local trouble in Bihar. Sarojini said: "It used to be the boast of Bihar that there was no Hindu-Moslem problem in this province and I have heard over and over again of tributes paid by the leaders of other provinces, saying that when the national sky was overcast with doubt and despair, Bihar stood kindling the torch of love and union." This link had to be sustained. "It is only because we are ignorant that we are divided and it is the sacred mission of enlightenment to bring not the lesson of quarrel but of peace." A cascade of words flowed from her: "There are in India two communities (I will not say two races), two communities that are separated by what they consider the differences of creeds. But when you come to analyse this difference of creed you begin to find that after all, fundamentally, the teaching that came in the wake of the Moslem conquerors was the same as the teaching that arose in the great hymns in the sacred Ganges five thousand years ago. It means essentially the love of truth, the love of purity, the services of humanity, the search for wisdom, the great lessons of self-sacrifice, the worship of the same transcendent spirit, no matter whether in one language it is called Allah, and in another Parmeshwar." (Applause). Antagonism "was merely the weapon of the ignorant." The great emperors did not wish to divide and rule, but to unite the people "to build an imperishable guarantee of their own power and administration" (Loud cheers). Emperor Akbar took his son to Rajputana so that the blood of the conqueror and the blood of the conquered were mixed to create a new generation of Indians in India. That was the marital union between the Mussalmans and the Hindus." Separate entities and creeds could be kept; but a federated India had to be preserved enriched with the culture of centuries. The "mystic genius" of the Hindus and the "Dynamic forces" of Islam had to be united. "Personal resentments" and "passing grudges" had to be forgotten. The nation must be united in true brotherhood.

## 5 *Self-Government*

1917 was a momentous year for the political movement in India. Mr. Edwin Montagu, Secretary of State for India, came to the country to enact a new set of reforms. Gandhiji was also at the turning point of his career, and with him, Sarojini plunged into the freedom movement. Both Gandhi and Sarojini had so far been moderates in their political outlook, with a sense of loyalty to the British, sympathising with them during the First World War. Gandhiji had even recruited soldiers for the war and Sarojini had written a famous war poem which had appeared in various magazines. The fame of this poem, written by an Indian woman during the British crisis, had travelled around the world.

Because of India's general spirit of loyalty, the British Government wished, according to the declaration in 1917, to establish "self governing institutions with a view to the progressive realization of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British Empire." But Indian affairs did not seem really to matter to the British in the face of other more pressing problems, such as the peace settlement, the Irish crisis, the Russian Revolution, the Turkish question. India, however, was becoming impatient and the spirit of revolt grew. Indeed, India was to feel her quota of suffering—the high spiralling of prices, the influenza epidemic and the offering of India's sons to a war which was not really Indian. The Khilaphat Movement also forged a strong national link between Moslems and Hindus, for the Congress fully sponsored the cause of the Moslems, who had been unhappy when they found that Britain was waging war in 1914 with Moslem Turkey. The Ali brothers and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad were immediately interned for their seditious articles. They were in prison in 1917. Earlier, during the Balkan Wars of 1912-13, the feelings of the Moslems had already been aroused, and the Red Crescent Mission had been sent to give medical aid to the wounded Turks. Mr. M. A. Ansari had been a member of this mission and he had always been a great friend of Sarojini Naidu.

Sarojini's activities in other fields were as dynamic as in politics. Her interest in students continued. She spoke at the Oxford and Cambridge Hostel on October 8, 1917 at Allahabad and arrived

at Bhagalpur with Mahatma Gandhi for the Bihari Students' Conference. When her friend Amar Nath Jha, a young educationist at the time, called on her, she remarked: "You must buy a beard, else no one will believe you are a professor." At the Conference, Sarojini remarked to Professor Jha: "Gandhiji does not want English to be spoken. I don't know how I am going to speak in Hindustani. I tell you what. When I get up, ask the students to shout 'English, English'."<sup>15</sup> But actually she spoke in high-flown Persianised Urdu.

The internment of Annie Besant, the founder of the Home Rule League, in June 1917, caused a further furore and had the effect of bringing women belligerently into the political arena. Processions of women, organised by patriots such as Margaret Cousins, were taken out in protest.

Mr. Edwin Montagu arrived that year at the same time as Mrs. Besant's internment. She was released in September 1917, and in October a joint meeting of the Congress and the Moslem League was held in Allahabad. That year, Mrs. Besant was made the first woman President of the Indian National Congress. This event further cemented a bond between the women's movement and the struggle for freedom.

In fact, women were very much in the forefront in 1917 when Annie Besant was elected the first woman Congress President. On the day of the Congress Session, three women graced the platform and dominated Congress proceedings. On Annie Besant's right sat Sarojini Naidu, and on her left Begum Amman Bibi, the mother of the Ali brothers. Men had recognised the need for women to fight by their sides.

Previously, in December 1915, Sarojini had, as a delegate from the United Provinces, supported the Resolution on Self-Government at the Bombay Congress Session, and her speech had been received with great acclaim. She felt she was hardly worthy of speaking except that she represented the women of India, "not only Hindu, but Mussalman, Parsi and other sisters for the sake of self government which is the desire and the destiny of every human soul."

At the Lucknow Congress the next year, she not only spoke on the Resolution on the Arms Act, but on Self-Government. On

<sup>15</sup> *Sarojini Naidu*, by A. Jha, p. 7.

December 29, 1916, the Resolution was moved by Surendra-nath Banerjee and seconded by Mrs. Besant. Many people then spoke on the Self-Government resolution, including Sarojini, Lok-manyia Tilak, Bepin Chandra Pal, Mazharul Huq, and Baptista. Of Sarojini's speech the *Leader* of January 6, 1917 published the following comment written by Amar Nath Jha: "The bird of the Deccan is sweet voiced. One imagines, as one listens to her, that the Kokil is singing. Her language is very well-chosen, and the spell she casts by her words is abiding." She remarked: "I am merely a spectator from the watch-tower of dreams, and I watched the swift and troubled, sometimes chequered, but nevertheless indomitable time-spirit marching on in a pageant of triumph to the desired goal." She offered her great tribute to her Motherland, showing her love and resolution which she followed to the end of her life; "There is no one so mean, so weak, so selfish as not to think that in the service of the motherland lies joy greater than all personal joy; in suffering for her comes the supremest consolation in our personal sorrow and in her worship is the absolution of sin, to live for her is to achieve the priceless crown of immortality. (Hear, hear and applause.) Let us then offer our lives unani-mously as a tribute at the feet of the Motherland, for, as the great Prophet of Islam says, 'Under the feet of the Mother lies Para-dise' ". (Loud applause.)

Sarojini's activities during January 1917 were prolific. Com-ments have earlier been made on her speeches. Sarojini also spoke at meetings on January 13 and 19. She accepted an invitation to speak at Muir College for the 20th, much to the delight of the Principal, Dr. Hill, though he told Mr. Amarnath Jha that she must not speak on politics. On the morning of the 20, Mr. Jha called on Sarojini to remind her of her engagement, and she said: "You young men never let me forget any engagements." Mr. Jha introduced Dr. Hill to Sarojini. A huge gathering filled the hall and it was difficult to provide seats for the party from Ananda Bhavan. Sarojini read some of her verses and then had tea with Professor and Mrs. Gidwani. At the tea party, Sarojini re-marked: "I must get back soon to Hyderabad, where my husband is waiting with a stick to beat me, for setting such a bad example to the rest of Madras women." At the conclusion of her speech at Muir College Sarojini visualised the "whole of India marching

forward in concord and peace, so that Tagore's wish may be fulfilled and the country might awaken into a heaven of freedom."<sup>16</sup>

Sarojini supported the resolution on Self-Government again in December 1917 at the Calcutta Congress Session. She said: "Several years ago, in this historic city, the modern nation-builder, Dadabhai Naoroji proclaimed that immortal message of Swaraj in your ears. I do not think that there was one single heart amongst you that did not respond to the call of your birthright that had so long been withheld from you. We are gathering here today to vindicate the message that he then gave, to confirm the truth that he proclaimed; and we demand the fulfilment of the dream that he dreamt for you on that memorable occasion. If I stand before you as a chosen representative of United India it is only because the womanhood of the nation stands by you today and you require no proof more worthy, more convincing of your evidence for responsible and complete self-government than the sense of instinctive and fundamental justice you show in letting the voice of Indian womanhood speak and confirm the vision, the demand, the endeavour, the ambition of Indian manhood."

Sarojini stressed the ideal that had been represented in this resolution. "Remember, whatever may be the details of the proposition, whatever may be the facts and factors of any practical politics that you contemplate, its permanent inspiration is the spirit in which these demands and these aspirations are conceived and fulfilled today. What is it that we demand? Nothing new, nothing startling, but a thing that is as old as life, as old as human consciousness, and that is the birthright of every soul in this world. Remember that within your own province, within your own territories, you should have a living chance and not be disinherited as exiles in your own land, slaves in your own territories, dumb to all things, blind to all things, deaf to all things, that other nations are enjoying. That day is over when we were content to be slaves in bondage, intellectual, and political, because the day of division is over. No race can be separated from another race in this great land. There is no longer an India of the Hindu or an India of the Mussalman, but it is an India which is a united India. Arguments are brought forward, you all know how cleverly and subtly, that India has always been a conquered country, a country always

<sup>16</sup> Sarojini Naidu, by A. Jha, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

under foreign political domination. It is true, that India we should know is a great country, with five thousand years of Vedic culture that absorbed and enriched itself within the Aryan culture, Buddhist culture and European culture of the world. 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 right of man to defend his honour, to defend his women and to protect his country have been taken away from him. That is the deadliest insult that has not merely emasculated and embittered but has almost slain beyond redemption the spirit of the heroic Indian. . . ." "I am only a woman and I should like to say to you all, when your hour strikes, when you need torch-bearers in the darkness to lead you, when you want standard-bearers to uphold your banner and when you die for want of faith, the womanhood of India will be with you as the holders of your banner, and the sustainers of your strength. And if you die, remember, the spirit of Padmini of Chittoor is enshrined with the manhood of India." (Loud cheers.)

## *6 The Rowlatt Bills*

The British Government in 1917, was deeply troubled with the mounting tension in India. The Montagu-Chelmsford proposals were published in July 1918 and were embodied in the Government of India Act passed in December 1919. They greatly upset the equipoise of the country; for the "Montford" reforms inaugurated two Central Legislatures known as the Assembly and Council of State. These Houses, though open to elections, still contained a strong official block. The legislation passed by these Houses could be cancelled, if desired, by the Viceroy. Provincial Legislative Councils were also formed and electorates were based on a wider franchise; but diarchy constituted checks and balances. Subjects such as Finance and Law and Order were reserved as a responsibility of the Governor and only innocuous portfolios known as "transferred" subjects were entrusted to Ministers who were responsible to the Legislatures. Both Congress and the League declared these reforms as hopelessly inadequate. Trouble was also

mounting at this time over the Khilaphat question which had alienated the Moslems against the British and caused the Hindus to sympathise entirely with their cause. The Rowlatt Bills further added to the feeling of growing and angry resentment all over India. A committee was appointed with Mr. Justice Rowlatt as its chairman to probe into the question of seditious activities of Indians and criminal conspiracies. The Rowlatt Committee recommended that judges could try political cases without juries in certain areas and that Provincial Governments could be armed with powers of internment. Two Bills, known as the Black Bills, were presented, one being a temporary measure to deal with the situations arising after the expiry of the Defence of India Act. The other was to be permanent, and among other injustices even forbade the mere possession of a seditious document "with intention to publish or circulate it." This offence was punishable with imprisonment.

The battle now began in earnest. The Rowlatt Bills were passed by the New Delhi Imperial Legislative Council on March 18, 1919, but before they became law great efforts were made in all parts of India to try and prevent the enactment of these Black Bills, as they came to be called. Mahatma Gandhi called a conference at Sabarmati Ashram, but only a dozen leaders were invited. They included Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Sarojini Naidu, Mr. Horniman, Editor of *The Bombay Chronicle*, Anusuyabehn, Umar Sobani and Shankarlal Banker. The Satyagraha pledge was drafted, and among the first to sign it was Sarojini. Six hundred men and women gave their signatures to it. The Bills caused so much resentment that even Moderates like Motilal Nehru now became fervent if not aggressive nationalists. Gandhiji intended offering Satyagraha once the Bills were passed, but first he appealed to the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, to have the measures withdrawn. His appeal was rejected and he began to organise his campaign. Members of his group would openly disobey the Rowlatt Bills and court prison. Sarojini Naidu was by now his enthusiastic disciple and it was now that the powerful voice of renowned orators like her came into full force. Before the Hartal, scheduled at first for March 30, 1919, and delayed later to April 6, 1919, was started, Sarojini spoke in various places, travelling from one end of India to the other. Her oratory roused the people in a miraculous manner.

She exhorted her countrymen and women to overthrow the iniquitous new legislation even at the risk of losing their lives as it was an "accomplished piece of tyranny that in a day of doom might lay the whole of the Indian nation low." But the path was not through violence; it lay through truth and non-violence and courage. Wisely she quoted the martyrdom of Imam Hassan, thereby chartering the goodwill of the Moslems. Her gift of speech lay in her tactfully quoting past lives and traditions which pleased and flattered the audience. Sarojini was a superb mass psychologist. Now she cried: "Do you not remember the martyrdom of Imam Hassan of old? When Azad, King of Egypt, usurper of the Caliphate said to Imam Hassan, 'bow down in homage to me and kiss my hand,' this follower of the truth of Islam said: 'You tyrant, you liar, you usurper, I who hold the truth in my hand will not bend my head to you in homage.' Then persecution followed, so that in futile rage Azad ordered that all the waters were to be closed to the thirsty lips of Hassan." Hassan refused to give way, despite being tortured with thirst. One can imagine the ripple of approval and admiration amongst the Moslems at this impassioned reference to a Moslem hero. She went on in her speech to cite Mahomed Ali, who being interned said: "Each time a martyr for truth died for the sake of the truth, his religion was reborn into immortality". . . . "With us also friends," continued Sarojini, "if we have the truth within us, we, children of the Shastras, we children of the Koran, if we have the truth with us, if we are spiritually the descendants of Harishchandra and of Imam Hassan, we shall also die so that truth may live."

What a mighty effort was made here, not only for the overthrow of the hated Rowlatt Legislation; but for the unity of Hindus and Moslems!

On March 17, 1919, a day before the Rowlatt Bills were enacted Sarojini addressed a meeting of the public of Madras on the beach opposite Presidency College and urged the Government to drop the Rowlatt Bills. She expressed her loyal adherence to Mahatma Gandhi and moved the following resolutions:

"(a) that this public meeting of citizens of Madras once again earnestly urges on H.E. the Viceroy and the Government of India that they should drop the Rowlatt Bills at least at this stage in

as much as they are unjust, subversive of the principle of liberty and justice and destructive of the elementary rights of individuals on which the safety of the community as a whole and the State itself is based."

"(b) that this public meeting gratefully welcomes the happy news of the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi tomorrow and once again expresses its unqualified adherence to Mahatma Gandhi's Satyagraha movement and calls on all the people to support it."

Sarojini Naidu, after moving the resolutions spoke to the vast gathering before her. She cried: "Citizens of Madras . . . you will wonder in what capacity and by what right I stand before you today to move the resolution that the President of this evening has read out to you and also to interpret to you the meaning, the purpose and the mission of what my honoured *guru*, Mahatma Gandhi has said to you. (Cheers.) Ever since in far off Ahmedabad, in that little thatched cottage where the selfless sage dwells, living the life of self-chosen poverty, ever since the little *guru* of the men and women came to decide that the only possible weapon today in the armoury for tyrannised India was not the weapon of the machine gun and swords but the immortal, elementary and invincible weapon of all spiritual revolt and spiritual power which is against the material weapon and the material power of other nations, we decided to dedicate our lives, and all that our lives stand for in the way of our personal liberty and yes, according to the world's standards, of our personal happiness." She continued that misconceptions reached her from all quarters, the chief being that this movement should have been an all India one and that the methods were new. She cried: "The answer is simple but it is final since it is comprehensive; for the Satyagraha movement is a theory of organic life which must of necessity grow and expand because it carries within itself the immortal functions of life and so the Satyagraha movement has kindled its fire in the temple or asrama where Mahatma Gandhi is the high priest or *guru*." Gandhi had kindled the flame and the spiritual army had been formed. The objections to the Satyagraha movement as voiced by some was that it meant the "disruption of national life as constitutionally carried on"; the "disintegration of all political work; the encouragement of indiscipline, disobeying of laws and irreverence for constituted law and authority." An emotional people such as the

Indians should not be given such a weapon of revolution. It would lead to "danger and disintegration, if not death" to people and traditions. All these criticisms had but one answer—"that logic, that law, is not the ultimate standard of a nation's spiritual advancement. There are times in the history of nations as of individuals, when the customary law of caution, of order, of reverence to constituted authority must fail before the inspiration and the impulse and the intuition of the moment's demand. Sirs, if logic, if mere reasoning, if mere academic following of things to their logical conclusions were always the highest mode of achievement, would the French nation have been led to victory?" The soldiers of France had been guided by the vision of Joan of Arc. The very Hindu religion survived because it followed the methods of passive resistance throughout the years. Satyagraha was not a new weapon, pointed out Sarojini Naidu. The honour of Rajputana was defended by the women offering themselves on the funeral pyre. Now the country was threatened with legislation which implied the "climax of all degradation." It was the "crowning insult of insults, the crowning tyranny of tyrannies" which would make it impossible for Indians to lift their heads because "in accepting, in acquiescing in that unjust tyranny" they would have lost their "primeval right to be called men, men of honour, to whom their self-respect is greater than the favour of kings." The Rowlatt Bills, cried Sarojini were "legislation which in its very nature is universally counted to be subversive against all laws of God and subversive of all human rights of man." The English in their heart of hearts were ashamed of all forms of tyranny. But they were working against their own beliefs in India. India had sacrificed her sons for Britain and this was the reward. Mahatma Gandhi's satyagraha asked the people to "follow the truth fearlessly."

The day after this speech the Rowlatt Bills were passed into law. Mahatma Gandhi, despite ill-health travelled to Madras to address a mass meeting. Sarojini within a week travelled to Ahmedabad. On March 25, 1919, she addressed a meeting in Ahmedabad on the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms and the Rowlatt Bills. She said: "I am ill and I am standing before you." She felt that India was "face to face with a hideous nightmare and the trouble is that unless it is laid at rest you and I are done for in perpetuity." (Cheers). There was a remedy for the poison of physical force.

It was Satyagraha. "To speak truth was good, but to live the truth was better—even in our dealings with our enemies." She admonished her audience never to submit to the Black Bills. On March 26, Sarojini again praised the ethics of the Satyagraha movement.

Mahatma Gandhi now launched a mass movement and announced an All-India hartal on March 30, 1919. This date was postponed to April 6, 1919, but notice of the change of date did not reach Delhi in time and the hartal was held there as scheduled. Swami Shraddanand addressed a vast gathering in the Jumma Masjid, and the authorities decided to break it up by force and resorted to firing. A few were killed. In Bombay the hartal met with tremendous success on April 6. Moslems and Hindus worked together as a co-ordinated team. Mahatma Gandhi, with Sarojini Naidu beside him, was taken to a mosque where both delivered speeches. It was indeed a unique situation that two Hindus, one of them a woman, should speak in a Moslem mosque. Sarojini Naidu visualised the coming procession of Satyagrahis "as a symbol of national humiliation when the united prayers from far flung provinces would go forth to the Almighty to deliver them from life-destroying Black Bills and from the danger to the liberty they threatened."

After the speeches the two intrepid leaders went about in cars selling forbidden literature which was nothing more innocuous than *Hind Swaraj* and *Sarvodaya* (the Gujerati version of Ruskin's *Unto this Last*) both written by Mahatma Gandhi. The books were sold at fabulous prices and the funds were to be used for the furtherance of the Civil Disobedience movement. The next morning another meeting was held, but Gandhiji left for Amritsar and Delhi on April 7 where trouble had flared up. He was arrested on the way and taken back to Bombay; but the news of Mahatma Gandhi's arrest touched off violence and rebellion in Bombay and Ahmedabad. There were riots and some non-violent rules were broken which greatly troubled Mahatma Gandhi. In Amritsar on April 6, two Congress leaders, Dr. Kitchlu and Dr. Satyapal were trying to restrain violence when they were deported by the authorities. The police fired at a procession demanding their release. The martyrs were carried in procession and a riot followed. Two banks and the railway station were attacked and five Europeans were murdered. A British woman, Miss Sherwood was also

accosted. The holding of meetings was then forbidden, but this rule was not known to many and on April 13, a peaceful meeting was held in Jallianwalah Bagh, which had only one narrow exit. Into this trapped enclosure General Dyer ordered firing on a crowd of about 20,000. The crowd tried to pour out of the one exit, but fifty soldiers fired over 1600 rounds in 10 minutes. 1200 died and 3600 were wounded, according to non-official reports. Officially, the numbers were about 400 killed (397) and between 1000 and 1200 wounded. General Dyer himself admitted that 1605 rounds had been fired by his troops until his "ammunition was almost exhausted." The whole of India was horrified. Mahatmaji was deeply moved. He never thought that the peaceful hartals which he had sponsored would have such dire consequences. He tried to restore peace and admitted having committed a "Himalayan miscalculation" because his non-violent creed had been violated by his followers with tragic results. He imposed a penitential fast on himself in Ahmedabad for three days. A deep sense of his own failure overcame him, but the faith in him of his followers, especially of devotees like Sarojini Naidu, never failed. On April 18, Mahatmaji suspended his campaign. But he by no means gave up the struggle. He called a meeting of volunteers in Bombay to whom he gave careful instructions as to his future campaign.

The Punjab tragedy later caused the British to appoint a committee consisting of four Indians and four British to enquire into the Jallianwalah Bagh massacre. Lord Hunter was President of this Committee and General Dyer was blamed; but in far milder terms than were expected by Indians. He was recalled from his command and his pension was stopped, but he was not really punished. Some members in the House of Commons and many in the House of Lords even approved his action. Sympathisers in England presented him with a purse of £20,000. All this naturally gave rise to indignation in India. In the meanwhile Martial Law was proclaimed in Amritsar from April 15, till June 9. Untold atrocities were alleged to have been carried on by the authorities which Sarojini took up when she went to England later in 1919. Among the horrors said to have been enacted during the Martial Law period were "flogging of naked men" for "trivial offences. Indian civilians were required to salute British officers, and to dismount on meeting them, if they were riding or driving."

“Indians were also made to crawl on all fours through the street where Miss Sherwood was attacked.”<sup>17</sup>

After Martial Law was lifted, the Congress followed a programme of relief for the victims of Jallianwalah Bagh and launched an inquiry into the atrocities. Swami Shraddanand and Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya took up relief work. The inquiry was conducted by Motilal Nehru and Deshabandhu C. R. Das. Gandhiji was permitted to enter the Punjab in the second half of October 1919, and to his surprise Sir Michael O’Dwyer, Governor of the Punjab, blamed him for all the tragedies. By this time Sarojini had left for England where she became an advocate for India. In the meanwhile, Gandhiji’s popularity and power increased and the well-known slogan “Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai” rang out aloud at the Amritsar Congress Session in 1919. Motilal Nehru himself presided at this Conference. This was Lokmanya Tilak’s last Congress. He died in 1920. Sarojini carried on a violent fight in England regarding the Amritsar atrocities which caused a widespread sensation in England and India.

On May 30, 1919, Rabindranath Tagore resigned his knighthood. In his letter to the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, he protested against the Punjab atrocities and remarked that the time had come “when badges of honour made our shame glaring in their incongruous context of humiliation.” Mahatma Gandhi also returned the medals he had received for his war work, and Sarojini Naidu surrendered her Kaiser-i-Hind gold medal.

## 7 *The Women’s Movement*

Parallel to the Freedom Movement grew the Women’s Movement of India. The first women’s organisation to be started on an all India basis was the Women’s Indian Association, which that great Irish woman worker for India, Mrs. Margaret E. Cousins, guided by Annie Besant and the Home Rule League, inaugurated, and which Sarojini Naidu sponsored from its inception. The internment of Annie Besant by Lord Pentland, Governor of Madras in June 1917, played a prominent part in rousing the spirit

<sup>17</sup> *Mahatma Gandhi*, by H. S. L. Polak, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

of women, and awakening them from their lethargy into active participation in the women's movement. Her release in September 1917 inspired women in all parts of the country to give her a rousing welcome. Before she became the first woman President of the Indian National Congress she toured extensively and inspired women everywhere. Following her example together with that set by Sarojini Naidu and Margaret Cousins, a number of women came forward to work for the emancipation of women and the national cause. It was now felt that since women were eager to take part in the freedom movement and emancipation of their sex, an Association should be formed to represent them.

The Women's Indian Association afforded this common platform for women to air their grievances and demand their rights. Mrs. Cousins insisted that there should be equality between men and women and an "equipoise of male and female co-operation," and the battle was launched. At the helm of this struggle stood Sarojini Naidu. It was to be a long and arduous combat, but throughout the fight, women, in spite of being inspired by the aggressive suffragette movement in Britain, were strangely docile and peaceful in their methods in India; but they were none the less insistent in their demands. One of the first activities of the women's movement was to send a Deputation of women to wait on Mr. Edwin Montagu, the Secretary of State for India, who had come to India in 1917, to discuss the coming reforms.

It will not be out of place here to give a brief summary of the life of Mrs. Margaret E. Cousins, one of the greatest foreign friends India has ever possessed. Born in Ireland a year before Sarojini, in 1878, she studied in Ireland and became a Bachelor of Music. She married the philosopher and poet, Mr. James Cousins. She spent the years between 1906 and 1913 fighting for the Women's Franchise League, and was imprisoned in England in connection with women's suffrage. Mrs. Cousins had been one of Mrs. Pankhurst's lieutenants in the votes for women campaign in England and Ireland.

In November 1915, Mr. and Mrs. Cousins came to India to join Dr. Annie Besant. They worked in the Theosophical Society, Adyar, and in 1916, Mrs. Cousins was elected a member of Maharshi Karve's Indian Women's University in Poona. The Deputation of women which waited on Mr. Montagu and on the

Viceroy was promoted by the University for Women, Poona, sponsored by Mrs. Cousins and Dorothy Jinarajadasa, who was also an ardent suffragette.

When Mr. Montagu came to survey India's claim for home rule, Margaret Cousins wrote: "I knew the ins and outs of approaching responsible Ministers of State. When week after week my husband and I read in daily papers of a never ending stream of men going in deputations to the Viceroy and the Rt. Hon. E. S. Montagu and never a mention of the voice of an Indian woman, all my training in organising, in taking hold of psychological moments could not be curbed, and I approached about twenty of India's best known women in public life, most of whom I had met through the Senate meetings of Prof. Karve's Indian Women's University. Eventually it became my privilege to organise and carry through the one and only women's deputation calling for Indian Reforms. Mrs. Sarojini Naidu was spokesman of the fourteen women who waited on the Viceroy and Mr. Montagu in Madras City on 18th December 1917."<sup>18</sup> Among the ladies in the Deputation were also Mrs. Ramabai Ranade, Mrs. Saraladevi Caudhurani, Mrs. Uma Nehru, Mrs. Herabai Tata, Mrs. Cousins and a supporter by telegram—Lady Abala Bose. The Deputation included representatives from organisations such as the Women's Indian Association, the Seva Sadan, the Mahila Seva Samaja, the Indian Women's University, the Women's Home Rule League and other institutions and organisations.

Negotiations with Mr. Montagu started two months earlier when a letter was written from the Indian Women's University, Poona, expressing a wish that Mr. Montagu during his visit to India should receive a Deputation of Indian women who would claim some post-war reforms which were essential for women, especially for facilities for Primary and Secondary Education for girls. Votes for women became the main issue of the Deputation ultimately, though at first this question was not intended to be featured, possibly because women first wished to be granted their essential social and economic rights. In the preliminary draft, therefore, only educational and social reform were mentioned; but Mrs. Cousins was informed that only political subjects were to

<sup>18</sup> *Indian Womanhood Today*, by Margaret E. Cousins, Kitabistan, Allahabad, p. 32.

be considered by Mr. Montagu which more or less forced the Deputation to include "Opportunities for Political Service." Thus began the clamour for votes for women and the impetus for women to combine social and political progress. A non-violent fight continued unrelentingly during the British regime, and won its victory only after India became independent in 1947. After Independence, women were granted universal adult franchise with one stroke of the pen by the Indian Government after it took over from the British and the futility of all the fuss which the British Government had created to grant this simple and at the same time most necessary political right became apparent. Neither have women, in the General Elections, so far held in Free India, ever betrayed their right; they have, on the contrary, often helped to create an atmosphere of real democracy in the country.

The story of women's votes in India is itself interesting enough to claim a chapter of its own, and in this romantic tale Sarojini Naidu played a major if not the leading part. Margaret Cousins, after receiving the information that politics had to be included if women wished to interview Mr. Montagu revised her draft and included the subject of women's franchise. The additions were approved. "But", added Mrs. Cousins, "I thought it would be a century before Indian women would understand, or be interested in political matters. I entirely underrated Indian mentality in the second year of my residence in India. I have since learnt to judge nothing in this ancient and wise country by a standard of ordinary Western values of vaunted literacy. Indian womanhood is amongst the most intelligent in the world, apart altogether from standards of schooling."<sup>19</sup>

An address was duly presented by the All India Women's Deputation to Lord Chelmsford and Mr. E. S. Montagu. The Address stated that women supported the claim of the people for Self-Government within the Empire, and Mr. Gandhi's scheme for Reform drawn up by the National Congress and the Moslem League. It demanded that members of the Council should be elected by the people and the Franchise should be extended to the people. Women should be recognised as "people" and there should be no sex disqualification. Local Self-Government should be granted and women should be represented. The British Gov-

<sup>19</sup> *Indian Womanhood Today, op. cit., p. 34.*

ernment had the example of the Indian National Congress before it in its just treatment of women. It had never made any differences between men and women, and in 1917, a woman was to be elected President of the Congress. But in order to fit themselves for their task as democratic citizens, education had to be improved. At the time, there were only one girl and thirteen boys out of a hundred who were literate, and Mr. Gokhale had referred to only one in six villages being provided with a school. Compulsory free primary education was demanded for boys and girls, and secondary education to be extended. The number of training colleges for women had also to be multiplied, scholarships were to be provided and Widows' Homes constructed. A strong request was tendered for more medical colleges for women and short maternity courses and other medical facilities.

The success of the Deputation, led by Sarojini Naidu was recognised in all parts of India, and was followed by public meetings and political conferences supporting the demands.

The Deputation and its aftermath were always a source of great rejoicing to Sarojini Naidu. It was characteristic of the whole Women's Movement that perfect democratic methods were used and no favours were asked or special rights for women sought. All they wanted was to be given the right to share an equal status with men. As Frank Moraes said: "The women's battle for equal rights has been a highly civilized affair—persuasive and persistent; insistent even but never violent, or aggressive. The 'Indian-ness' of it all is quite extraordinary."<sup>20</sup> Of the women of the time Sarojini was declared the most outstanding, and proudly she asserted her faith in her sisters; almost anticipating that time to come when she and the other Satyagrahis valiantly upheld the banner amidst hardships and tragic circumstances as, one after one, the men were taken to prison after the Salt March in 1930. Until prison doors closed on them also, the women, with their leader Sarojini upheld the banner.

<sup>20</sup> *Women of India*, published under the auspices of the National Council of Women in India, Chief Editor, Tara Ali Baig, The Publications Division, 1958, p. 90.

## 8 *Women's Franchise*

The suffragette movement in India is packed with romance and excitement. As early as 1889, Pandita Ramabai led a delegation of women to the Indian National Congress and demanded various rights for women. Thus almost from its inception, Congress encouraged women and was anxious to ameliorate their backward position. Perhaps this was what paved the way for women to gain the vote and adult franchise without any demur when India became free in 1947. One glance at the Draft Constitution reveals the astonishing fact that women were considered equal to men the moment India was free. There were to be no discriminations on grounds of religion, race, caste or sex. Equal work would earn equal pay for men and women alike and unconditional adult franchise was granted to the poorest woman as to the richest. Though Mrs. Cousins lived to see the first General Election in 1952, and must have rejoiced greatly at the sight of old and young women gathering at the polling booths, it was one of the greatest tragedies that Sarojini Naidu never lived to witness this exhilarating sight.

In 1918, Sarojini Naidu moved a resolution on Women's Franchise at the Eighth Session of the Bombay Provincial Council at Bijapur. "This conference welcomes the requisition of the ladies of Bombay inviting the support of this conference for the women's franchise in India, and places on record its opinion that such a franchise should be given to women, but under suitable conditions, and recommends that this resolution be forwarded to the Congress through the Provincial Congress Committee." In her speech in support of this resolution she said that the word "man" should include politically "woman" in all discussions of rights of the citizen, and that women should form a part of the set-up of all talks when the Congress League scheme came into existence. She went on to describe the waiting of the Women's Deputation on His Excellency the Viceroy and on Mr. Montagu when they had asked for their franchise rights. Then Mr. Montagu had asked: "Do you think that the men of India will allow such a thing, or will they oppose it?" Sarojini answered that so far from objecting to the right being granted to women, they would support them.

Previously at the A.I.C.C. committee meeting in Calcutta, a

half-hearted resolution had demanded partial franchise, but Sarojini Naidu had withdrawn it as she felt that the women of India should not appeal to the chivalry of men but to their sense of justice. Meanwhile the women of India, by the score—by the hundred—were aroused to their sense of responsibility and felt urged to demand their privileges in the great reconstruction to come. Their position consisted in the fact that so far from demanding the condescension of a partial franchise recommended by men, they were in a position to ask for full franchise on suitable conditions. The question now arose as to whether in the reconstruction of national life India could ever become a free nation, unless and until men and women equally shared political and social rights. Sarojini Naidu in her speech went on to define the great responsibility always shared by women. Men were only part possessors and co-trustees of the life-blood they were ready to offer for the salvation of their country. “When you are ready to have the citizen army,” thundered Sarojini Naidu, “when you are ready to send out sons for the defence of the Empire, when you are ready to stake your life and your wealth and all that you hold dear for the freedom of India, you should remember that you are accepting half the responsibilities for India’s future in trust. When the spartan soldier went to fight, it was his mother who said to him: ‘Come back victorious.’ Remember that in all great national crises, it is the man who goes out, but it is the woman’s hope and woman’s prayer that nerves him—nerves his arm to become a successful soldier.” (Hear, hear.) So man ought to share with woman all rights.

Soon, the progress that the women’s movement made after its initial “Votes for Women Deputation,” as the visit to Montagu and the Viceroy came to be called, showed a clear renascent spirit, a renaissance for which Sarojini had worked all her life. As she herself declared: “The Indian woman of today, whatever her creed, or community, is clearly imbued and inspired by a profound renascent consciousness of her special and too-long forgotten place and purpose, privilege and responsibility in creating and sustaining suspicions and enduring conditions of national progress and international fellowship.”

The suffragette question claimed Sarojini Naidu’s attention as much as the political struggle for freedom. From 1917 to 1919

she "became more and more popular as a soul-stirring orator, a poetess, a politician, an unofficial ambassadress of India to foreign lands, an acknowledged leader of the united Indian people. In her person she ensured that womanhood will be found in every move of every game in the political chess-board. She became President of every kind of important political conference, and of Students' Conferences and in 1918 was elected President of the (Provincial) Indian National Congress in Bijapur, Bombay Presidency."<sup>21</sup>

During these two years between 1917 and 1919, the Indian Women's Association held meetings through most of its branches in various parts of India and took part in political conferences both of the Moslem League and the National Indian Congress.

A second Women's Deputation waited on the Southborough Commission for Franchise Reform in 1919. But the blow had already fallen when the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms, despite the "Votes for Women Deputation," made no mention of women and completely ignored their demands. The Southborough Franchise Committee was appointed to deal with the question of Elections. It was one of two committees appointed to investigate the suggestions put forward by the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms. The Committee ungraciously exclaimed "that it is not practical to open the franchise for women" and Mrs. Cousins had to reiterate that "masculine monopoly" was sought instead of "the equipoise of male and female co-operation."

Mrs. Cousins then addressed an interesting letter to Mr. Montagu in her capacity as Acting Secretary for the All India Women's Deputation. The letter said that the Deputation wished to bring to Mr. Montagu's notice the Resolution of the Special Session of the Indian National Congress on the political status of women in the coming Reforms. She said: "In the interview you accorded to Mrs. Sarojini Naidu and three other members of the Deputation you questioned whether the political institutions would support their women's request for enfranchisements. Already we have informed you of Resolutions supporting this passed by the foremost Provincial District Conferences, and these have been ratified in the strongest way by this Resolution of the special session which was passed by an overwhelming majority.

<sup>21</sup> *Indian Womanhood Today*, *op. cit.*, p. 64, see previous speech.

“Women possessing the same qualifications as laid down for men in any part of the scheme should not be disqualified on account of sex. Our members earnestly request you to include this principle in clear terms in the Bill which you are drafting, thus submitting it to the parliament and not to leave the fate of one half of the Indian people to a subordinate Franchise Committee.”<sup>22</sup>

Women were to be allowed to record their votes in their homes, as was done in Australia, for which a special band of police officers was employed which was to be present when votes were recorded and collected. Purdah women could thus cast their votes.

A requisition signed by 800 educated women of the Bombay Presidency was submitted to the Committee. The demands of the earlier “Votes for Women Deputation” were also placed before the Southborough Committee. Two women then appeared personally representing Bengal and Punjab Provinces. It was pointed out that for over fifteen years the women of Bombay had enjoyed the Municipal vote without any difficulties; the women even went to the polling booths along with men. “Even Lord Southborough’s Committee had to admit that Bombay women used their right in this respect with intelligence and diligence.”<sup>23</sup>

But the report of the Committee, which appeared in April 1919, entirely ignored the claims and demands of women. They were totally excluded, irrespective of qualifications of education, property or social position. “It was understood that the members of the committee based their recommendation on the views they held as to the social customs regarding Indian women, which, they alleged, made the granting of the franchise premature.” As Mrs. Cousins remarked: “The decision (in 1919) of the Southborough Franchise Committee and the Government of India to perpetuate this discredited sex-qualification advertises to all the world that the views of these gentlemen are in this particular behind the times, that they consider Indian conditions behind the times, Indian women lagging behind all other women, and that they intend them and India to remain behind the times.”<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> *Mrs. Margaret Cousins and her Work in India*, by One Who Knows, published by Women’s Indian Association, Adyar, Madras, 1956, p. 12.

<sup>23</sup> *Mrs. Margaret E. Cousins, op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>24</sup> *The Awakening of Asian Womanhood, op. cit.*, p. 62.

In July, 1919, the women of Bombay assembled at a public meeting "to protest against the indignity put upon their sex and to express their deep regret at the recommendations of the Southborough Franchise Committee (and the acceptance of these recommendations by the Government of India) not to include women as a whole in the Franchise Proposals." But the Committee disposed of the claims of women in four pages out of a report of four hundred, so insignificant did women seem in the eyes of this august enquiry Commission. They felt that social conditions in India made it premature to extend the Franchise to women, and that until the Purdah system was "relaxed female suffrage would hardly be a reality." At the protest meeting resolutions were passed and cablegrams (eleven in all) sent to prominent people in England.

The Joint Parliamentary Committee of the Government of India Bill was appointed in July 1919 to take evidence from representative Indians on Reforms and Plan them on a workable basis. A deputation of women again waited on this Committee; among the members were Mrs. Annie Besant, Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, Mrs. Herabai Tata and Miss Mithan Tata. These ladies so convinced the Committee that Parliament actually began to consider votes for women as a "domestic subject," leaving it for Indian Provincial Legislatures to settle the matter.

Thus the fight continued through the years; but little progress was achieved during the time of the British Raj. The Simon Commission later, despite all its praise for women, recommended only the property qualifications, and the Lothian Committee went a step further and included literacy which brought up the ratio of men to women by 4.5 to 1; but all these foreign committees, with a few "loyal" Indians to boost them in their enquiries and assessments of a country of which they knew nothing, possessed no human understanding of the question. The British Raj treated the women of India with the authority of an autocratic and dictatorial parent bringing up a backward child, ruling with threats and reluctant to give it any freedom or credit for acting for itself. Women like Sarojini Naidu for ever kept insisting on the fact that if women were conceded their full responsibility they would never fail; but they were not trusted. What the British Government was afraid of it is difficult to understand. The women of India con-

tinued to plead for adult franchise and though the Indian legislatures fully encouraged women, Adult Franchise was a far cry.

The "Montford" Reforms of 1919 only enfranchised about one million women. It was eventually in 1926 that they were accorded the right to be members of the Legislatures, and even this, only by Government nomination. Dr. Mutthulakshmi Reddy was the first woman legislator of the Indian Provinces and she was unanimously elected a Deputy Speaker of the Madras Legislative Council. She retained the position for three years, and only resigned in protest of Mahatma Gandhi's arrest in 1930. Women had also begun to seek election in Municipal Councils. Four women were elected in Bombay city by topping the polls of four different wards. Sarojini Naidu was one of them; it is even said that she was invited actually to become Mayor of Bombay; a position which she, however, never held.

In 1933, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur was one of the leading members who gave evidence before the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Indian Constitutional Reforms, asking for direct election on a non-communal basis and without reservation of seats for women. This bold step stretched far ahead of the demands of men, who at the time wanted communal representation and reservation of seats. Women wished for no separate favours, but to win their seats on merit alone. As Sarojini Naidu said: "One thing is unchangeable throughout the world, the indivisibility of womanhood; frontiers, wars, races, many things make for division, but womanhood combines the queen and the peasant, and the time has come when every woman should know her own ability."

## 9 *In England*

In July 1919, Sarojini Naidu set sail for England as a member of the deputation of the All-India Home Rule League, where she pleaded for the rights of women. Her efforts at this time and later largely influenced the Joint Committee on Indian Reforms before which she gave her evidence.

On August 6, 1919, Sarojini handed over her Memorandum to the Joint Select Committee. She supported the plea for fran-

chise of women in India. She gave evidence on August 7, before this Committee and the Chairman remarked of her speech: "If I may be allowed to say so, it illuminated our prosaic literature with a poetic touch." He added that with the Memorandum and the evidence already submitted by other witnesses, the Committee was clearly in possession of the case in respect of Indian women.

It was at this time that I, as a school girl, used often to meet Sarojini Naidu with my mother in London. She took us once to the Lyceum Club. I still remember her seated in the lounge, drinking tea. English women, with whom she was most popular despite her political mission on behalf of Indian freedom, kept coming to chat with her.

Sarojini felt that though she lived and worked as a satyagrahi, for the triumph of truth, it was necessary for India to build up a solid front of loyal support. Why did so many Indians keep pointing out their own faults and criticising their leaders when they were not even asked to do so? Why paint a black picture when they could at least assess their good points before cataloguing their mistakes?

Once we went to see Sarojini in her lodgings in London. She and her daughter Lilamani were staying together, but she told us that Lilamani, in order to assert her independence, had left for a few days to stay on her own in a girls' hostel. One of Sarojini's admirable qualities as a mother was that she never claimed any maternal hold on her children. She allowed them complete independence and yet, she was a most devoted and much-loved parent. Both her daughters, Lilamani and Padmaja, adored her. Meeting Lilamani a few days later, and going out for a long walk with her, I asked why she had gone away from her mother even though only for a week, and she, quite simply and directly, as was her manner, replied, "Why not?"

Sarojini Naidu was often criticised for not spending more time at home. She was found fault with for leaving her husband alone; but he was proud of his wife's achievements, her genius and her patriotism. It was, no doubt, with his full consent and blessings that Sarojini so often travelled away from Hyderabad. Asked once why she left home so frequently, as she was not only a wife and mother but a "Hindu" wife, she replied: "My home, my husband and my children are now as much my care as ever. They know

that my public work does not interfere with my care for them. They and I are thankful to you for your interest in us."

Sarojini, though she travelled to England for reasons of health, never, as far as we could see, rested much. She spent many hours looking after Indian students in England, and her interest in her friends was a subject of wonder and admiration to all of us. Once, an Indian girl fell seriously ill and we were told that Sarojini used to spend night after night by her bedside, for she knew how lonely a student could be in a foreign country. She was mother to all and the Indian students adored her.

Lilamani was at school in London at this time and later she went to Oxford. Her intellect was brilliant, lucid and clear; but her health always gave her trouble, and also, her abrupt and at times unpredictable manners often caused people to misunderstand her. Her real friends, however, knowing her generosity and kindness, were extremely fond of her. Her public career in Independent India was of no small worth as she held an important post in the Ministry of External Affairs and also worked wholeheartedly for the Women's Movement.

In 1919, despite her ill-health, Sarojini threw herself into the vortex of politics, sweeping men and women off their feet and firing them with patriotic zeal. She looked on the Mahatma "rightly, as a Crusader, and she joined the band of the crusaders and became the bard and minstrel carrying hopes and aspirations of India to the hills and the dales, to towns and villages and hamlets. Gandhiji was her spiritual father, her *guru* who had baptized the nightingale of India with the unquenchable thirst of freedom."<sup>25</sup> Mahatma Gandhi was also fast beginning to look on Sarojini as one of his devoted followers.

The year 1920 started with a definite split among Congress leaders. The Liberals had broken away from the Congress in 1919 and in the Congress itself a further schism was feared. The Montford Reforms introduced the question, "Co-operation, or obstruction." Gandhiji wanted Non-co-operation, and added to this question were the problems of the Punjab Tragedy and the Khilaphat Movement. The last had now become an important problem. During the war Mr. Lloyd George had faithfully promised not to

<sup>25</sup> "Sarojini Naidu," by Prof. K. K. Bhattacharya, *The Modern Review*, April 1949.

deprive Turkey of Asia Minor and Thrace, but this promise was broken. The Moslem claim that the Khalif should rule over the holy places of Mesopotamia, Arabia, Syria and Palestine was denied under the terms of the Armistice, and Turkey was deprived of her right. The whole of the Moslem population of India was enraged, and other communities joined in indignant protests, especially the Congress which was much in sympathy with the Moslem cause. Mahatma Gandhi announced his intention of organising the Khilaphat Movement. The Ali brothers then took a Deputation of Indian Moslems to wait on the Viceroy, headed by Dr. Ansari. March 19 was fixed as a National day of mourning—of fasting, hartal and prayer. In the midst of this atmosphere of unrest, the non-official report on the Punjab atrocities was published on March 15, 1920. The week April 6 to April 13; the time of the Jallianwalah Bagh massacre the year before, was observed as National Week.

In England, Sarojini Naidu joined in the Khilaphat Movement and spoke at Kingsway Hall, London on April 22. George Lansbury presided. The Indian Khilaphat Delegation put in a vigorous plea on behalf of the Indian Moslem cause and Sarojini Naidu exclaimed: "Mr. Mohamed Ali has spoken to you of the invincible assent of the Independent people, their determination to die in defence of their national sentiments. But I am not ready to die, because I think it requires an infinitely higher courage to live." Hers was not a defeatist mentality, but always one which attacked the enemy and fought its way through, non-violent though it was.

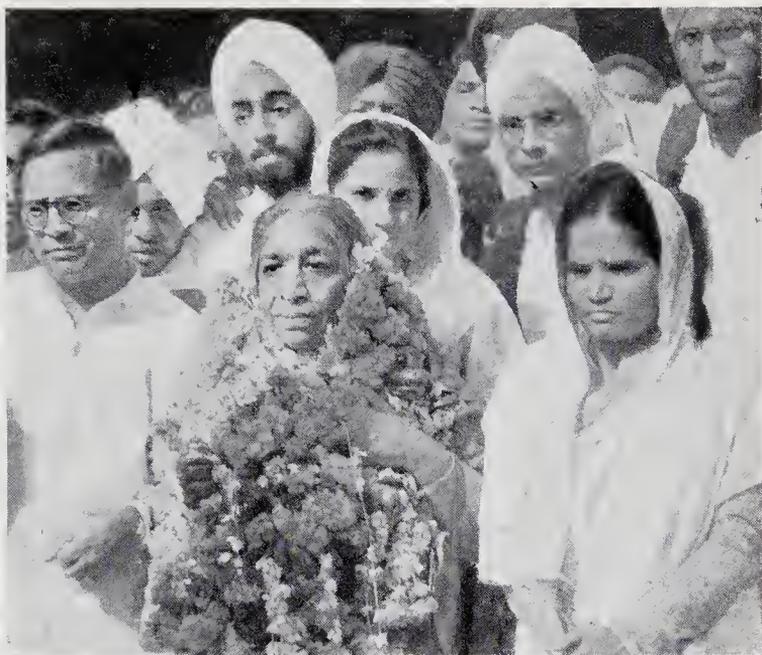
The peace with Turkey was made on May 14, 1920 and the Viceroy explained the terms of the Treaty of Sévres to the Indian Moslems. He asked them to be patient and understand the Treaty. But great indignation ensued in India and was accentuated by the publication of the Hunter Committee report on the Punjab atrocities, which was said to have been an understatement, and did not tally with the findings of the non-official Congress enquiry. Gandhi's Non-co-operation project was accepted by the Khilaphat Committee and adopted at the end of May 1920, as this was the only remedy open to Moslems. Questions were discussed at a special meeting held in Benaras. Sarojini Naidu was still in England. It was decided by Gandhiji and others, both Moslem and Hindu, that a programme of the boycott of schools and colleges



An early profile.



With friends (1923). Standing: R. K. Chowdhry, K. N. Wanchoo and S. K. Handoo. Seated: Vishnu Sahay, Amarnath Jha, Sarojini Naidu and P. N. Sapru. Ground: Mohd. Hashim and Ram Nath, From *Sarojini Naidu* by A. Jha.



At Lahore Railway Station as President-elect of All-India Women's Conference (1945).



With Rabindranath Tagore. *Courtesy: The Times of India.*



With Lady Linlithgow, Lady Protima Mitter and others.  
*Courtesy: Lady Protima Mitter.*



At Bardoli. L. to R.: Asaf Ali, Govind Vallabh Pant, Sarojini Naidu, Morarji Desai, Indira Gandhi and Aruna Asaf Ali.



With Lady Mountbatten and Govind Vallabh Pant.



With Lord Mountbatten.



With Deshapriya J. M. Sengupta.



During a hartal. From *The Indian Ladies' Magazine*.

Dear Mrs. Naidu,

Your beautiful  
letter written in the midst  
of your sorrow - so beauti-  
ful, perhaps, because of  
your sorrow - reached me  
yesterday afternoon. . . .  
I do hope your grief will  
break into tears that will  
abide. . . . work  
renewed expressions of affection  
are doubly, from love

12<sup>th</sup> February '15 K. Gokhale

The Bird of Time.

Songs of Life, Death and the Spring.

69

Sappho's Maidens.

"The Bird of Time has but a little way  
to fly - and lo! the Bird is on the wing"

Vigil  
(To Ju-ju the little dog)

What tho' ti guard and soothe you help me slumber,  
The twilight night I spend?  
Have you not watched with me the other vigils,  
O my loyal little friend?

What tho' I thrust you from my room  
With anxious love and wild?  
You are, O little playmate of my children,  
To me a little child.

"Vigil." From poems not published. Courtesy: National Library.

Slumber Song for Sunalini  
(In an Indian melody to an Indian lyric)

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When the golden glances  
Champak buds are blowing .  
By the flowing stream  
Now, when day is dying  
There are fairies flying  
Scattering a cloud of dreams.

Slumber, spirits weaving  
Thro' the forest dew drops,  
Flutter hither breezing soon  
Baby, vision dreaming  
In my Sunalini ...  
Hush thee, O my pretty moon.

Sweet, the saints shall bless thee  
Hush mine own crown thee  
Hush my heart soft from the sleep  
Till the red dawn dances  
Breaking thy soft trance,  
Sleep my Sunalini. Sleep!

## The Lover

O Love! my foolish heart and eyes,  
Have lost all knowledge save of you  
And every sense - is blank as the  
And flowering earth - I find anew  
~~Only in the~~ The changing glory of you for  
The myriad symbols of your grace

To my enraptured sight. You are  
Sovereign ~~and~~ <sup>sweet</sup> and ~~fit~~ <sup>real</sup> reality,  
The splendour of the morning star  
The keening and music of the sea.  
The very fragrance of the storm  
Rich hues of all times; harvest

O my Love! my foolish soul and senses  
Have lost all vision save of you  
my sacred fount of substance  
In which my spirit drinks anew  
Serenity and solace, hope and peace  
From life to life and hour to hour.

O poignant dawn! O purple dawn  
O sanctuary of love and bliss!



26. 12. 46

This is not a letter .. it is an  
affirmation of love and faith.  
Had it been possible I should have  
tried to reach you only for a  
moment. You will I know approve  
of my leaving Bengal without even  
making the effort. I need not  
try to see you nor to speak with you -  
because you dwell in my vision  
and you message says it self to the  
wala through my heart.  
Beloved Pilgrim seth up in you  
pilgrimage of love and hope. 'Go  
with God' is the beautiful Spanish  
phrase. I have no fear for you - only faith in  
you message. Sarojini

and Law Courts was to be organised. Even Tilak fell in with the programme of the All-India Congress Committee; but he died on July 31, 1920. In August, the Supreme Legislative Council met, and due to the Non-co-operation Movement, some of the members of the Council resigned their seats. The Viceroy characterised the movement as the "Most foolish of all foolish schemes."

On June 3, 1920, Sarojini spoke on the Punjab Tragedy at Kingsway Hall and caused an animated debate in the House of Commons on what she said. The title of her speech was "The Agony and Shame of the Punjab." She attacked General Dyer for his treatment of Indian women. "My compatriots," she said, "I do not speak to you tonight, but for you English men and women, I speak to you today as standing arraigned at the bar because of the blood-guiltiness of those who have committed murder in my country. I need not go into details about those incredible atrocities that have been committed. My friends, Mr. Patel and Mr. Horniman have already given you in outline and in essence the nature of that horrible, most horrible, thrice horrible deed, done in the name of British justice. But I am going to speak to you as a woman about the wrongs committed against my sisters. Englishmen, you who pride yourselves upon your chivalry, you who hold more precious than your imperial treasures the honour and chastity of your women, will you sit still and leave unavenged the dishonour, and the insult and agony inflicted upon the veiled women of the Punjab?"

"One of the speakers has said Lord Chelmsford refused to draw the veil from the ugly face of realities; but his minions, his martial authorities rent the veil from the faces of the women of the Punjab. Not only were the men mown down as if they were grass that is born to wither; but they tore asunder the cherished Purdah, that innermost privacy of the chaste womanhood of India. Therefore, Englishmen and Englishwomen, my sisters were stripped naked, they were flogged, they were outraged". . . . "And yet you dare to talk of the auction of souls", she thundered. "The auction of souls was the auction of your British souls, your British democracy betrayed, dishonoured, for no dishonour clings to the martyrs who suffered, but to the tyrants who inflicted the tyranny and pain. Should they hold their Empire by dishonouring the women of another nation or lose it out of chivalry for their

honour and chastity? The Bible asked, 'What shall it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his own soul?' " She admonished: "You deserve no Empire. You today have lost your soul; you today have the stain of blood-guiltiness upon you; . . . no nation that rules by tyranny is free; it is the slave of its own despotism."

Sarojini's words caused a sensation. Newspapers asked the British Government if her words were true. Were women really "stripped naked" and "flogged"? A long correspondence ensued between Mr. Montagu, a Member of the House of Commons, and Sarojini Naidu after this fiery speech. Mr. Montagu spoke insultingly of Sarojini's charges. He wrote accusing her of making untrue statements and challenged her to quote her authority or publicly withdraw her statements. He received a crushing reply in a letter dated July 12, 1920, written from St. James' Place.

Sarojini took a great delight in attending the session at the House of Commons where her remarks were the subject of a heated debate. She listened light-heartedly to the discussion and wrote long letters on the subject to Mahatma Gandhi.

From England Sarojini travelled to Sweden and then to Geneva where she attended the Conference of the International Women's Suffrage Alliance. Her speeches left an unforgettable impression on all who heard her. She received a great ovation in Paris. She took the message of India's "spiritual culture" to the West and explained the part the Satyagraha movement played, the importance of passive resistance, soul-force and the non-violent struggle for freedom. "As a priestess of a new Gospel," Sarojini took a novel message from India to Europe and focussed the eyes of the Continent on India.

## 10 *India Again*

The New Assembly which had been created by the "Montford" Reforms was to be opened in August 1920 and it was proposed that the Prince of Wales should perform this function. But due to the disturbances and the formal announcement of the Non-co-operation Movement by Mahatma Gandhi on August 1, 1920, it was thought wiser to send the Duke of Connaught instead

of the Prince to open the Assembly. The Duke was also boycotted and cries by demonstrators of "Go back Duke" rang out in the country. Mahatma Gandhi and the Ali Brothers toured the villages of India extensively and popularised the idea of Non-co-operation.

A special session of the Congress met in Calcutta in September 1920, but though the burning question of the day was Non-co-operation, there was a split in opinion. It was considered by some that a boycott of the new Legislative Bodies was not necessary. Deshabandhu C. R. Das was against Gandhiji's Non-co-operation programme. He did not approve of his boycott of Councils and Law Courts. Lala Lajpat Rai who had just returned from the U.S.A. presided at the session; he too opposed Gandhiji's Non-co-operation programme. The Opposition was led by C. R. Das but Gandhiji's resolution was passed by a narrow margin.

The Gandhian era started from this date. European clothes vanished from Congress circles and Khadi came into vogue. The language gradually changed to Hindi though Sarojini adhered to her beloved English. C. F. Andrews wrote his brilliant essay, "Independence—the Immediate Need." He declared that Mahatma Gandhi had given India the *Mantram*, "Be Free! Be slaves no more!" The Non-co-operation Movement spread and by the time the Congress met in Nagpur in December, 1920, the two sections had more or less re-united. The Nagpur Conference attracted an immense gathering of no less than 14,582 people. A number of Moslems and women were present. The veteran Congress leader, Mr. Vijayaragavachari presided. Members of the Labour Party of England attended, including Col. Wedgewood, and conveyed the Labour Party's greetings and sympathy to India. The President demanded that Swaraj should be the motive of the Non-co-operation Movement and not merely the airing of grievances of the Punjab Tragedy and the Khilaphat wrongs. Gandhiji avidly agreed. He felt that Satyagraha must be strongly established if India was to win freedom. The majority were on Gandhiji's side and finally the Nagpur session proved a triumph for him. Old stagers like Bepin Chandra Pal, Malaviya, Jinnah, Khaparde, Das and Lala Lajpat Rai were overruled. C. R. Das finally actually moved the Non-co-operation resolution and it was seconded by Lajpat Rai. The Resolution also called on merchants to boycott foreign.

trade relations and encourage hand spinning. It appealed to all Government servants to exercise greater kindness and honesty. It emphasised non-violence in word and deed. Pandit Nehru wrote: "Many of us who worked for the Congress programme lived in a kind of intoxication during the year 1921. We were full of excitement and optimism and buoyant enthusiasm. We sensed the happiness of a person crusading for a cause."<sup>26</sup> The creed of the Congress was to attain Swaraj by peaceful and legitimate means.

The A.I.C.C. now met almost every month in 1921. Gandhi had taken over *Young India*, a magazine which the Home Rule League had previously edited and was able to express his views freely to the public. Everywhere there was activity and patriotic fervour.

In the meanwhile, Lord Reading succeeded Lord Chelmsford as Viceroy, in April 1921. In May, Gandhi and Reading met but though the meeting was cordial, nothing conclusive came out of it. They had long talks about the Treaty of Sévres and the meaning of Swaraj, but the Indo-British relationship steadily deteriorated.

Immediately after her return from England in 1921, Sarojini plunged into the fray. On July 8, 1921, the All-India Khilaphat Conference took place in Karachi. Moslems were asked not to serve in the army or help in recruitment. Mohamad Ali made an impassioned speech, and the Ali Brothers were prosecuted. Congress, as usual, wholly supported the Khilaphat Movement.

In July 1921, the All-India Congress Committee also passed a resolution urging the need to boycott all foreign cloth and encourage hand spinning and weaving to popularise khadi. Liquor shops were picketed. A huge bonfire of foreign cloth was organised, which caused C. F. Andrews to protest. He sympathised with the fight against drink, drugs, untouchability and prostitution. "But lighting bonfires of foreign cloth and telling people it is a religious sin to wear it, destroying in the fire the noble handiwork of one's fellow men and women, one's brothers and sisters abroad, saying it would be 'defiling' to wear it—I cannot tell how different all this appears to me," he said. "Do you know I almost fear now to wear the khadi that you have given me lest I should be judging

<sup>26</sup> *Jawaharlal Nehru*, by Frank Moraes, Jaico Publishing House, 1959, p. 75.

other people as a Pharisee would, saying 'I am holier than thou.' I never felt like this before."

But the flames of Non-co-operation flared into a mighty conflagration in India. The atmosphere was explosive and in the middle of this turmoil it was announced that the Prince of Wales would visit India. The Congress knew that the "royal" visit would excite the masses and determined to boycott the Prince as they had boycotted the Duke of Connaught the previous year.

An organisation called the "Young Volunteers" was formed. Sarojini addressed a great multitude saying: "Do not co-operate with the authorities, remain indoors, do nothing beyond that." No violence was intended, and pointing to the proscribed books of Gandhi Sarojini cried: "You are liable to arrest if you buy or sell them." The audience immediately bought them.

On October 4, 1921, Mahatma Gandhi issued a manifesto over the signatures of himself, Motilal Nehru, Lala Lajpat Rai, Sarojini Naidu and many others. The leaders met near Shanker Lal Banker's residence and about five minutes' walk from Mahatma Gandhi's lodgings. A little before 3 p.m., Mahatmaji walked to the meeting place with Sarojini Naidu and about eight or nine others. The Mahatma came out, possibly for the first time in his loin cloth, holding a bag in his hands. The grand old man Abbas Tyabji burst out laughing when he saw Gandhiji, and clapping his hands jestingly said: "Look, the Mahatma not only lost his senses and turned mad, but he has devised a new way of making others mad also!" In response, Mahatmaji laughed heartily. Such was the spirit of humour in which the leaders worked. The meeting began. The Moslems sat on the Mahatma's left and Sarojini Naidu, Motilal Nehru and others on his right.<sup>27</sup>

The Manifesto was published in *The Bombay Chronicle* the next day (October 5, 1921). That morning Sarojini Naidu told Mahatma Gandhi that the English residents in her hotel were astonished and alarmed on reading the papers. Many of the Europeans had asked her at the Taj Mahal Hotel, where she was staying, if she was really serious and what she really meant.

The Prince of Wales arrived on November 17, 1921. The Con-

<sup>27</sup> *Seven Months with Mahatma Gandhi*, by Krishnadas, abridged and edited by Richard B. Gregg, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1951, p. 47.

gress programme of boycott and burning of foreign cloth was carried out but there was violence on the day of the Prince's arrival. Gandhiji sent Sarojini and others to the scene of the disturbance to pacify the crowd. He also went and they both addressed the people in the midst of riots and bloodshed, for about three days. Fifty-three people were killed and four hundred wounded. The riots could not be stemmed despite the efforts of the leaders, among whom Sarojini played a prominent and fearless part. Gandhiji now went on a five-day fast. He said "Swaraj stank in his nostrils." On November 19, the third day of the disturbance, Mahatmaji "sounded his trumpet call for peace"; but the populace had gone mad with the fervour of violence and could not be called back to a sense of duty. At midday Sarojini sent a written message to Gandhiji. She was working among the rioters nearby. The message ran thus: "Please send a surgeon immediately, men dead, dying and wounded are lying on the road." Gandhiji's fast had indeed shocked the leaders into striving to keep alive non-violent ideals, and they worked night and day to stop the riots. The most ardent were Sarojini Naidu, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Umar Sobani, Shankarlal Banker and Barucha. Shri Krishnadas writes: "What shall I say of Srimati Sarojini Naidu's daring? Time after time she would go out amongst the rioters in the different areas of disturbance; and coming back each time, she would relate to Mahatma with appropriate postures and gestures her personal exploits, not forgetting to give a dramatic picture of the acts of cowardice of which some others might have been guilty. Thus, she of them all could occasionally bring a smile to the Mahatma's lips, even in the midst of all this grief and anxiety."<sup>28</sup>

In December 1921, Congress met in Ahmedabad under the Presidentship of Hakim Ajmal Khan, and Sarojini Naidu read out C. R. Das's speech "with all the eloquence which the speech itself possessed in language and sentiment." C. R. Das was to have been President but he fell ill and Hakim Ajmal Khan was invited to take his place. Sarojini was chosen to read C. R. Das's speech and it was remarked that he himself could not have read it better.

During this month and the next about 39,000 people were arrested. The Nehrus were incarcerated in Lucknow jail and could

<sup>28</sup> *Seven Months with Mahatma Gandhi, op. cit., p. 146.*

not attend the Congress Session. At the session Gandhiji called for "aggressive civil disobedience to all Government laws and constitutions, for non-violence, for the continuance of public meetings throughout India despite the Government prohibition, and for all Indians to offer themselves peacefully for arrest by joining the Volunteer Corps." Sarojini Naidu seconded Mahatma Gandhi's resolution, and called upon the nation to prepare for civil disobedience.

Apart from work in the Congress, Sarojini was busy in Ahmedabad. She made her famous presidential speech on "The Temple of Freedom" at the Students' Conference in December 1921. Much use was made of students at this time; they were asked to boycott colleges and schools. Congress was often blamed later for including students in politics; but by asking them to boycott merely the British type of educational institutions a tremendous step was taken at the time to foster national educational institutions which helped to break to a certain extent the purely conventional British education which was being imparted to the country. Sarojini quoted C. R. Das as having said: "Let me not forget the students. They are the inspiration of the movement. They are the torch bearers on the path to freedom. They are the pilgrims on the road to liberty. If theirs has been the sacrifice, their victory is their due." Sarojini asked students to wipe off the wrongs of the older generation; she cried that Mahatma Gandhi was "the flute of Shree Krishna that is within your hearts and souls" and she beseeched students to "Sacrifice! Sacrifice!! Sacrifice!!!" This was their duty.

Then Sarojini touched on the moot point of students joining politics. She had not believed in this before; but now, she felt that though it hurt, youth must deny itself culture and knowledge because "freedom is worthy of even so valuable a sacrifice." The 1914 war saw thousands of students leaving Oxford and Cambridge to fight for the country. India's plight was more tragic, more vital and urgent. Sarojini beseeched them to pour forth the blood of their hearts in battle. It was a battle of "self-purification, self-sacrifice and self-devotion." When the Swaraj flag would fly, the loss of education of youth would count as nothing as set against the imperishable legacy of freedom. "You are the new soldiers," she cried, "... March with me to the Temple of Liberty. I carry

the standard in my hands, comrades, march with me till we reach the goal." Though Sarojini was fervent at the time in asking the students to join the Non-co-operation Movement, later she, with other leaders, realised that students should not dabble in politics but should keep to the discipline of their schools and colleges.

## II *The Great Trial*

With hundreds of leaders in jail, 1922 broke with dismal foreboding. In the meantime, Sarojini Naidu and C. F. Andrews addressed a mass meeting convened by the District Congress Committee and the Madras Presidency Khilaphat Committee on the Marina in Madras on February 15, 1922. The silver-voiced orator, Srinivas Sastri was present. Congress had now taken up action in Bardoli in Western India and the No-Tax and Civil Disobedience campaign was introduced and explained. Then all at once, in February, Mahatma Gandhi decided to suspend Civil Disobedience because of the violence which broke out in the Gorakhpur District of Chauri Chaura in the U.P. There had been a disturbance followed by police firing, and the infuriated mob had surrounded the police station and burnt the building. About two dozen constables taking refuge within had lost their lives. Mahatma Gandhi was non-plussed and called off the Civil Disobedience campaign in Bardoli. He asked the people of India to spin, practise temperance, further Hindu-Moslem unity, and concentrate on social reform and on expanding their education programmes instead. At the All-India meeting of the Congress in Delhi on February 24, 1922, however, Mahatmaji was strongly criticised by the Congress Committee, which favoured the continuance of civil disobedience. Gandhiji felt deserted. The Government thought it expedient at this time to pounce on him, and in spite of the fact that he had called off Civil Disobedience he was arrested. The day before his arrest in March Gandhiji had written in *Young India*: "If I am arrested—rivers of bloodshed by the Government cannot frighten me, but I should be deeply pained even if the people did so much as abuse the government for my sake or in my name." The charges against Gandhiji were that he published seditious ar-

ticles in *Young India* on September 19, December 21, and February 23, 1922.

Jawaharlal Nehru who had been in prison was released at this time and went to visit Gandhiji at his Ashram in Ahmedabad; but before he arrived, Gandhiji was arrested and taken to Sabarmati Jail. He took with him a change of clothes, blankets and five books, which included the Sermon on the Mount. Gandhi's great trial began on March 18, at Ahmedabad. Sir Robert Broomfield was the judge. The courtroom was packed, and Gandhiji, on hearing the case against him, rose and made a speech to explain his position and his previous actions. He ended by saying: "I believe that I have rendered a service to India and England by showing in Non-co-operation the way out of the unnatural state in which both are living. In my opinion Non-co-operation with evil is as much a duty as co-operation with good." He asked for "the severest penalty." Mr. Justice Broomfield replied: "The law is no respecter of persons. Nevertheless it will be impossible to ignore the fact that you are in a different category from any person I have ever tried or am likely to have to try. It would be impossible to ignore the fact that in the eyes of millions of your countrymen, you are a great patriot and a great leader. Even those who differ from you in politics look upon you as a man of high ideals and of noble and even saintly life." Sir Robert Broomfield was chivalrous and dealt with the situation with great dignity, but sentenced Mahatma Gandhi to six years imprisonment. When the court adjourned, most of the audience fell at Gandhi's feet. This was the last time that he was tried before being imprisoned. During his many incarcerations in later years, he never stood before a judge to be tried. Sarojini Naidu attended the Great Trial and was deeply moved and wrote as follows in *The Bombay Chronicle* of March 1922: "A convict and a criminal in the eyes of the Law; nevertheless the entire court rose in an act of spontaneous homage when Mahatma Gandhi entered—a frail, serene, indomitable figure in a coarse and scanty loin cloth, accompanied by his devoted disciple and fellow-prisoner, Shankerlal Banker. . . . 'So you are seated near me to give me your support in case I break down,' he jested, with that happy laugh of his which seems to hold the undimmed radiance of the world's childhood in its depths, and looking round at all who had come, he said: 'This

is like a family gathering and not a law-court.' A thrill of fear, pride and hope ran through the crowd when the judge took his seat. . . . An admirable judge, deserving of our praise alike for his brave and resolute sense of duty, his flawless courtesy, his just perception of a unique occasion and his fine tribute to a unique personality. . . . The strange trial proceeded and as I listened to the immortal words that glowed with prophetic fervour from the lips of my beloved master my thoughts sped across the centuries to a different land and different age when a similar drama was enacted and another divine and gentle teacher was crucified for spreading a kindred gospel with a kindred courage. I realised now that the lowly Jesus of Nazareth, cradled in a manger, furnished the only parallel in history to this invincible apostle of Indian liberty who loved humanity with unsurpassed compassion, and to use his own beautiful phrase 'approached the poor with the mind of the poor.'" After Gandhiji's arrest Sarojini took up his work and toured about dressed in khaddar.

The Moplah trouble in Malabar now claimed Sarojini's attention and she made a speech in Calicut in March 1922, on the atrocious behaviour of the soldiers in Moplah territory. The Government wanted her to withdraw the statement and apologise; but she refused and the Secretary of the Kerala Congress Committee supported her with facts and data.

Sarojini indulged in a little of her favourite hobby of travelling in the second half of 1922. In October, 1922, she went to Ceylon for a holiday, because of her bad health, and motored throughout the island. She lectured in Colombo, Galle and Jaffna on the message of the Mahatma and his work and Non-co-operation. A great meeting took place in Colombo on October 7. The President wittily called the "Nightingale of India" the "Naughty Gal of India," much to Sarojini's great amusement, for there was nothing she liked so much as a joke against herself.

She spoke on the Indian political renaissance. She said: "My master is in prison, his hands are tied for a moment—but the harvest is here." On October 9, she delivered an open air address to four thousand people on the New World of Islam. She returned to India and spoke at Trivandrum on the 18th of October. It was a dark rainy day, and the hall was steeped in gloom. The audience cried "Light, light," and Sarojini Naidu remarked,

“Friends, your cry for light, light, light, reminds me of a great German poet who said—More light, more light.” In two days, she was in Trichinopoly and then she spoke at Madras. Kasturi Ranga Iyengar, Editor of *The Hindu*, presided.

By the winter of 1922, the old schism in Congress developed into two groups at the Gaya Annual Session. These were the No-Changers, who adhered faithfully to Mahatma Gandhi’s Non-co-operation programme, and the Pro-Changers. At this Conference, Deshabandhu C. R. Das resigned his Presidentship of the Congress and also constituted the Swarajya Party. The Gaya Congress proved to be a healthy battle between the two contending sections. With Mahatma Gandhi in prison, it was not unexpected that the party which did not agree whole-heartedly with Council boycott, should again strive to assert its views. A party was, therefore, organised and a programme drawn up in opposition to Gandhiji’s Non-co-operation movement. Even though Deshabandhu C. R. Das had magnanimously moved the Resolution at Nagpur in favour of Non-co-operation it must be remembered that he was definitely opposed to it. A great spirit of loyalty to the absent leader Mahatma Gandhi, however, prevailed throughout the proceedings of the 1922 Congress Session. The No-Changers stood by the programme of the Non-co-operation group and the Pro-Changers wanted Congress to take part in the new elections to the Central and Provincial Legislatures. Among the former were Rajendra Prasad, and Sarojini Naidu, Deshabandhu C. R. Das was at Gaya at the time with his family and Basanti Devi (Mrs. C. R. Das) recently told me that her friendship for Sarojini Naidu was one of great affection and respect. Basanti Devi and her daughter-in-law, Sujata Das, still remember the historic Gaya Congress vividly and the happy time they spent with Sarojini—her wit and humour and scintillating repartee, her enjoyment of Bengali meals especially *Magoor Maccher jhol*, a particular fish curry, and her capacity never to let a situation depress her too much—her friendship with Basanti Devi and Deshabandhu greatly enriched Sarojini’s life and Basanti Devi’s face glowed with affection and nostalgia as she spoke of Sarojini to me.

On the Congress platform, however, the No-Changers and Pro-Changers were arraigned for battle. Motilal Nehru was the Secretary of the new Swarajya Party. Other leaders, such as Vithalbai

Patel, Hakim Ajmal Khan and M. C. Kelkar joined it; but Rajendra Prasad and Sarojini continued as Gandhi's staunch supporters. A compromise formula was proposed and rejected; but the papers gave a twist and made out that this deadlock was due to the fault of the No-Changers alone. "Even Sarojini Naidu, herself a No-Changer, misunderstood her colleagues and got annoyed with them for having lost an opportunity for settlement. The Press was very critical of our attitude," writes Dr. Rajendra Prasad. "Motilal Nehru started openly propagating the programme of the Swarajya Party and announced his decision not to attend the meeting of the A.I.C.C. to be held in May to discuss the matter of compromise and asked his followers to do likewise."<sup>29</sup>

Many Congressmen felt frustrated because of the internal conflict and many provincial committees wanted a compromise. Among the No-Changers, Sarojini Naidu and Dr. Ansari wished for a settlement. Jawaharlal Nehru, who had been in prison at the time of the Gaya Congress, consented to an agreeable solution of the problem on his release. He had been convicted again in May 1922, after Mahatma Gandhi's conviction. At last, the Swarajya Party agreed to attend the meeting of the A.I.C.C. in September 1923 at Delhi, presided over by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. During the Gaya Conference, not only Mahatma Gandhi, but Abul Kalam Azad was in jail. Six months later, Abul Kalam Azad was released from jail and realised that Congress was facing a serious crisis. Abul Kalam was neutral and was elected President at a special meeting in Delhi. It was agreed that both parties should be free to pursue their own policies. The Pro-Changers decided to contest the Elections. The No-Changers decided to carry on their constructive programme.

At the beginning of 1923, not only was the internal unity of Congress affected, but communal differences interrupted the feeling of brotherhood which had existed between Moslems and Hindus. In 1922, the Multan riots had taken place, and a fracas occurred in Bengal and the Punjab. The Khilaphat question, which had held the Hindus and the Moslems together also suddenly petered out as Turkey became a republic.

On June 13, 1923, Sarojini wrote the following letter to Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru:

<sup>29</sup> *Rajendra Prasad, op. cit., p. 196.*

“Cheerio! We shall weather the storm bravely and fulfil the advice to let our work be a battle and our peace a victory. I think the idea of a full<sup>30</sup> Conference about Bakr Id is quite sound and the meeting place should be Allahabad in preference to Nagpur for various reasons. The idea is to have a joint meeting of Khilaphat and Congress Working Committees.

“The Nagpur Satyagraha<sup>31</sup> is well organised and the only drawback is that local people do not take part. The Jubbulpore Satyagraha is really more genuine from that point of view, and, on a close inquiry, I discovered that Jubbulpore had been badly let down by the very people who had instigated it and also backed it officially by sanctioning a grant of 15,000 towards it!! However, I have asked them to stop all Satyagraha in connection with the Town Hall by the 20th. In view of the commitment made under the impression that they were acting with the blessing of the old working committee they could not, in bare justice be ordered to stop all at once.

Old Rajagopalachari is behaving shockingly and with sundry deviations from the exact ‘cross-your-heart’ kind of truth!!

The Swaraj party here is about finished and Patel is, I hear, setting up some rival candidates against Swaraj Party candidates! C. R. Das is making matters pretty desperate by his speeches in the South.

However—let us go on churning the ocean till we evolve some supreme gift of Harmony—but first let us tide over Bakr Id which, *Inshallah*, we shall do!

Love from your loving Sister,  
Sarojini.”<sup>32</sup>

A compromise between the No-Changers and the Pro-Changers was reached in September, 1923, at Delhi, and in December a full Congress Session met at Cocanada under the Presidentship of Mohamed Ali. Henceforth they could at least work together with no disunity in their ranks.

On January 12, 1924, Mahatma Gandhi was carried from Yeravda Central Prison to Sassoon Hospital in Poona and operated on by Col. Maddock for acute appendicitis. He was released

<sup>30</sup> A note from Pandit Nehru says: Mrs. Sarojini Naidu’s letters are very difficult to decipher. We have had to ask the help of her daughters Miss Padmaja Naidu and Lilamani Naidu where my efforts to decipher them proved of no avail. The word ‘full’ here does not make very much sense but none of us has been able to suggest a better word. (*A Bunch of Old Letters, op. cit.*, p. 25).

<sup>31</sup> A Flag Satyagraha had been held in Nagpur in May 1923 when a large procession carrying national flags had been taken out.

<sup>32</sup> *A Bunch of Old Letters, op. cit.*, pp. 25, 26.

on February 5, 1924, in a weak condition as he developed an abscess after the operation. But he was back at work very soon.

Despite her heavy programme of political activities, Sarojini kept up her interest in students. In February 1923, she went to Allahabad and had tea, among other entertainments, with her friend Amarnath Jha. She stayed from 4.30 to 6, "saying she enjoyed a sumptuous tea." On March 1, Sarojini addressed the Hindu Boarding House on "The Charms of Poetry" at which Jha presided, and she remarked: "My friend Amarnatha's memory is as young as himself."

Sarojini Naidu sailed for Africa in January 1924.

## *12 Pre-Presidential Activities*

The special session of the Congress held in Delhi in September 1923, presided over by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, was one of the grandest and most memorable the Congress had so far held. New roads were constructed; a magnificent pandal erected, housing for the out-going and in-coming Presidents built, and a high standard of living, though simple in nature, encouraged. Here, it was clearly defined that Non-co-operation could be affected as much from inside the Councils as outside. The meeting recorded its sorrow at the demise of Kasturi Ranga Iyengar. Kenya again aroused attention, though the Congress felt powerless to do anything much, except to depute Sarojini Naidu and Mr. George Joseph as delegates to the Kenya Indian Congress.

This was Sarojini's first visit to Africa. She was sent to this sister Continent to help the Indian settlers. She had previously worked hard, alongside Gokhale and Mahatma Gandhi and C. F. Andrews to eliminate Indentured Labour and abolish the many unjust laws which had been promulgated. But still, the Indian settlers were anything but happy, and Sarojini took it upon herself to speak to and give new life and encouragement to the Indians who had made their home in East and South Africa. Matters were at their worst and General Smuts was on the point of carrying through a Segregation Bill. The Bill, which was very nearly pas-

sed had to be abandoned owing to the fall of Smut's government on other issues. General Hartog came into power in 1925, and an even more drastic bill, the Class Areas Bill, was drawn up. Andrews was asked to visit Africa and he raised the issue of the breach of the 1914 Pact. Later, the Government of India sent out the Paddison Deputation which met with a cold reception.

In Kenya, a harsh and cruel law of apartheid, dividing the white and black, forced many Indians to leave their adopted homes.

Indians naturally had to retaliate, and started fighting for their rights. Sarojini was sent to help them, and received a warm reception from the Indian community. She broadcast forcefully the methods of Mahatma Gandhi and taught them to use the weapons of truth, reason and gentleness; but she by no means asked the people to be lethargic and non-resistant. On the other hand, she roused them to action and inspired them to carry on a battle of non-violent protest. She was much appreciated, and from East Africa Sarojini went on to South Africa. Here the Indians felt that a Goddess had descended in their midst. She received a resounding welcome.

Her programme in Africa was even more strenuous than her activities in India. On January 19, 1924, she presided over the East African Indian Congress in Mombasa. She spoke fluently and never consulted a single note. She spoke to children in Durban on the March 9, 1924, at the Albert Park. The reception was organised by the Indians of Durban. She spoke a great deal to audiences of children, and remarked: "Today I am going to speak to the people I love best in the world, the little children of the whole world, not only little Indian children, but little white children, little black children and little yellow children. Childhood is a wonderful thing. It is a thing that cannot be divided by the quarrels of the older people. It is a thing without race, without hate—a thing of love, and the children of the world are going to be the golden bond between all the races that inhabit this great colony of South Africa. To you little children, dear little children, I am going to speak. Yesterday, I was speaking to little boys and girls in Maritzburg, and I told them exactly what I am going to tell you today." She also spoke at the Indian Women's Association in Durban on the March 9, 1924, and a farewell was given to her on May 22, 1924, at the Town Hall in Dur-

ban. Here she asked: "Are you not tired of listening to me speaking? I am so tired of making speeches."

Sarojini was back again in India by the middle of 1924, and attended the Belgaum Congress where she put forward her case for the better treatment of Indians abroad.

In the meanwhile, Mahatma Gandhi had been operated on for appendicitis and released. Communal troubles broke out in various places, and Gandhi was appointed by Congress to enquire into the causes. It was a time of internal anxiety and strife. The Kohat riots "broke the backbone of India." Gandhi held himself responsible for the fury which was let loose and went on a twenty-one day fast. It was held in Maulana Mahomed Ali's house, in Delhi, but later Mahatma Gandhi removed to another house outside the city. When he emerged out of his fast he faced an All Parties Conference in Bombay on the 21st and 22nd of November, 1924.

Then came the Belgaum Congress which was a landmark in Congress history.

By this time, the Congress was at the crossroads. Would there be rival camps or unity? Gandhi alone could achieve the latter and he was elected President. He gave a wonderful presidential address regarding Indians abroad, and much appreciated Sarojini Naidu's and others' efforts in South Africa. Neither had Government been idle on the subject. The Colonies Committee discussed the standing grievances of Indians in Kenya, Fiji and Tanganyika, and the situation became easier. Although Mahatma Gandhi was the President of the Congress in 1924, Sarojini Naidu's name had come up for Presidentship. Rajendra Prasad remarked that "Gandhiji had wanted to propose her name for the Presidentship of the Belgaum Session but his colleagues had pressed him to take it up himself. Even then it was known that the next President would be Sarojini Naidu."<sup>83</sup> Sarojini had proved herself an ideal ambassador of the Congress in Africa and had earned a good name for herself. Mahatma Gandhi had himself remarked at Belgaum that he was stepping in where Sarojini Naidu should really have been. He had for some time wanted to make Sarojini President. When she was in South Africa Mahatma Gandhi wrote a letter to his friend G. D. Birla, as follows on July 20, 1924: (These

<sup>83</sup> Rajendra Prasad, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

points seem to have been uppermost in his mind) “*First*, my absolving the Swarajya Party from the charge of aspiring to office; *Second*, my granting a testimonial to Suhrawardy; and *Third*, my endeavouring to secure the Congress Presidentship for Sarojini. . . . You are unnecessarily worried about Sarojini. She had served India well, and is still doing so while I have done nothing in particular just now for her Presidentship. I am convinced that if others who have so far accepted that position, were fit for it, she too is fit. Everybody is enamoured of her enthusiasm. I myself bear witness to her courage. I have noticed nothing wrong about her.

“But from all this you need not infer that I approve of all that she or anybody else does.”<sup>34</sup>

In October, 1925, Sarojini Naidu was elected ahead for the coming Annual Session in Kanpur. When the out-going President of the Congress, Mahatma Gandhi, was given authority to elect his successor, he presented Sarojini’s name. 15,000 delegates had gathered, and most of them wore Gandhi caps. There was a sound of drums and Gandhiji entered. Sarojini accompanied him, together with Motilal and Jawaharlal Nehru and the Ali Brothers. Sarojini Naidu’s nomination was quite dramatic. The whole audience rose as she appeared, dressed, in plain khaddar. “Her once fragile figure had broadened, but she looked handsome, queenly, with her flashing eyes, her fine skin and beautiful dark hair. Accompanying her, was her eldest daughter who travelled with her on all tours made with Gandhi. The other daughter was a student in Oxford. Although her husband, Dr. Naidu, was concerned about her heart ailment, she showed no sign of illness.”<sup>35</sup>

Mahatma Gandhi ascended the dais and introduced Sarojini Naidu. She then spoke: “I, who have rocked the cradle—I who have sung soft lullabies—I, the emblem of Mother India, am now to kindle the flame of liberty. . . . In electing me chief among you, through a period fraught with grave issues and fateful decisions, you have reverted to an old tradition and restored to Indian women the classic epoch of our country’s history.” Her message

<sup>34</sup> *In the Shadow of the Mahatma*, by G. D. Birla, Orient Longman’s, 1953, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> *Women Behind Mahatma*, by Eleanor Morton, Max Reinhardt, London, 1954, p. 139.

was as follows: "Mine, as becomes a woman, is a most modest, domestic programme, merely to restore India to her true position as the supreme mistress in her own home, the sole guardian of her own vast resources, and the sole dispenser of her own hospitality. As a loyal daughter of Bharat Mata, therefore, it will be my lowly though difficult task, through the coming year, to set my mother's house in order, to reconcile the tragic quarrels that threaten the integrity of her old joint family life of diverse communities and creeds, and to find an adequate place and purpose and recognition alike for the lowest and the mightiest of her children, and foster-children, the guests and the strangers within her gates." "That was a fine ideal, especially for a lady to lay down" concluded Pattabhi Sitaramayya.<sup>36</sup>

### 13 *A Holiday at Home*

Sarojini, in 1925, took a much needed rest at home. Here she lost her importance as poet and politician and was regarded as a normal human being. She even used to tell her friends that outside Hyderabad she was "Sarojini Naidu," but in her home town she was the wife of Dr. Naidu. This role suited her well and when at home she could really relax. The Golden Threshold was to her like an oasis in a desert. It was a sanctum sanctorum where she exulted in the love of her quiet, gentle and ever-reliable husband, her children, and her pets and friends. In the midst of the desert sands of her tiring activities, she sought shelter in her quiet home; not that it was ever very quiet, for wherever Sarojini was there was a spirit of exuberant *bon hommie*. Beverley Nichols visited Sarojini nearly twenty years later in Hyderabad and remarked in his book *Verdict on India*, that Sarojini compared her home to Sanger's Circus with herself as the most important performer. The Golden Threshold was an institution full of active human beings, overflowing with intelligence, generosity, love and unconcern for the conventional. It was full of pets, and Sarojini, in a long letter to Jawaharlal Nehru written on May 11, 1925, remarks:

<sup>36</sup> *The History of the Congress*, by Dr. Pattabhi Sitaramayya, Padma Publications, Bombay, 1935, Reprinted 1946, Vol. I, p. 130.

“My dear Jawahar, I am writing from The Golden Threshold, sitting on my own carved blackwood couch with Ras Taffari, Pavo Nourmi, Nicolo Pissano and Dik Dik Mahjongg—the four-footed rulers of the house harmoniously stretched all around me, the sun-birds and honey-birds making music in the garden among the flowering Gul Mohurs and scarlet roses.”<sup>37</sup> A Who’s Who has declared that among Sarojini Naidu’s recreations were motoring and gardening. Indeed, flowers fascinated her and her love for pets can be added to the list.

“Padmaja,” wrote Sarojini, “is in thrills over the new Fiat that has just arrived from Bombay. Govind is praying in his heart while he feeds on a belated lunch of *Bhaigara Baigan* and *falsa sherbet*, that the Exalted One won’t spoil his holiday among the rocks and waters of our intended destination.”<sup>38</sup> A holiday had been planned—a camp on the banks of *Osman Sagar*, and Dr. Naidu had come home late after working extra hours, so that he could enjoy his picnic the better. It was this atmosphere of free home life which Sarojini so enjoyed, and which was such a tonic for her. What would she have done without these periodic holidays at home? She writes: “In a word, I am at home having my first holiday since 1921, a real holiday with every snake shut out from the paradise in the guise of outside cares, responsibilities and duties. Basely but bravely have I deserted my post for a few weeks because my soul needed and cried out for an atmosphere of beauty, burgeoning trees, nesting birds, lyric poets, the children and dogs and old friends and a little leisure from the constructive programme and the self-destruction programme of our so-called politics. I shall return duly to neglected duties and responsibilities but meanwhile I wish you could share the delight—the real delight of being in Hyderabad boating on the Mir Alam, or lounging and loafing around and meeting the most truly cosmopolitan society in India, which needless to say haunts The Golden Threshold even unto four generations, beginning with the smallest tiniest generation that sits on the floor and shares its cakes with the cat and upsets its sherbet on its clothes. Why don’t you too go on strike and hide here? I will ask Shuaib to come on strike too, but I do draw the line at your other colleagues, Lord, save the mark!”

<sup>37</sup> *A Bunch of Old Letters*, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

<sup>38</sup> *A Bunch of Old Letters*, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

Here was her ebullient humour again, never to be submerged; always bobbing up in glee and childlike joy.

Sarojini did not attend the working committee at Calcutta as she had been ill for weeks and needed the change mentally more than physically. "Besides, the agenda does not call loudly for my brain-wave except perhaps the 'present situation' as created by Deshabandhu" she wrote to Nehru, and "I hope that Papaji and dear little Mamaji are well, that Kamala is quite strong again and that Indira is still like Atalanta, fleet of foot with the sunrise in her eyes.

"Padmaja sends her love to all, specially to Betty of the Beautiful Eyes. Lilamani has got re-absorbed into the Oxford atmosphere and is quite happy.

"Au revoir, I send you all my renewed joy of life to share,

Your affectionate sister,  
Sarojini."<sup>39</sup>

## 14 Congress President

Aldous Huxley came closely in contact with Sarojini Naidu during his visit to India in 1925. Intimate glimpses of her are given in his *Jesting Pilate*. She is warmly praised and appreciated. "It has been our good fortune while in Bombay, to meet Sarojini Naidu, the newly elected President of the All-India Congress and a woman who combines in the most remarkable way great intellectual power with charm, sweetness, and courageous energy, a wide culture with originality, and earnestness with humour. If all Indian politicians are like Mrs. Naidu, then the country is fortunate indeed."<sup>40</sup>

Aldous Huxley went to a tea party in Sarojini Naidu's rooms in Bombay and a young Mohamedan of Arab descent entertained them by reciting poems in Urdu by Iqbal. Amusingly Huxley says that the subject was Sicily and "Sicily alas was the only word in

<sup>39</sup> *A Bunch of Old Letters, op. cit.*, p. 44.

<sup>40</sup> *Jesting Pilate, The Diary of a Journey*, by Aldous Huxley, Chatto and Windus, London, 1948, p. 12.

the poem which I could understand." Huxley was struck with the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Sarojini's room in the Taj Mahal Hotel.

The next time Huxley met Sarojini was at a party held to congratulate Patel the new speaker of the Legislative Assembly. The Huxleys found themselves sitting on the dais as guests of honour. The hall was packed, and though the sun had set, the heat was prodigious. A band played outside "the foxtrots of two or three seasons ago", and all the speeches were made in Gujarati, except that of Mrs. Naidu who spoke "English eloquence."

Aldous Huxley also went to the Congress Session held in Kanpur in December 1925, and gives a graphic description of the mammoth meeting. The pandal was enormous—100 yards or more in length and 60 in width, decorated with green, white and red wind-blown flags. The floors of the tent and the platform were covered with matting on which the delegates sat all day long. "These nine foodless hours of squatting on the floor were very nearly my last" remarks Huxley. "By the time they were over, I was all but dead of sheer fatigue."<sup>41</sup> But the delegates seemed positively to enjoy every moment of the meeting. Huxley was struck by the appearance of Sarojini Naidu, the President at the time, and Motilal Nehru, the leader of the Swarajist Party. To the casual observer, these two would have been intrinsically important for their faces proclaimed it. Mahatma Gandhi was unostentatious. The speeches in Hindi angered the Tamilians. Motilal spoke in Hindi and immediately a Tamilian retorted in his language. "These are some of the minor complexities of Indian politics," remarks Huxley.

The weight of importance of a Congress President may no longer be felt today. Each year the President has to be sought for with a "drag-net". As Waqnis, writing in the *Statesman*, remarked: "The office of the President today is rather different from what Sarojini Naidu described in 1925 at Kanpur where she was President, 'the consolation of a nation in agony, and the promise of a nation determined to win freedom at the utmost sacrifice.' Sarojini Naidu was Sarojini Naidu."<sup>42</sup>

At the meeting Gandhiji formally and gracefully handed over

<sup>41</sup> *Jesting Pilate, op. cit.*, p. 97.

<sup>42</sup> *Statesman*, May 19, 1962.

charge to his successor. Perhaps it was Sarojini alone who could have so aptly taken over from the greatest of India's men. After a few words from Mahatma Gandhi, Sarojini began her Presidential address. Pattabhi Sitaramayya, the historian of the Congress says: "Sarojini Naidu took charge with a few choice words. Her Presidential address was perhaps the shortest delivered from the Congress rostrum, while of course, it was the sweetest ever delivered. She emphasized unity—unity between the parties and unity between India and the Indians abroad. She referred to the national demand as put forth from the Assembly, and pleaded for the obliteration of fear. 'In the battle for liberty fear is the one unforgivable treachery, and despair the one unforgivable sin.' Her address therefore, was an expression of courage and hope. With this gentle hand to exercise discipline as well as forbearance, the Kanpur Congress had an easy time except for certain labour demonstrations and small troubles from certain delegates which were brought under control by sturdier men like Jawaharlal."<sup>43</sup> Sarojini did not hand out her printed address to the audience or read from it. It was distributed later and she spoke extempore.

The Presidential address held the audience spellbound and throughout the speech Sarojini was cheered loudly. She remarked that an honour had been done to Indian womanhood, the descendants of the Sitas and Savitris of old. She regretted the want of unity, the quarrels between the various parties and between the Hindus and Moslems. She urged the closing in of all ranks. The problems facing India at the time were (1) poverty—people in the villages should be employed in spinning and agriculture and factory workers be given better conditions, (2) the Princes—she extended a friendly hand to them and insisted that their States were a part of India, (3) the Frontier Provinces—better treatment was needed and the state of military rule condemned, (4) the Youth—military training was needed for them—"What a shame, what a national shame, that our homes should be defended by foreigners!" She suggested that Congress volunteers should be given military training.

Finally, she praised Gandhiji and suggested that a woman's section of Congress should be formed, and a new Congress information department be planned. Envoys should also be sent to

<sup>43</sup> *The History of the Indian National Congress, op. cit.*, p. 294.

the Indians of Kenya and South Africa. The speech electrified the gathering.

The publicity given to Sarojini on the event of her becoming President was world-wide. The *New York Times* said that she was the "Joan of Arc who rose to inspire India" and that she was the "Darling of English society", "the first high-born Brahmin girl to break with the strict tradition of veil and caste . . . who returned home, and obtained the support of the progressive Nizam." She was patient and persistent during the long sessions. "Let the Congress be the voice of the people, not the voice of politicians," she cried. "We have national not purely personal purposes! How shall I kindle the flame which should waken men from slavery? Why not aspire to crescent honours, splendour, victories as vast as India herself? There are those amongst us who wish to be but cheap models of the West! Why are we not Indians—for India?"

"Her graceful hands moved in gestures of appeal, a lift of the eyebrow emphasizing an inflection, a turn of glance giving fuller meaning to a word. These were mannerisms of a great lady, taught since infancy to delight, to plead without speech; men realized the magic of her effortless charm."<sup>44</sup>

Her address was one of courage and hope and a fervent plea for unity abolishing fear and despair. The whole session was a tremendous success, thanks to one dynamic woman.

<sup>44</sup> *Women Behind Mahatma Gandhi, op. cit., p. 141.*



PART FOUR

*The Golden Storm*

Like a joy on the heart of a sorrow,  
The sunset hangs on a cloud;  
A golden storm of glittering sheaves  
Of fair and frail and fluttering leaves:  
The wild wind blows in a cloud.

AUTUMN SONG

From: *The Golden Threshold*



## I *Bengal*

Sarojini Naidu always spent a good part of her time in Bengal. Here she was thoroughly at home, especially with her numerous Brahmo friends. She lives today as fresh and lovable as ever in the hearts of many families of Bengal. Not that she was not at home in other Provinces, but Hyderabad and Calcutta held a special fascination for Sarojini. Once when the police was accused of committing atrocities and insulting women during a political disturbance in Faridpur, the Governor of Bengal made a statement that the women had not been molested and that the accusation was uncalled for. The Swarajya Party took up the case and a Resolution was moved that the evidence of the women had been correct. As the Resolution concerned the women of Bengal it was felt that a Bengali woman should move it. Sarojini who was present at the meeting, immediately rose and went to the dais and moved the Resolution proclaiming that she was always a Bengali and was ready to defend the honour of her Bengali sisters. And yet Sarojini had no Provincial bias at any stage of her life. She always regarded India as one integral whole.

I remember her at a lunch party in 1940. There were a number of us seated round a sumptuous table at the home of a friend of Sarojini's, an old Congress worker. Suddenly, the glass, crockery and cutlery jumped on the table and caused a clatter as Sarojini lost her temper and thumped an angry fist. A Bengali had bemoaned the fact that at the time there seemed to be a dearth of Bengali leaders in the Congress circle. There was dead silence after the crash as Sarojini cried in a loud voice: "Forget Bengal, young man, and think of the whole of India. Bengal is not separate, but a part of India!"

Sarojini's connection with the leaders of Bengal such as C. R. Das, J. M. Sengupta and others, was not only strengthened with long political understanding but with profound admiration and love. In 1923, J. M. Sengupta unveiled a portrait of C. R. Das in Karachi and delivered an eloquent speech. Sarojini, who was pre-

sent, remarked on the excellence of the address. "I almost felt as if Deshabandhu himself was present," she cried.

Sarojini, along with Vithalbai Patel, Jamna Das Mehta and Rangaswami Iyer, was present at a function when Deshapriya J. M. Sengupta was elected Mayor of Calcutta on July 17, 1925, following the death of Deshabandhu C. R. Das, the first Mayor of Calcutta. Her friendship with the Senguptas was warm and deep, and she often stayed with them when she visited Calcutta. Nellie Sengupta, Deshapriya's wife, that intrepid English woman who worked heart and soul in the national struggle, even becoming the third woman President of the Congress and courting jail and lathi charges, was among Sarojini's oldest and much loved friends. Ranen Sengupta,<sup>1</sup> Deshapriya's youngest brother, when still a college student, acted as Sarojini's secretary, buying her railway tickets, posting her letters and running errands for her. He was one of her favourites among the younger generation.

Sarojini's activities during her Congress Presidential year (1926) were prominent in Bengal. In the early part of the year, the Working Committee met in Calcutta, and she came as the guest of the Senguptas and stayed with them in Elgin Road. At this time Deshapriya was President of the Bengal Provincial Congress and Sarojini toured the districts with him and addressed many meetings. She was present at the Krishnagar Conference in May and stayed at Hem Sen's house. Sen was a Professor of Presidency College, Calcutta. He belonged to Krishnagar. The Conference was held in the Palace of the Maharaja of Krishnagar, who was a member of the Executive Council, Government of Bengal. This Conference was the most important event of the year and Sarojini stayed in Krishnagar for two days. At one of the meetings she quelled a disturbed and turbulent audience by casting her usual magic spell. She was also instrumental in bringing together the many factions in the Provincial Congress Committee and as President of Congress played an admirable part in her favourite role of peacemaker. While at Krishnagar, Sarojini received an address from the Krishnagar Municipality. After leaving here she toured different districts of Bengal in connection with the election of Congress leaders.

An amusing incident took place at this time when Sarojini was

<sup>1</sup> The author's husband.

staying with the Senguptas in Elgin Road. She wanted a draft cashed at the Imperial Bank and asked Sukendu Sengupta, a young and ardent follower of Deshapriya, to take the cheque to the bank and have it cashed. At the bank Sukendu was told that Sarojini Naidu had no local account, and in any case, they did not know who she was. Sukendu, therefore, brought the cheque back and told Sarojini what had happened. She was most indignant and immediately went to the telephone and rang the bank.

“Don’t you know who I am” she asked. “Why, the whole world knows me!” Later, Deshapriya Sengupta took her to the bank and the cheque was cashed.

In Calcutta, there was an all-parties convention in 1928 and Deshapriya was chairman of the Reception Committee. A session of the Indian National Congress was also held together with the convention in Park Circus Maidan under a huge pandal. All the important leaders were present, including Pandit Malaviya, Mr. Jinnah, the Ali Brothers, Pandit Motilal and Jawaharlal Nehru, Srinivas Iyengar and Satyamurti, from Madras, Nariman from Bombay and Dr. Satya Pal from the Punjab. When the session was over and the leaders were returning, an ardent young man Depak Chaudhuri, held out an autograph book for Pandit Motilal Nehru to sign after having obtained the signatures of the other leaders; but Pandit Jawaharlal brushed it aside as he was worried about not locating his compartment at the time. Sarojini immediately saw the disappointment in the young man’s face and taking the book, went quickly to Pandit Motilal and said: “You cannot disappoint a young man,” and the kindly father of our late Prime Minister immediately signed in the book.

Nellie Sengupta tells me that once when Sarojini came to stay with them, she arrived from Bombay on a hot summer’s day. The Bombay Mail, which possessed no air-conditioned compartments at that time, arrived at Howrah at 3.30 p.m., and the Senguptas went to the station to meet their friend. Suddenly, Nellie Sengupta remembered that she had not filled the bath at home with tap water to allow it to cool, and she knew that it would be hot from the sun-heated tank upstairs. On returning to the house, therefore, she asked the cook to bring a large block of ice and put it in her bath water. Soon, the hot tap water became comfortably cool and Nellie went to see if her friend Sarojini had everything she wanted for

her bath. She was nonplussed to see Sarojini emptying out the iced water, and she cried: "You are pouring out the cold water. The tap water is boiling hot. How will you get a cold bath?" Sarojini replied: "I want a hot bath. Otherwise, how will I ever get clean after this long dusty journey?" Nellie said nothing. That night there was no ice for even a cold drink! Refrigerators had not been installed then. Deshapriya and Nellie drove out to try and buy some ice, but could find none. When Sarojini was told the story of the ice; she laughed heartily and said: "I am very sorry for the waste of your ice; but I cannot help laughing!"

One of Sarojini's favourite hobbies was to dye sarees, and one day, Nellie found her twisting pieces of her sarees and dipping them into various colours, making a border. Though she loved silk, for about two years during the fervent khadi propaganda days, she had worn nothing but khaddar. At last she started wearing silks again, but she confided to Nellie that she felt almost "indecently clad" when she abandoned her heavier khaddar saris. It was some time before she could accustom herself to silk again.

One of Sarojini's characteristics was always to be punctual and no matter how late she worked the night before, she was ready for the morning engagement and "woe betide the people who kept her waiting."

Nellie says: "At one time both Mrs. Naidu and her daughter Padmaja were staying with us. My husband was then Mayor of Calcutta and it was necessary for us to give quite a big party in return for all the people who had called on us, both European and Indian. The Congress people were not allowed to drink or serve any alcohol. I remarked that the party might be rather dull with lemonade to drink. Both Mrs. Naidu and my husband said 'dull or not, there will be no intoxicating drinks.' We made any amount of fresh fruit drinks and they were delicious; of course there were plenty of eats. The party went with a swing from the very beginning. Nobody attempted to go away quickly and it went on for some hours, Mrs. Naidu making one of her delightful speeches, one of the best I think I ever heard from her."

There is scarcely a renowned house in Calcutta which does not remember "Sarojinidi" or "Sarojinimashi", and to the older "my dear friend Sarojini." Speaking to Mrs. S. C. Mookerjee, fondly reminiscing about her beloved friend, I was told

that Sarojini loved shopping, loved good food, and was always so warm and loving and kind. She made frequent excursions to Bhowanipur to do her shopping. She would ask her friend "Minnie" (Mrs. S. C. Mookerjee), to take her and buy a Dacca sari. Then she would wander about the glowing shops of the New Market, and respond cheerily to the shop keepers' welcome—*Ashun, Boshun*.<sup>2</sup> She would even visit the butcher's shop personally to buy her dog sausages. Telling me about the "Golden Threshold" in Hyderabad, Mrs. Mookerjee and her daughter Renuka Ray said it was cosy and like dreamland, full of intimate love and kindness. Once Mr. Mookerjee went to see Sarojini off at the station. She travelled Third Class at the time, following the Congress policy; but she had booked a coupé for herself. She took no servant with her, though she was ill, and when she entered the compartment she refused help and opened and laid out her bedding herself. She asked Mr. Mookerjee not to wait for the train to leave. "I hate to see anyone sitting or standing about," she remarked. Her great friend in Calcutta was Mrs. P. K. Ray, Mrs. Mookerjee's mother and founder of the Gokhale Memorial School. Sarojini called her *Mashima*. She often delivered addresses at the school, the progress of which she avidly followed.

"When in the U.P. Sarojini once had an accident," said Mrs. Mookerjee to me. "It disfigured her face and she used to laugh and say 'If there had been plastic surgery at the time I may not have been so ugly.'" And yet, a glowing beauty always shone through her genial face.

Lady Protima Mitter remembers her as an adored friend and can never forget her kindness and sympathy when her beloved son, Shankar passed away on February 4, 1933, at the early age of 22. He had returned from London, after being appointed by Andrew Yule in 1932. He died suddenly of the Spanish 'flu and his grief-stricken parents felt that the best memorial they could establish for him was something in connection with music, which he loved. Lady Mitter, therefore, inaugurated the Kirtan Shikshalaya on March 18, 1937, Shankar's birthday, and received a telegram from Sarojini Naidu: "Shankar's youth will blossom perennially in our remembering. Love. Sarojini Naidu." The following statement regarding the opening of the institution was made

<sup>2</sup> Bengali for "Come and sit down".

by Sarojini: "You could not have conceived a happier way of commemorating Shankar's youth and your devoted love for him than by fostering the art of *Kirtan* which is so singularly typical and symbolic of the lyric and mystic genius of Bengal and should receive encouragement and appreciation from all who value a natural possession of such exquisite and moving loveliness."<sup>3</sup>

And thus, in every home in Bengal, glows the warm image of Sarojini who belonged first to Bengal and Hyderabad and then to India and the world.

## *2 Growth of the Women's Movement*

Soon after the historic deputation of 1917, women began to realise that co-ordination and co-operation was necessary. There were a number of organisations all over India. They had to be amalgamated and united. Health services, for instance, needed a body to survey them from an all India point of view. Therefore, the Red Cross organised the All-India Maternity and Child Welfare Association. A network of local maternity and child welfare centres and pre-natal clinics were the result, apart from Education in Hygiene and child care; centrally the Lady Reading Health Centre in Delhi was inaugurated. The Girl Guide movement also made rapid strides, and the social awakening of women was such that everywhere, women offered themselves for social services, education and other activities. Among the many organisations which flourished as the years progressed were the National Councils of Women in the various provinces of India, the Seva Sadan of Poona and Bombay, the Saroj Nalini Dutt Mahila Samitis and Bharata Stri Mahamandalam of Bengal, the Arya Samaj of the Punjab and U.P. and other Samajes and Women's Homes in all parts of India. All these had to be linked together and the All-India Women's Conference came into existence in October 1926. Its first conference of delegates from Constituent Conferences took place in Poona from January 5 to 8, 1927. From then it became the focus of women's activities in India and from its inception Sarojini Naidu was its friend, philosopher and guide. It

<sup>3</sup> *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, March 19, 1937.

was really the Women's Indian Association in 1927 which launched the A.I.W.C., the first mass Indian women's organisation to come into being. Its ardent Secretary was Mrs. Cousins. The Conference felt it should first concentrate on the problems concerned with women's education and it was, therefore, called "The All India Women's Conference on Educational Reform". The organisation centred around the annual conference which appointed the Standing Committee and subordinate committees which functioned during the year in various Provinces. Sarojini persuaded the Maharani Gaekwar of Baroda to preside at the first session. It was non-political in character, but was free to discuss all questions, especially with reference to women and children. It also became a mouthpiece for peace and the abolition of war.

Sarojini had pleaded during her Congress Presidential address in 1925 for a women's section of the Congress. Though this never materialised, the A.I.W.C. could well have filled the role. It directly eschewed politics, but proved to be a tremendous step forward in the amalgamation of the woman's cause and the fostering of a forceful series of national reforms. The resolutions passed by the A.I.W.C. year after year, played an important part in finally giving women their complete social, political, legal and economic freedom. Soon it was found that the Conference could not concentrate on education alone. It had to come into line with the political forum, though it discussed political questions from a purely national point of view, without aligning itself with any political parties or communal prejudices.

The credit of women entering politics is mostly conceded to Mahatma Gandhi. And indeed, it was he who called forth women in such an unconscious manner that they did not even realise they were leaving their secluded homes, in which they had hitherto been brought up like hot house flowers, and came out into the glare of India's struggle for freedom. Few, however, understood that it was from a woman of Sarojini Naidu's calibre that others of her sex really learnt to stand side by side with men in the political movement. Sarojini was the first woman in Indian history to reconcile the struggle of women into one united effort with the fight for freedom. With the achievement of one, the other was inevitable, but it was Sarojini who put the women's movement on this footing. Women and men had to fight side by side and the index

for the civilisation of a nation depended on the position of its women. She, therefore, with her *joie-de-vivre*, her sincerity and capacity for work and sacrifice created a happy family of men and women who worked arduously for the country.

The beautiful city of Delhi was the scene of a unique gathering when the Second A.I.W.C. on Educational Reform met in 1928. Women delegates gathered from thirty-three constituencies. The Conference deliberated on important matters concerning women, and the Vicereine, Maharanis and people of various professions and housewives mixed on a common platform in a spirit of perfect equality. The Conference was opened by Lady Irwin, and was followed by a civic reception. The splendid arrangements made the delegates feel they had been given an imperial welcome. Sarojini Naidu and Mrs. Cousins were the life and soul of the conference, and a delegate remarked: "No man could have conducted the business more ably than they did."

Stress was laid, during the deliberations, on social, intellectual, physical and moral aspects of education; on the importance of compulsory primary education, the abolition of child-marriages and other aspects of social reform. Her Highness, the Begum of Bhopal, the President, made a sympathetic speech and was described by Sarojini as "a womanly queen and a queenly woman."

From 1928, the A.I.W.C. more or less took charge of women's emancipation. Another All-India organisation, the National Council of Women in India, which is the Indian branch of the International Council of Women, was running on parallel lines with its Provincial Councils working in all parts of India; but its force and fusion was not as great as the A.I.W.C.: partly because the N.C.W.I. was purely social and educational whereas the A.I.W.C. began to take an interest in socio-political problems and was more national-minded.

Mahatma Gandhi was glad to see the trend which the women's movement was taking and remarked: "I am uncompromising in the matter of woman's rights. In my opinion she should labour under no legal disability not suffered by man. I should treat the daughters and sons on a footing of perfect equality . . . Women must have votes and equal legal status. But the problem does not end there. It only commences at the point where women begin to effect the political deliberations of the nation." Today, when wo-

men have been granted adult franchise and the enacting of the various sections of the Hindu Code Bills has brought women up on a par with men in social and legal rights, it is difficult to imagine the stress and strain of those first days and the spade work such organisations as the A.I.W.C. and, before it, the W.I.A. put in, with such women at its helm as Sarojini Naidu, Muthulakshmi Reddy, Margaret Cousins, Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya and many other women who suffered and toiled for the welfare of the women of India. Sarojini Naidu, from the inception of the A.I.W.C. felt a warm interest in four women in particular, whom she loved and who she felt would work sincerely and wholeheartedly for the women's cause. They were Lakshmi Menon, Renuka Ray, Hansa Mehta and her own daughter, Lilamani Naidu. All four continued to work for the women's cause throughout the years. Lakshmi Menon has today reached Ministerial heights at the Centre, whereas Renuka Ray has been a Minister in the State of West Bengal and has held innumerable other important posts, apart from being a Member of Parliament. Hansa Mehta has been Vice-Chancellor of Baroda University, the only woman to hold such a designation, apart from being a leader of the women's movement and the illustrious wife of Dr. Jivraj Mehta, Mahatma Gandhi's great friend, now India's High Commissioner in the U.K. Lastly, Lilamani, who passed away in 1959, held an important position in the Ministry of External Services and was always a keen participant in all the A.I.W.C. conferences. It was not for nothing that Sarojini showered her love on and placed her faith in these four outstanding women. Lakshmi Menon paid a warm tribute to her friend Sarojini when she wrote: "By some strange intuition, it might be poetic, she could not only judge the limitations of others, but also understand their needs. A woman in distress, whom she had perhaps encountered casually somewhere, would receive all too unexpectedly a letter of affectionate greeting, perhaps on Divali Day, and the joy of such remembrance would light a thousand lamps and bring joy into a gloomy home. Her memory for faces was astonishing. Is it because she loved her fellow-beings so truly and well that she could remember them as her own?"

"No physical inconvenience deterred her from doing a generous thing. On a cold morning, she arrived at the Ahmedabad rail-

way station to receive Mrs. Cousins who was the President-elect of the Women's Conference. When we remarked about the trouble she had taken, she simply said: 'It will make her happy' . . . . Hansa Mehta was one of her favourites. And when she came to Hyderabad (Sind) she was far from well; in fact she was very ill. But knowing how Hansa would feel to see her there she came and did not mind in the least her inconvenience of the long journey or the semi-camp life one is forced to lead on such occasions. She would not miss an engagement if she could help it, because that would mean disappointment to others. Often, when she was very ill, against medical advice, she would attend a social function, and when I asked her why she did such a thing, she gave this reason; she might meet somebody who could be made to help someone else in distress. Thus she walked through life, trying in her own unconscious manner to bring sweetness and comfort to others."<sup>4</sup>

Renuka Ray praises Sarojini Naidu with warmth and affection and deep reverence. She has told me that Sarojini was one of the greatest women she ever knew. "And always so full of laughter, bubbling over with humour; but thoughtful and kind and compassionate." Renuka Ray and her mother Mrs. S. C. Mookerjee have been bulwarks of the A.I.W.C. since its inception.

In 1931, Lilamani became the Educational Secretary of the A.I.W.C. and Renuka Ray the Social Secretary. Lilamani wrote a wonderful report of her section and Sarojini was very proud of it. She wanted young women to take on responsible posts, and women began to hold important positions in every field of life.

Gradually, the prejudices against council entry also disappeared, though no woman was given the right to become a member of a Legislative Assembly by the Government until 1926. Even then, it was only by Government nomination. Dr. Mrs. Mutthulakshmi Reddy was the first woman to be a member of an Indian State Legislative Council in 1927. After taking her seat, she made history by being unanimously elected to the position of Deputy Speaker of the Madras Legislative Council. She was among Sarojini Naidu's more intimate friends. Dr. Mrs. Reddy refers today

<sup>4</sup> *Sarojini Naidu, Indian Writers and Their Work*, by P. E. Dastoor, Rao and Raghawan, Mysore, pp. 8 and 9.

to Sarojini as her "beloved sister." Women now sought council entry bravely. In the General Election of February 1937 over eighty Indian women entered the legislatures. Among them, there was one woman Minister, in the U.P., two Deputy Speakers respectively in Madras and the C.P. and many others in responsible positions; but an outstanding absence was Sarojini Naidu. This was because by 1937, she had come to hold so exalted a position in the Indian scene that she was a "Super Member" and like Mahatma Gandhi stood out of the scene and helped others to find their feet.

Women were also now being sent out as women's representatives to sit on international organisations. The A.I.W.C. resolved in 1928 to send Sarojini Naidu to Honolulu to attend the Pan-Pacific Women's Conference, which she accepted. She sailed for America in May 1928.

It seemed as if Sarojini Naidu's *début*, as President of the Congress had opened the door to women to come forward. During the winter of 1926-27 women's conferences were held in all parts of India and Indian women made a surprisingly rapid entrance into public life. The All India Women's Conference became a registered body in 1927. Once Sarojini was called away on some urgent business, and Mrs. Sushama Sen who had gone to Madras with her husband at the time received a message from Sarojini to take her place and preside over the Conference and to read out her speech which few could decipher. Mrs. Sen says: "I had to obey, and got through the ordeal having been inspired by her. Moreover, I made my first public speech. As her *chela* (follower) I was with her and Mrs. Margaret Cousins during the initiation of the Women's Movement. Sarojini was always the guiding star. But, I could not follow her in her political activities and court prison. She, as a mother, advised me that my first duty as a woman and mother was to look after my very sick and ailing child, and together with it, to carry on social and educational work, and keep the fire burning in Bihar. Her advice was prophetic. I got the hearty co-operation of my Bihari sisters in the Anti-Purdah Movement, which Mahatma Gandhi himself came to inaugurate. Three Child Welfare centres were started; the child-marriage Act came into being in the Bihar Legislature. We even succeeded in holding the All India Women's Conference at Patna in 1929,

against violent opposition from some who thought Bihar too backward for such a conference.”

### 3 *The Vision of Love*

When Sarojini took the helm of the ship of women's emancipation in her capable hands, and sailed the floundering vessel through the deep waters of reactionary Hindu tradition, British indifference and their convenient *laissez-faire* attitude, she knew where she was going. Her goal was complete equality and freedom for women, not only politically but socially and economically—a free world. For this reason, when she spoke on platforms she always accentuated the fact that she was a woman. In her Presidential speech at the Kanpur Congress she had stressed this fact. She was not standing there as a mere freak genius, one woman in a million who had reached eminence and had therefore been conceded a seat by the side of men. No—she was there on her own right as a woman.

Women were important, they had to advance, they had to stand beside their men, and therefore, she almost always started her speeches by stressing the fact that she was a woman. In her Presidential address at the Asian Relations Conference in Delhi in 1947, she again accentuated this fact. “You will wonder that a mere woman has been chosen to occupy this great place of honour today. The answer is simple. India has always honoured women.” (Cheers.) There was no beating about the bush here. Sarojini Naidu was the President of an august gathering of great men and women in Asia in her right as a woman. The position of women in Asia may have deteriorated over the centuries. Women may have suffered wrongs and martyrdom because of a peculiar form of masculine chauvinism; but it was upto women to overcome this difficulty, and therefore, there she was, in her rightful place.

It is interesting to read an editorial note on this insistent reference of Sarojini Naidu to women, in the *Statesman*.<sup>5</sup>

Sarojini's reference to women and herself being a woman had been greeted with cheers at the Asian Relations Conference. “Had

<sup>5</sup> *Statesman*, Calcutta, March 25, 1947.

the cheerers not been carried away by her personality” says the note, “they may have paused to consider more closely this ‘honour’ which India was supposed to have given. Some might then have concluded with Falstaff: ‘What is honour? A word. What is in that word honour? Air.’ It seems a pity too, that Mrs. Naidu, a distinguished person who has done much for women’s welfare, should revive that deprecatory phrase, ‘a mere woman’, together with the coy joke made ‘amid laughter’ that the Asian gathering ‘almost but only almost’ struck her dumb, since ‘it takes so much to make a woman dumb’. Such stress on feminity tends to undermine the case for admitting mere women to public affairs. And the speaker wished for a ‘woman’s angle’; it was not far to seek in the still shockingly depressed condition of many of the women of Asia.” Mr. Cousins also, in his criticism of Sarojini Naidu’s poems felt that at times she almost perpetuated in her poetry, the wrongs of women by romanticising the various reactionary customs under which women still suffered. Sarojini, however, though she may have at times been suffused with the sentimentalism of the devotion of women to their men, never condoned the customs which had deteriorated the progress of women. Neither did she reiterate the fact that she was a ‘mere woman’ in order to demarcate as separate the worlds of men and women. She was well aware that the position of women in Asia was anything but satisfactory; but it was up to women to overcome this sad state of affairs. That they had fallen from their pedestal and that the position of women was in a “still shockingly depressing condition” in Asia was a fact Sarojini wished to accentuate. Mahatma Gandhi’s views tallied with Sarojini’s. He once wrote a message to Kamala Satthianadhan, the Editor of *The Indian Ladies’ Magazine*, as follows, dated February 11, 1929.

Dear Friend,

Here is my message—as with men, so with women: Salvation lies in their own hands. They must resist with all their power every evil custom that keeps them under its heels.

Yours sincerely,  
M. K. Gandhi.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *The Indian Ladies’ Magazine*, 1929.

Sarojini also always admired the Sitas and Savitris and Damayantis of India, because they had been great fighters for truth, proving their honoured positions. As early as 1916, Sarojini, in a speech in Bombay to Hindu women, said: "Why are the names of Sita and Savitri and Damayanti so sacred and commonplace in every household and the cause of inspiration? What were the qualities that made them so great? They had no stupidity, quarrelsomeness, idleness, timidity, and so on. Damayanti had no terror of death though she was separated from her husband. It was spiritual understanding and intellectual development that made them great. When women lost their self-reverence, degeneration came in. It is said in our Shastras where women are respected there the Goddesses are pleased. So also it is said by a sage 'One who conquers his spirit is greater than the being who builds a city.' . . . "No one can be greater than a good woman. The sisterhood of women is a nation-building work; so also co-operation and help to suffering humanity are nation-building works." The nation needed women. Without them and their equal and intelligent co-operation, nothing could progress. Men and women had to share all their rights. Women had to bring back to India "that dignity, that liberty, that deliverance from evil, that freedom from all social laws which comes of education." They had to be visions of love.

It was this essential need which Mahatma Gandhi felt. What was Mahatma Gandhi's magic technique over women? Sarojini herself was drawn into this mystic circle. Some critics say that the Mahatma possessed a strange form of tenderness which particularly appealed to unhappy women, or those who were frustrated and disappointed in life. But Sarojini was no such type. She was neither unhappy, frustrated nor disappointed. Neither were the thousands of women who followed him to the extent of facing lathi charges and prison. Also, it must be remembered, that he did not only attract women. There were his numerous men disciples who were willing to lay down their lives for his cause. The secret of the Mahatma's magnetism, one feels, lay in the fact that he knew what was right and what was wrong and only followed the right with sincerity. With this was combined his tenderness which added to his moral stature. It is perhaps worthwhile remembering this today when the world is in such a turmoil and our

minds, especially those of us women, is suffused with a chaotic clash of ideas and ideals. Truth and love, to the Mahatma, was simple as it was to Christ and Buddha. It merely taught that one must love one's neighbour better than oneself. As Rabindranath Tagore once said, one had to "take Truth simply" and this the Mahatma surely did. If, however, self, and the aggrandisement of self came first, there was no truth or love in service. St. Paul's maxim that though we may "speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love" we become merely "sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal", was indeed a fundamental truth which the Mahatma and Sarojini must have realised.

Beverley Nichols in one of his fantastic character sketches remarks that the Bengal famine of 1942 proved "a crisis which had done more to undermine the prestige of the British Raj than fifty years of Congress propaganda" and continued that Sarojini Naidu "welcomed this fact—if it was a fact. The qualification is necessary because some of Mrs. Naidu's facts, which were typical of the Congress propaganda, were somewhat akin to wishful thinking."<sup>7</sup>

As those who knew Sarojini Naidu over the years have always been aware of her clear thinking, her veracity and her integrity, her sincerity and love for truth coming close to Mahatma Gandhi's, it is surprising that Beverley Nichols should have made so loose a statement. At times, Sarojini may have allowed herself poetic licence to exaggerate a mundane description, but her political propaganda, like the Mahatma's never swerved from the truth. Even before she became the Mahatma's faithful follower, she remarked in 1916: "Take the history of the world as we know it and see how the vision of love, working and working and working in the hearts for ages has built up a great religion, a great literature. . . . To what do we owe our great stories that thrill the heart of every Hindu, man and woman, excepting that vision of love that found its pious embodiment in the virtues, in the sacrifices, in the invincible image of a nation's ideas?"

Mahatma Gandhi did not make any special effort to get women to follow him. Least of all did he ever try to persuade Sarojini Naidu to become his disciple. But, as she has already described, her first meeting with him was enough to cast his spell on her—

<sup>7</sup> *Verdict on India*, by Beverley Nichols, Jonathan Cape, London, 1944, p. 100.

why?—because both the Mahatma and Sarojini were the apostles of Truth and Love. At times, Mahatma Gandhi himself felt women should not join the national struggle since they may not be able to cope with the brutalities and hardships which may be the consequence of a mass satyagraha movement; but it was Sarojini, during the Salt Campaign who insisted on bringing women into the scene, and herself led the marchers, facing intolerable difficulties.

Once in the fight Gandhiji placed women on a par with men, giving over charge, after his and Abbas Tyabji's arrest, to Sarojini Naidu. He had infinite faith in women for he knew that essentially the serenity of the ages, the ideals of old, the vision of love, would never allow women to forget their poise and dignity. For this reason, Gandhiji explained: "I would love to find that my future army contained a vast preponderance of women over men. If the fight came, I should then approach it with much greater confidence than if men predominated. I would dread the latter's violence. Women would be my guarantee against such an outbreak." Certainly, Sarojini was the General of this army, from beginning to end, and a strong guarantee against the outbreak of violence. The vision of love was always there before her and Sarojini never lost sight of this. It is this love which lives on so strongly in the memories of those who knew her.

#### 4 *The Nehrus*

As Sarojini's contact with and work for the Congress grew through the years, her friendships with the many leaders increased, and she became more and more an intimate figure in their family circles. At Anand Bhavan in Allahabad, she was a revered and dear friend and almost a relation to the Nehrus. Her love for Jawaharlal and his family became warm and affectionate. She and her daughters were always considered members of the great Nehru household.

In the summer of 1925, Pandit Jawaharlal and his family went to Dalhousie, in the Himalayas, for a holiday. The year was one of great calamities for the Congress. Motilal was suffering from asthma, and when the Nehrus were in Dalhousie, C. R. Das died

at his Darjeeling residence, "Step Aside", on June 16, 1925. This was a great blow to the Congress. The next month, on August 6, 1925, Surendranath Banerjee passed away. Pandit Motilal Nehru now became President of the Swarajya Party and about this time, the autumn of 1925, Kamala Nehru fell seriously ill. When Jawaharlal attended the Kanpur session in December 1925, at which Sarojini presided, he was extremely worried about his wife's health. Finally, in 1926, her condition became so precarious, that he decided to take her to Europe and sailed for Venice from Bombay with Kamala, and his nine year old daughter, Indira, in March. With them went Ranjit Pandit, Pandit Jawaharlal's brother-in-law and his sister Vijayalakshmi. Pandit Motilal joined them in September 1927, and father and son visited Moscow before returning to India.

Nehru was away for twenty-one months. The greater part of his stay was spent in Geneva and in the mountain sanatorium at Montana, where Kamala underwent treatment. Krishna, Pandit Nehru's sister, joined them in the summer of 1926. During Jawaharlal's stay in Europe, Sarojini wrote a letter to him from Bombay on October 5, 1926, in which her intimacy with the Nehrus is revealed: "I had a letter from Papaji<sup>8</sup> this morning to say that quite inadvertently he had omitted to write to any of you in time to catch tomorrow's mail and that I was to write and let you know that he was 'convalescent and rapidly recouping. Others well.' Papaji was wonderfully well after his prolonged rest in Mussoorie before he went to Simla. Since then he began to languish—that I think is the right word for it, for mental more than physical reasons; the wretched political situation, the internal quarrels, the wholly unworthy and disintegrating moves and counter-moves on the part of men whom he had trusted and worked with. . . . Besides of course, the strain of his tours. But now I think he is really getting better after the last sharp attack of fever. The elections are bothering him unduly. I think, on the whole, the situation is not merely so gloomy for his party as was feared. I shall be glad when the next few weeks are over and there is a relaxing of the purely artificially produced and deliberately sustained tensions—communal, internecine, personal and all sorts."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Pandit Motilal Nehru.

<sup>9</sup> *A Bunch of Old Letters, op. cit.*, pp. 45-46.

Obviously, Sarojini at the time was very upset about all the internal quarrels that were assailing India, but she was too interested in Nehru's personal affairs to let them cloud her letter too much. She wrote: "I hear all sorts of nice rumours about you—things that please me of your restored *joie-de-vivre*. I am so glad that you have had a prolonged vacation from the torpid horrors of Indian life. For you Europe must have been a fresh revelation of yourself and a real recovery from the ills of the soul." Sarojini enquired after Kamala's health; she herself did not much care for Switzerland, though she "adored the green slopes" when they were "enamelled with autumn flowers." She commented on "Indu being a young mademoiselle by now jabbering French with a real Swiss accent. Betty (Krishna), I hope is enjoying her holiday. Swarup and Ranjit, I am told have had a superb time. Alas—I would I were away across the seas! I have had a most strenuous time touring and settling quarrels. . . . Just now, I am somewhat ill. Padmaja is very well. But Lilamani had a serious operation and is still only convalescing." There follow a few remarks about friends and politicians. Ansari was imprisoned with "thermometers and gargles and bandages as his only companions in bondage". . . . Umar Sobani had died and "Bombay was a nightmare without him. Poor Umar, royal-hearted Umar! I wonder if his unhappy soul has found peace. How he loved you."

Sarojini's writing was almost illegible at times and she asked:

I wonder if you can read my scrawl. My wrist is stiff with pain. '*Main sar-a-pas dard hun*' to quote Iqbal literally.

"Good night, dear Jawahar. How I rejoice that you are out of India and that your soul has found its chance to renew its youth and glory and the vision of the Eternal Beauty. My love to the girls—mother and child,

Your loving sister,  
Sarojini.<sup>10</sup>

When the Nehrus were in Europe Krishna and her brother went to Brussels early in 1927 to attend a conference of the League against Imperialism, as Jawaharlal Nehru was asked to represent the Indian National Congress. There were people from all parts of the world at the Conference. Here Jawaharlal and Krishna met

<sup>10</sup> *A Bunch of Old Letters, op. cit., p. 46.*

Sarojini's eldest brother Virendranath Chattopadhyaya for the first time. He was known as Uncle Chatto. He had been an exile from India since he left the country before the First World War. Alone, he had wandered about the world, living a poverty-stricken life. "He had not become embittered as many might have done and did become. On the contrary, he always had a word of good cheer for everybody. He was clever, gentle, charming and one of the most lovable characters I have ever met."<sup>11</sup>

In October 1927, Krishna and Jawaharlal went to Berlin and they again met "Chatto" and became very fond of him. He, in his turn, warmly returned their affection, as he was a lonely man and craved for love and warmth of feeling. He was upset when the Nehrus had to leave and his eyes dimmed with tears as he said good-bye. Krishna was also deeply moved. She writes: "As the train moved out of the station I waved to him till I could see him no longer. I remember the last smile on his lips which quivered though he tried not to show it. And so we parted, leaving him a lonely desolate figure on the platform—we to our home, comfort and security, and he back to his life of hardship, uncertainty and loneliness."<sup>12</sup>

At times, Pandit Nehru and Krishna heard from Virendranath Chattopadhyaya and then eventually news stopped coming.

Sarojini was regarded as a loving aunt by the younger Nehru generation. Nayantara Sehgal gives vivid pictures of Sarojini whom she says was a frequent visitor to Anand Bhavan as Nanuji's friend and also her mother's. "There was laughter in the house whenever she was there, and a festive lively atmosphere of a kind which only she could create."<sup>13</sup>

Sarojini Naidu, to Nayantara, was spontaneous, blunt and sharp-tongued, "but could also be gentle, and music flowed from her speech as it did from her pen." Sarojini used to tell the younger generation of Nehrus stories galore, and when she related her anecdotes, they were accompanied with "vivid facial expressions and gestures which could not but produce immediate hilarity among

<sup>11</sup> *With No Regrets* by Krishna Hatheesingh, Champak Library, Oxford University Press, 1952, pp. 40 and 41.

<sup>12</sup> *With No Regrets*, *ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>13</sup> *Prison and Chocolate Cake*, by Nayantara Sehgal, Victor Gollancz, London, 1954, p. 141.

her listeners. She turned every gathering into a festival, for she infected those around her with her irrepressible vivacity and *joie-de-vivre*.”<sup>14</sup>

Sarojini had the habit of looking the girls up and down whenever she visited Anand Bhavan and then she would say to Vijayalakshmi Pandit: “Good gracious! How did a lovely woman like you produce these odd-looking children?”

She loved talking to the young about their future and what they would like to do and once she asked the author of *Prison and Chocolate Cake*: “Would you rather be the most brilliant woman in the world or the most beautiful?” The reply came pat: “The most beautiful.”<sup>15</sup> Sarojini Naidu grunted: “Umph, a true woman.”

She gave Nayantara a book which is much treasured, for in it she wrote: “As a star illumines the sky, so may you shed radiance on earth.”

Sarojini has written a foreword to Krishna Hatheesingh’s book, *With No Regrets*. She explained that she never wrote forewords, but “as I have known Krishna Hatheesingh since she was a child, I readily conceded her claim for my blessing on her sheaf of memories.” Sarojini’s deep respect for the Nehrus is revealed in her paragraph: “Had the history of the Nehrus not been for a quarter of a century a living symbol and an integral part of the story of the Indian struggle for freedom?”<sup>16</sup> In her foreword she gives her opinion of some of the members of the Nehru family.

Motilal Nehru is “magnificent—shall we ever find his equal?” Jawaharlal “the passionate intrepid crusader for world causes, doffs his armour and sheathes his fiery sword, and proves himself an incomparable exponent of many-sided relationships as son and brother, husband, father, friend and perfect playmate of little children.” Kamala Nehru is a “lovely and heroic wife”—“the pathos of whose brief life and the poignant tragedy of whose death have already passed into lyric and legend in the country.”

Swarup, or Vijayalakshmi, “winds her way through the pattern of this tale like a gleaming thread of silver; and Indira floats before our eyes for a moment, a delicate vision in her saffron bridal robes.” But most precious memory of all to Sarojini is “that tiny

<sup>14</sup> *Prison and Chocolate Cake*, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *With No Regrets*, *op. cit.*, p. vi.

and exquisite, aged and suffering woman, Motilal's wife, Jawaharlal's mother, in whom love and faith wrought so sweet a miracle of courage and endurance." Sarojini speaks of an older sister, "widowed in childhood, who dedicated her life to the tireless service of the Nehru household."<sup>17</sup>

Thus Sarojini intimately knew the Nehrus, and right through her life, they were her second family, her brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews. Nehru's speech on Sarojini's death speaks for itself; "Here was a person of great brilliance. Here was a person, vital and vivid. Here was a person with so many gifts, but above all with some gifts which made her unique. She began life as a poetess. In later years, when the compulsion of events drew her into the national struggle and she threw herself into it with all the zest and fire she possessed, she did not write much poetry with pen and paper, but her whole life became a poem and a song. And she did that amazing thing; she infused artistry and poetry into our national struggle. Just as the Father of the Nation had influenced moral grandeur and greatness into the struggle, Mrs. Sarojini Naidu gave it artistry and poetry and that zest for life and that indomitable spirit which not only faced disaster and catastrophe, but faced them with a light heart and with a song on her lips, a smile on her face. Now, I do not think, being myself a politician, which most of us are, that hardly any other gift was more valuable to our national life than this lifting it out of the plane of pure politics to a higher artistic sphere, which she succeeded in doing in some measure.

"Looking back upon her life, one sees an astonishing combination of gifts. Here is a life full of vitality, here are fifty years of existence touching many aspects of our life, cultural and political. And whatever she touched, she infused with something of her fire. She was indeed a pillar of fire and then again she was like cool running water, soothing and uplifting and bringing down the passion of her politics to the cooler lives of human things. So it is difficult to speak about her except that one realises that here was a magnificence of spirit and it is gone. . . .

"I said she was a curious combination of so many things; she represented in herself a rich culture into which flowed various currents which have made Indian culture as great as it is. She her-

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. vi and vii.

self was a composite both of various currents of culture both in the East and the West. And so she was, while being a very great national figure, also truly an internationalist, and wherever she might go in the wide world she was recognised as such, and as one of the great ones of the earth.

“She stood more than any person in India for the unity of India in all its phases. For the unity of its geographical areas. It was a passion with her, the very texture of her life. It is well to remember when we sometimes fall into narrower grooves that greatness has never come from the narrowness of mind, or again, greatness for a nation as for an individual, comes from a wide vision, a wide perspective, an inclusive outlook and a human approach of life. So she became an interpreter in India of the many great things that the West had produced, and she became an interpreter in other parts of India of India’s rich culture. She became the ideal ambassador and the ideal link between the East and the West, and between the various parts and groups of India.”

Sarojini’s frequent visits to Anand Bhavan are recorded in Amarnath Jha’s Diary.<sup>18</sup> He called again and again at the home of the Nehrus to meet her. On March 16, 1926, Sarojini gave the young professor a copy of Flecker’s *Don Juan* when he went to Anand Bhavan. He went with her and Krishna to the meeting of the University Union when Sarojini spoke on “The Heart of Youth.” After the meeting, he went for a long drive with his friend. In fact Sarojini’s contact with the University students of Allahabad was so close because of her constant visits to Anand Bhavan, from where she could foster her deep friendship with Amarnath Jha. On April 26, of the same year, Mr. Jha again went to Anand Bhavan and had tea with Sarojini and Krishna. Motilal Nehru joined them later. In jovial mood, Sarojini called Jha “A mean cat”, after he had said something and then she said suddenly: “Life is an absurd thing.” “What an absurd adjective to use,” replied the young Professor; Sarojini remarked: “It seems snobbish to say so, but politics makes you mix with some people you would not care to know in private life.” In the summer of 1927 she was again in Allahabad and had tea with Amarnath. With reference to a remark of his she said: “A bad sign, Amarnath, you are becoming a misogynist. That is an old man’s way.”

<sup>18</sup> *Sarojini Naidu*, by A. Jha, *op. cit.*

She praised American girls at this tea party but remarked: "They are crazy after novelty, lap-dogs or an incarnation." The next year (1928) Sarojini again went to Anand Bhavan and when she presided at a University function, she twitted: "Professor Jha was a little younger and a little slenderer than he is."

In February 1930, Amarnath Jha took Sarojini and Betty to the All-India Olympic sports and then to tea. Then they went to the Magh Mela where Sarojini "bought a silk piece for a sherwani for Major Naidu."

In fact, no year seems to have passed without Sarojini visiting Anand Bhavan and her beloved friends the Nehrus. In February 1931 Mr. Jha called at Anand Bhavan where he had tea with "Jawaharlalji, Kamalaji, Betty and Mrs. Naidu." Then he wanted to go for a drive with Sarojini and Hansa Mehta; but his car was missing and he found that "to avoid the crowd Gandhiji had taken it and had gone in it some distance." The next day, Sarojini went to tea to Mr. Jha after which he took her and Mahadev Desai to the Rudras' for dinner. They returned to Anand Bhavan only to hear that Motilal Nehru was sinking fast at Lucknow. So Sarojini Naidu shared the joy and the sorrow of the Nehru family and was one with them not only in the struggle for freedom but in their everyday life.

### *5 Indian "Ambassador" to America*

Sarojini Naidu's greatest unofficial Ambassadorial achievement was during the years 1928-29 when she was sent as Mahatma Gandhi's representative to America and Canada. He himself could not go, and Sarojini was chosen not only to be the mouthpiece of the Congress but indirectly to counteract the effects of Miss Mayo's book, *Mother India*, in the West. She achieved this without actually ever referring to Miss Mayo or deigning to take any notice of her. When her ship reached New York harbour, pressmen and women crowded around her and she was asked many questions; one reporter enquired: "What do you think of Katherine Mayo?" To his surprise Sarojini replied: "Who is she?" Miss Mayo had visited India in 1927, and after a short stay, she had

written her scathing book on the country. Who could paint a more glowing picture of India, a direct contradiction to Miss Mayo's sordid details, than Sarojini? Mahatma Gandhi had been very upset at Miss Mayo's book which had depicted India as a country of sewers and brothels. Sarojini's opposite views must have served to make the Americans realise that there was also a brighter side.

She sailed for America in the autumn of 1928, and reached the New World in the middle of October. Her visit was splashed in headlines across the American papers. The *New York Times* of October 14, published a long notice of Sarojini's visit under the headings:

INDIA'S POETESS TO VISIT AMERICA  
Sarojini Naidu Will Tell of the Changes  
That Are Coming Over the Lives of Indian  
Women Against the Most Ancient Traditions.

Sarojini Naidu, said the papers, was of Brahmin caste and would be "an accredited interpreter of India to the Western World." She "succeeded Mahatma Gandhi as President of the Indian National Congress. Besides holding one of the most important posts in Indian politics, Mme. Naidu was a poet, playwright, reformer, leader and social worker." The article reviewed Sarojini Naidu's work on behalf of women. The Bombay Presidency Women's Council was actively moving the Sarada Bill to illegalise child marriage and raise the minimum marriage age of boys to twenty and girls to sixteen. The Child-Marriage Restraint Act of 1929, made it punishable to marry a boy under eighteen years or a girl under fifteen years of age.

The *New York Times* notice of Sarojini's visit to America referred to the campaign against purdah in Bihar and Bengal and the feminist movement "of which Mme. Naidu is both sponsor and leader . . . Mme. Naidu is a singular combination of personal qualities. As a politician she can be stern and strategically minded, issuing ultimatum 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."

The article mentions a new volume of poetry to be published by Messrs. Heinemann of London; but such a volume never saw the light of day. Neither had Sarojini written much verse since 1917 and the publication of *The Broken Wing*. Perhaps the reference to a book of poems was to a combined volume of all Sarojini Naidu's previous works—*The Golden Threshold*, *The Bird of Time* and *The Broken Wing*. Such a publication was made in America and quickly sold out.

Speaking of the feminist movement, the *New York Times* reported as follows: "The time has come, declares Mme. Naïdu, when the ideas of Indian womanhood shall be 'set in letters of fire against a sky that will not blot out the flame.' . . . 'Let us understand,' says this oriental feminist, 'that we must be ready to accept a lower standard of goods if the higher standard becomes incompatible with our true happiness. Neither man nor woman is to be judged by the amount of material goods each or both of them are able to produce, but by the understanding and sympathy they can command in converting these into human goods'."

Another article appeared in the *New York Times* on October 28, 1928, "SAROJINI NAIDU CALLS RULE IN INDIA 'PURE DOMINATION'" was the spectacular heading.

"MME. SAROJINI NAIDU, FEMINIST LEADER,  
SAYS COUNTRY WILL BE FREE."

"SEES PEACE OF VICTORY."

"ENGLAND SPENDS MORE ON ARMY THAN ON  
EDUCATION IN HER LAND, SHE TELLS  
TOWN HALL MEETING."

The article goes on to say that Sarojini Naidu arrived in the *Berengaria* on Friday (October 26, 1928) and attended a luncheon in her honour at the Town Hall and explained the latest developments of "India's struggle for self rule."

She was "robed in the costume of her native country." Haridas T. Mazumdar, Secretary of the Naidu Reception Committee, explained that Mme. Naidu was "an unofficial Ambassador to this country to interpret Indian culture." It was Sarojini's first visit to the U.S.A. and Mr. Mazumdar said "that her lectures in the country will promote better understanding not only between the

United States and India but between the East and West." After the lunch, Sarojini left for Chicago where she was to speak on the "interpretation of Indian womanhood."

Actually Sarojini was to deliver a series of lectures from November onwards and her programme covered the following schedule under different groups.

(A) *Interpretation of Indian Womanhood*: (1) The veiled Pageant; (2) Guardians of the Flame; (3) A Garden Enclosed and (4) The Sceptre of Service.

(B) *Studies of the Modern Indian Renaissance*: (1) The Mystic Spinner; (2) Torches in the Dark; (3) People of the Dawn and (4) The Crucible.

(C) *Interpretation of the Spiritual Ideals of India*: (1) The Sacred River; (2) The Mirror of Time; (3) Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh and (4) Pilgrims of Destiny.

Sarojini Naidu was also scheduled to give recitations of her poetry to illustrate Indian life. The following were her poetic titles under this group: (1) The Lotus Pool; (2) The Wandering Singer; (3) A Carpet of Dreams and (4) The Lamp and the Lute.

Sarojini did far more than that which is represented in the above list—for her own personality electrified American and Canadian society and she brought to light in the New World the wonder and romance of the old world, as depicted in India. She was a jewel from the East which shone with true oriental splendour in the West.

Banquets were arranged in profusion and four-hundred men and women, Americans and Indians of New York, attended a function given on November 10, 1928, in honour of the Indian Poetess/Ambassador, under the auspices of the Hindusthan Association of America, in collaboration with other Indian organisations, such as the Mahabodhi Society, the Vedanta Society, and the Young Indian Association.

International House, 500, Riverside Drive, where the banquet was held, was beautifully decorated and the audience comprised of men and women of sixty nationalities gathered early for a reception given to Sarojini Naidu. Prof. A. V. Williams Jackson of

Columbia University, was among those who welcomed the Indian poetess. Others were Mr. Curtis Page, President of the Poetry Association of America, Miss Ruth St. Dennis, the famous artist-dancer, and renowned editors and other international figures. Dr. J. J. Sutherland, the American Grand Old Man of India, and author of *India in Bondage*, a book proscribed in India by the British Government, was also present.

The audience rose amidst loud clapping as Sarojini Naidu ascended the platform and did her *namaskar* before she began her speech. Her theme was "Better Understanding Between India of the Old World and America of the New." "Like the founders of your Republic," said Sarojini, "The Young India of today has proclaimed to the world a Declaration of Independence, by which they mean not only political independence of the country from a foreign rule, but also social, religious, cultural and moral freedom for the expression of man himself. To this end, the India of today is evoking its ancient *dharma* of renunciation and *ahimsa*, of which that little man, Mahatma Gandhi, who physically is so tiny, is yet spiritually the greatest living symbol of our age." Her adoration of Gandhiji was thus poured out over and over again from the platforms of America. She pointed out the futility of aspiring for the freedom of the world when India was in bondage. At this function, Sarojini Naidu was presented with a special address printed on rich yellow silk, after which she was garlanded. There were prolonged cheers.

## 6 *American Experiences*

Right through Sarojini Naidu's tour she kept up a lively correspondence with Mahatma Gandhi, and most of this was published in *Young India*. On January 3, 1929, a letter was published with a note by Gandhiji: "The following graphic and poetic account of her experiences during her American visit sent by Sarojini Devi will be read with interest. M. K. G."

Sarojini was thrilled with the New World; "this wonderful New World where every hour has been an event." She wrote from the charming old town of Cincinnati, where a noble woman once

lived who dedicated her life to the deliverance of the Negroes. "I have just returned from interpreting to a large audience (whose parents and grand parents knew Harriet Beecher Stowe in the days when she was writing the poignant tale of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), the message of the 'Mystic Spinner'." The audience was most responsive. They went up to Sarojini "in the usual American fashion" to which she had become accustomed, and spoke to her. Sarojini delivered her lectures "as one inspired" and was told that she had taken a message that would always inspire those who heard her. Sarojini's message, like that of Harriet Beecher Stowe, was also one of deliverance from bondage—"Another version for another land." Hers was "the gospel of the 'Mystic Spinner' as interpreted by a wandering singer."

Sarojini spent three delightful weeks at Cincinnati. She enjoyed the festive receptions, the uninhibited *joie-de-vivre* of a people to whom she interpreted Gandhiji "and his world of austerity." She exulted in escape into the pageant of colour, and now she was overjoyed, because she had a legitimate excuse for giving free rein to all her love for good living. The "young" nation appealed tremendously to "her heart" and her imagination. Throughout "all the incredible tumult and turmoil of daily existence, I find the spirit of a valiant and vital seeking, seeking, seeking for some truth, some realisation, finer and higher than the old world has yet conceived or expressed," she wrote to Gandhiji. Though stone and steel and gold were the symbols of the Americans at the time they expressed "the challenge and dream of youth in all its unspent and invincible courage, ambition, power and insolent pride." The young *had* to deliver the challenge to the old and Sarojini watched "with a prescient tenderness and trust" this moving and inspiring "output of energy of the New World." "You will say (No, *You* will not say anything so foolish but others may and will) that after all I am a poet-rhapsodising in my usual way," commented Sarojini. "But I have rejoiced so greatly before that I am a poet and that the lily wand I carry in my hands opens all doors and all hearts to my knocking. . . . Gates of brass shall not withstand one touch of that magic wand."

Sarojini received a warm-hearted welcome from all sections of people and those she wished most to meet delighted her by seeking her out first. Among these were "scholars, writers, politicians,

preachers and men of affairs and splendid women who used their wealth and rank and talent in the service of fine national and international causes for the progress of humanity." Jane Addams was the chief among this galaxy of great personalities. Sarojini stayed in the famous Hull House in the midst of the slums of Chicago which was as much a part of contemporary history as "the President's White House at Washington."

Her personal contacts were not confined to one section. She met the lowest and the highest. The Negroes were among her friends "the descendants of those whom Abraham Lincoln died to set free." "It breaks my heart," Sarojini wrote, "to see the helpless, hopeless, silent and patient bitterness and the mental suffering of the educated Negroes. . . . They are so cultured, so gifted, some of them so beautiful, all of them so infused with the earnest and sensitive appreciation of all that is authentic in modern ideas of life . . . and yet, and yet, there is a bar sinister upon their brow. They are the socially and spiritually outcast children of America."

One night in Chicago, Sarojini went to see the play *Porgy and Bess* which was really a "transcript from life written and acted by Negroes." She found it simple, true, *heart breaking*. There was nothing like it in modern literature, she felt, and it may serve to educate the white races more than *Uncle Tom's Cabin* ever did in the days of slavery.

Sarojini Naidu attended countless numbers of interesting meetings. It was difficult for her to think which of these would have more enthralled Mahatma Gandhi, but three meetings seemed to have had a special significance. They were the wonderful banquet at the International House in New York already mentioned, the immense gathering in the Town Hall of New York when Sarojini spoke on "Will India Be Free?", and a vast assembly which met at the world Alliance for Peace, when a banquet was given for seventy nationalities. The walls of the banquet hall were decorated with flags of all the free nations. Sarojini was present as a private last minute guest of Dr. and Mrs. Hume, but was not permitted very long to remain a private guest. She wrote: "I was taken up to the high table on the dais to sit amongst all the dignitaries of church and state and foreign legations." Of course, she was called on to speak and deliver "a greeting from the East." She spoke

briefly but openly on what was in her mind to “a somewhat startled but enthusiastic audience.” She asked where was the flag of India? What was the use of world peace when one fifth of the human race was still in subjection? Enslaved India would be a danger to world peace and a mockery to disarmament talks. “Until they could hang India’s banner dyed in the red of her hope, the green of her courage and the white of her faith among other world symbols of liberty there could and would be no real peace in the world.”

Sarojini’s point was taken up by many speakers at the final session of the Peace Week Conference as a “most acute and vital issue.”

Her programme was so crowded that one wonders at her sheer physical strength—she who was always ill. She told Gandhiji that the day after the peace meeting, she travelled to Detroit and then returned to New York. Here she spoke at the National Thanksgiving Service inaugurated by the Joint Churches and Synagogues at Carnegie Hall. She said: “The chief Rabbi and Dr. John Haynes Holmes were both very eager for me to participate in this truly and peculiarly American Annual Feast which corresponds to our harvest festival.” She was later to meet Dr. John Haynes Holmes at the Second Round Table Conference in London in 1931.

She asked Mahatma Gandhi to forgive the length of her letter, but he had wanted “long love letters” as he called her “illegible scrawls, and I know you will rejoice at America’s marvellous kindness to me,” for this also meant their sympathy with the “beauty and magnificence of the message that India sent to the New World; but I believe, without being guilty of an undue lack of modesty, that a little of that kindness is evoked by the Messenger who brings so splendid a greeting across the seas.” How delightfully naïve, charming and sincere! Sarojini never suffered from false modesty. The New World, through Sarojini Naidu, sent back a message to the “Mystic Spinner” expressing admiration for India and her freedom movement.

Sarojini ended this charming “love letter” with the words: “Good night . . . while I have been writing page after page to you this little old lovely town has wrapped itself in slumber. I seem to be the only keeper of vigils amidst a world of sleep.”

Sarojini never forgot to report her wonderful experiences not

only to Gandhiji but to her other friends. She sent a card of New Year Greetings to the *Modern Review* from Quebec in which she remarked that she was receiving "splendid receptions and response everywhere in the U.S.A. and Canada." The papers in America sang her praises. *Unity* of Chicago wrote: "The presence in America of Mme. Naidu, of India, the friend and colleague of Mahatma Gandhi, is an occasion of profound congratulation. Her noble person should be seen and her eloquent speech heard in every corner of the land."... "In herself, she is one of the great women of the world. She radiates a power of intellect and spirit which marks her immediately as one of the supreme leaders of our time. But it is as an Indian, a representative of her stricken, yet unconquerable country that she is chiefly important, and would, we are sure, be recognised and heeded." Sarojini was honoured in her own country "as one of the greatest poets, and singer of the songs of a people for liberty and peace." She was also "trusted and followed as a statesman," and in 1925-26 was "raised to the highest national office in her land as President of the All-India Congress of the year." Sarojini was a lady of high respectability, "nobly born, highly educated, utterly consecrated, dowered with supreme gifts of intellect and will." The paper continued: "she stands in the forefront of India's life as defender of her people's rights and champion of their destiny. To America, she has now come to bear witness to the truth about India, so sadly maligned and therefore, misunderstood, and to plead her cause before the tribunal of an instructed and awakened public opinion. *Unity* salutes Mme. Naidu with humble admiration. It welcomes her to this country, which needs only to be taught in order to be won. We have known in these United States the struggle for liberty. We possess the high tradition of blood and treasure bounteously spent for release from tyranny. In our pride we may have grown callous, and in our prosperity selfish. But the heart of the nation still beats true to its ideals. We know of no one better equipped to reach that heart by power of thought and speech than Mme. Naidu."

## 7 *Liaison Officer*

Sarojini served as a brilliant liaison officer between India and America and Canada. An interesting letter was published in *Young India* on February 7, 1929, written by Miss Helen Reed of Montreal, Canada, on Christmas Day 1928, referring to Sarojini's visit to Canada.

Miss Reed wrote that ten days before Christmas, Sarojini went to stay with her. "My heart went out to her as woman, poet and reformer, and something of her spirit entered mine and has been with me throughout the days since she left this place," she said. Sarojini was to have spoken, but the illness of the King of England postponed her talk till early April which afforded Miss Reed "the joy of seeing her again." But by Sunday night, the king's condition had improved and Sarojini delivered her address. Miss Reed wrote: "You, who so well know her wide range of thought and experience, her poetic expression in both word and voice, her humour, her rich and happy use of our English language—you cannot picture the surprise, the amazement deepening gradually and inevitably into admiration, the quickening mental challenge which she brought out on that occasion!" Miss Reed's was not the only voice of praise. A prominent businessman said that he had never felt such power in any woman, and "indeed", he added, "for that matter, do you know any man who could do it?" Sarojini was feted at lunches, teas, dinners and receptions whenever she spoke. She appealed for a bond between Canada and India. In the shops, flowers were given to her and samples of handicrafts were presented at the Y.W.C.A. during a staff party, where she read her love poems to about fifty girls. Sarojini loved so many "sweet and good things," children and flowers, the wintry air, trees and lakes and rivers, the dear and obvious human needs that go to make "the whole world kin"—her soul was set in its course "by the stars of heaven," Sarojini was "dangerously popular". She succeeded where weaker women might have failed in their encounter with the New World.

Sarojini's book *The Broken Wing*, gave Miss Reed a "shock of delight." She was also given two unpublished poems, "Blind," and "Unity"—the latter was to appear in the *Canadian Forum*.

Lord and Lady Willingdon were at Quebec during Sarojini's visit to Canada and she met them. Lord Willingdon was in a "happy reminiscent mood" about India and his Viceregal days.

At this time, Dinabandhu C. F. Andrews was also in America in connection with Miss Mayo's book, *Mother India*, and he went to see Miss Mayo. She assured him that she had gone to India independently with no political motives.

Sarojini and Dinabandhu were both unofficial ambassadors. Dinabandhu wrote the following comments about her to Mahatma Gandhi. "Sarojini Naidu's visit has been amazing. She has won all hearts, and I have been hearing nothing but praise about her visit everywhere."<sup>19</sup> He commented on her gift of eloquence. In Chicago, Winnipeg or Montreal or wherever she went, she was requested to return again and again. The people would never forget her. Her next visit to Quebec would give her an even warmer welcome if that was possible. There was fresh enthusiasm in America and Canada for India. Everywhere people wished to carry on what Sarojini had taught them to think and do.

In March 1929, Sarojini sent her greetings and good wishes to the people of India from America, on the occasion of the inauguration of radio communications between the two countries: "Today inaugurates one more triumph of scientific skill that defies the barrier of time, defeats the challenge of space, and strives to interlink in an ethereal yet enduring bond of instant communication the New World which Columbus discovered and the Old World."

Sarojini said she was happy to be "amongst the earliest privileged to participate in the fresh miracles of modern achievement and I am deeply thrilled as I stand with my feet on American soil and send forth my living voice in its winged and mystic journey in a greeting of love and allegiance to my own beloved country and her myriad children."

Her message was to the leaders and Congress workers, her comrades of the Moslem League and all other common representatives to remind them that the entire world was watching India and that every word and action "whether an affirmation or denial of great common world ideas of democratic peoples, is fraught with grave significance and far-reaching influence or woe. I there-

<sup>19</sup> *Young India*, February 11, 1929.

fore charge these men and women of all communities, who are entrusted with the noble task of enunciating national policies and executing a national programme of advance, to reach a unanimous decision, in a spirit of splendid and generous adjustment, understanding and unity of action, and to endorse, initiate and fulfil all immediate and authentic plans or joint enterprise and common endeavour best calculated to ensure to India in abundant measure the opportunity to accomplish peace and accord."

Sarojini wrote another letter which was published in *Young India* on April 11, 1929. While travelling from Minesota, the 'land of blue waters,' to Illinois, the land of great lakes, she read a book *The Island Within*, on Jewish psychology. She felt the author's ideas coincided with Mahatma Gandhi's conviction that "only through the fellowship of the weak can the strong be saved from the sins of their strength."

Since she had written many weeks earlier from Cincinnati, she had been occupied with travelling, speaking, meeting newspaper men and the intellectuals of the New World. The first stage of her travels was now over. It had included all the important centres of the Eastern States and Canada with "snowbound landscapes and warm-hearted citizens." It had also included the Middle West region.

Sarojini had travelled from the coast back to Texas through the desert of Arizona. She had paused for a day at the Grand Canyon and then returned to Florida and the Southern States ending at Washington, "the capital where the fictitious peace has just been signed—the pact that holds a fictitious signature of India, for all vicarious pledges and commitments are fictitious!"<sup>20</sup> After finishing the Southern States, Sarojini hoped to return to her "beloved New York for a few days before visiting the Northern States and revisiting Canada."

She at the time waited anxiously for Congress news and the *All Parties* decisions; but she had received no news or very disjointed accounts which were given to her through cables. She knew little about the December Congress session. It had been held in Calcutta. All she had heard was "Congress great success" in a wire from Padmaja. She received belated reports of the great National Week in Calcutta. "Padmaja's little word pictures were

<sup>20</sup> *Young India*, April 11, 1929.

more vivid and illuminating than all the journalistic descriptions.” Sarojini was relieved when she heard that her eldest daughter had been “well enough to attend Congress. . . . After the long lonely seclusion in a far off sanatorium she longed for and needed the breath and tumult of crowds again. Sometimes there is more healing in the ‘common touch’ of multitudes than in the sanctuaries of the Most High. . . .”

### 8 *American Youth*

Sarojini seems to have made a point of visiting schools and talking to the younger groups in the midst of her busy programme. Mahatma Gandhi published a letter from Miss Dorothy Waldo,<sup>21</sup> the Associate Principal of Dana Hall School, Wellesley, Massachusetts, which reveals Sarojini’s interest in the young.

Sarojini visited the Dana Hall School, a boarding school of five hundred girls for age groups between ten and twenty years. The students studied in four separate units. Little girls up to fifteen were in one group, High School girls in the second, Post High School in the third and High School Graduates of music in the Fourth. They were all moneyed pupils, but the school tried to keep them simple. Miss Waldo remarked: “Because she was real herself, because her hands were sensitive enough to feel the glowing coal under the ashes, she blew away from that which was useless and unworthy, and they responded universally to the majestic inspiration of her presence.” The five hundred girls sat breathless for an hour and a half while Sarojini Naidu talked about Gandhiji’s message and what it meant. He was a storybook figure to the New World, picturesque but not alive; but, said Miss Waldo, since “Madame Naidu’s talk, I have heard girl after girl say: ‘Gandhi seems real to me now and I know what he is trying to do’ . . . . It was not only in her actual address that Mme. Naidu made India and Mahatma Gandhi ‘live’ to these young people. She was so gracious and so charming and so interested in all of our school life that wherever she went she left behind her

<sup>21</sup> *Young India*, April 25, 1929.

a trail of pleased and sparkling individuals." There was an Irish Catholic cook who admired her and ten year old children who named their puppy with the name she suggested. Even the carpenters were interested and left their work to hear her. She fascinated everyone. From the school she went to Wellesley College after a long day. Here she met a more mature audience and gave a second address. It was wholly different from the first, but as powerful and on as high a spiritual level. Many who heard her for a second time, felt that she gave "a further inspiration and further kindling of the consciousness that Truth knows neither race nor creed, and that we have been blessed in having this friend of ours come to us."

By May 1929, many letters had been published from and about Sarojini by Mahatma Gandhi. She had proved to be his true unofficial Ambassador, conscientiously and happily carrying out her duties. From a train she wrote: "You of course being an expert can wield with equal ease both pen and spinning wheel, in a train. But I, being a novice, moreover a novice with a crippled right arm, regard it as a feat to attempt this letter."<sup>22</sup>

She was at the end of the second part of her travels and was on her third. These included Southern and Northern States from Florida to New England. Her programme included visits to many universities and colleges of the more conservative type and also the more progressive. She also visited the Howard University in Washington, entirely for Negroes.

Since her last letter Sarojini had spent a whole month in strenuous travelling across thousands of miles from Chicago to Los Angeles and back through wheat, copper, oil, cattle and cotton countries, "a vast area that bears testimony to the triumph of man over nature, of his courage, enterprise, endurance, resource, industry and vision that could coax or compel such rich results in such a short period." But all human power became insignificant in the presence of Nature in the Grand Canyon of the Arizona desert, "where time itself has sculptured magnificent temples to the unknown God out of the rocks that are dyed in all the colours of jewels and flowers. Song itself is transmuted into silence and silence is translated into worship in the midst of such awe-inspiring beauty and splendour." The Arizona desert was the home of

<sup>22</sup> *Young India*, May 30, 1929.

Red Indians, who lived, picturesque and alone in their own ancestral heritage in which characteristic they were common with India. A free masonry bound all primitive worlds together. They possessed the same symbols, the same primal virtues through their folk music, folk lore and folk dancing. Valour was their keynote. She watched the dances on the edge of the Grand Canyon—the Eagle dance, the dance of the Buffalo Hunt and the Victory dances. An Indian told her: “They kill us but they will never conquer us.”

Sarojini loved California, its “every flowering road and foam-kissed acre,” but the plight of the Indian settlers troubled her who, “by recent immigration laws have been deprived of all right to land and citizenship.” They worked as “day labourers on their own soil.” They were all from the Punjab, and the majority were Sikhs. Some were Moslems from the Punjab and shared the same problems. Some had married Mexican women and made their home in America. Some of the Sikhs had “darling babies”; but all too few. These settlers had not immigrated to America with the idea of settling; but always hoped to make enough money to return home. “And so they drifted on, never bothered about establishing a social tradition or educational record similar to the activities of other immigrant races who became in the real sense *American*, and therefore an integral and acceptable unit of the new nation in a new world.” When Sarojini met them they were homesick and needed a wise man to cheer them up.

“I have come to the conclusion after all my visits to Africa and America that the status of Indian settlers can *never* be satisfactory anywhere till the status of India is definitely assured among the free nations of the world.”

In July 1929<sup>23</sup> Mahatma Gandhi wrote: “The wandering singer has returned home after making many conquests in the West. Time alone will show how lasting is the impression created by her. If the reports received from private sources in America be any criterion, Sarojini Devi’s work has left a profound impression on the American mind. From that triumphal tour she has returned none too soon to take her share in solving the many and intricate problems facing us in the country. May she cast over us the spell she was always able so successfully to cast over the Americans.”

<sup>23</sup> *Young India*, July 25, 1929.

## 9 *Return to India*

When Sarojini Naidu returned to India in the middle of 1929, the political situation was anything but happy. In 1928, while she was away, India seethed with unrest. Saunders the Assistant Superintendent of Police of Lahore, had been assassinated in December 1928; Gandhi branded it as a "dastardly act." But Bhagat Singh, the assassin, avoided arrest and quickly became a hero. It was also a time of reports and commissions. The Education Committee, chaired by Sir Philip Hartog, was travelling up and down reviewing the growth of education in British India. Its report was to be published in September. The Simon Commission which had caused so great a storm—despite the repeated requests of "Go Back Simon" which rang out in all parts of India—had concluded its report in April 1929. The Conservative Government was defeated in the May elections, and a Labour Ministry had stepped in with Mr. Ramsay Macdonald as Prime Minister and Mr. Wedgewood Benn as Secretary of State for India. It was hoped that freedom would now be granted to India "through a gentlemanly agreement with Great Britain"—because Britain would wish humbly "to serve the common end of humanity." Lord Irwin had gone to England for four months to discuss the growing tension. He returned on October 31, 1929, with the declaration that His Majesty's Government envisaged a Round Table Conference of British and Indian delegates.

Congress was active with programmes of boycott of foreign cloth and social problems such as the removal of untouchability and disabilities of women—which last was, at the time, being stirred up by the activities of the A.I.W.C. and other women's organisations.

In May 1929, Congress decided to make revolutionary changes in economic and social conditions. The Meerut Conspiracy case had taken place and Congress had supported the accused. In July the Working Committee was of the opinion that the various members of Legislatures should resign. A special meeting of the A.I.C.C. was convened in Allahabad in July 1929. There was a great deal of repression in the country. Dr. Sutherland, who had met Sarojini in the U.S.A. had published his book, *India in Bond-*

age, which had been banned in India. The Delhi Assembly Bomb Case had caused another sensation as also the hunger-strike in connection with the Lahore Conspiracy case. In Calcutta Subash Chandra Bose and others were being tried. He had begun his slogan; "Give me blood and I promise you freedom." Trials and convictions were taking place in various parts of India. The police were using methods of repression which the A.I.C.C. called "barbarous". There were large numbers of detenus in jails and long-term prisoners. Labour troubles had also started. In the midst of all these chaotic conditions Sarojini Naidu returned from America.

She was made a member of the Congress Working Committee the moment she returned, and was in Lucknow in September 1929. She was thrilled by the news of Pandit Jawaharlal's coming Presidency of the Congress. In the provincial voting, Mahatma Gandhi had received the maximum number of votes for Presidency, but he withdrew at the meeting held in Lucknow on September 28, 1929. Though he was pressed to reconsider his decision, he insisted on a younger man occupying the Congress *Gaddi* and Jawaharlal Nehru was voted for at Lucknow. He was forty at the time and the youngest President. Sarojini's delight at Pandit Nehru's election is expressed in a letter written to him from Lucknow on September 29, 1929:

My beloved Jawahar,

I wonder if in the whole of India there was yesterday a prouder heart than your father's or a heavier heart than yours. Mine was in the peculiar position of showing in almost equal measure both his pride and your pain. I lay awake until late into the night thinking of the significance of the words I had used so often in reference to you, that you were predestined to a splendid martyrdom. As I watched your face while you were being given the rousing ovation on your election, I felt I was envisaging both the Coronation and the Crucifixion—indeed the two are inseparable and almost synonymous in some circumstances and some situations; they are synonymous today especially for you, because you are so sensitive and so fastidious in your spiritual response and reaction and you will suffer a hundred fold more poignantly than men and women of less fine fibre and less vivid perception and apprehension, in dealing with the ugliness of weakness, falsehood, backsliding, betrayal . . . all the inevitable attributes of weakness that seeks to hide its poverty by aggressive and bombastic sound. . . . However, have abiding faith in your incorruptible sincerity and passion for liberty and though you said to me that you

felt you had neither the personal strength nor a significant backing to put your own ideas and ideals into effect under the turmoils of so burdensome an office, I feel that you have been given a challenge as well as offered a tribute and it is the challenge that will transmute and transfigure all your noblest qualities into dynamic force, courage and vision, and wisdom. I have no fear in my faith.

In whatever fashion it is possible for me to help you or serve you in your tremendous and almost terrible task, you know you have but to ask ... if I can give no more concrete help, I can at least give you full measure of understanding and affection ... and though, as Khalil Gibran says, 'The vision of one man lends not its wings to another man', yet I believe that the invincible faith of one's spirit kindles the flame of another in radiance that illuminates the world....

Your loving friend and sister,  
Sarojini Naidu.<sup>24</sup>

Sarojini wrote again to Pandit Nehru on November 20, 1929, from the Taj Mahal Hotel, Bombay, before she left for East Africa:

Dear Jawahar,

This is called the pursuit of friendship under difficulties. Padmaja and I are on the threshold of departure and both of us being vulgarly popular people we are besieged with 'miscellaneous fellows' of both sexes every moment. Padmaja is terribly excited over her first voyage and her first escape from domestic thralldom. I hope the trip is going to give a new turn to her health and spirits. I had to make up my mind very suddenly almost between two heart-beats whether I would go or not to Africa. But they are in difficulties and their S.O.S. was urgent ... and Padmaja's longing to go to Africa was one of the sub-conscious influences that decided me.

Good-bye, dear Jawaharlal. I am coming back in time for your Congress on the 21st December. Please see that Papa President sends a cable to daughter President by 6th Dec. to Nairobi with a message to be read out at the opening of the Congress.

*Au revoir*, Padmaja and I send love to all at Anand Bhavan.

Your loving  
Sarojini.<sup>25</sup>

Mother and daughter sailed for East Africa towards the end of November, 1929, Sarojini was to preside over the East African

<sup>24</sup> *A Bunch of Old Letters, op. cit.*, pp. 72-73.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

Indian Congress. She longed now to stay at home and rest, and she accepted this new assignment at great personal inconvenience; but her sacrifice was much appreciated by Congress. The Indians in East Africa were congratulated for the stand they took on Indian problems. Sarojini and her daughter returned in time to attend the Annual Congress session in December. At this session it was declared that no acceptance could be made of communal electorates based on a discriminating franchise. Jawaharlal Nehru had begun his slogan "Independence now"—and had become popular with the youth of India. Led by Bose and Nehru, Congress demanded action. "They advocated a declaration of independence and, by implications, a war of independence. Gandhi, then issued a two years warning to the British and under pressure he cut it down to one year. If freedom had not been achieved under Dominion Status by that time, Gandhi said: 'I must declare myself an Independence Walla . . . I have burnt my boats.'"<sup>26</sup> Lord Irwin had in the meantime proposed the First Round Table Conference, and stated that the "national issue of India's Constitutional progress . . . is the attainment of Dominion Status." But Lord Irwin's announcement had caused an uproar in Parliament. The leaders and Gandhiji responded favourably; but Nehru and Bose protested. On December 23, 1929, an interview with Lord Irwin was arranged but the Viceroy's train met with a bomb accident within a mile of New Delhi. He narrowly escaped with his life. His dining saloon was damaged and one of his servants hurt. Lord Irwin was jovial at the interview in spite of the accident, which was deplored by the Congress. The group which was to interview the Viceroy consisted of Mahatma Gandhi at the head and included Motilal Nehru, Jinnah, Patel and Sarojini Naidu; it was to present demands for full Dominion Status of India to discuss the proposed Round Table Conference. The interview ended by Lord Irwin declaring that it was impossible to "prejudge" the R.T.C. or "commit" it to "any particular line."

Soon after the Calcutta Congress, the Working Committee established a Students' Information Bureau in Berlin. This was run efficiently by Mr. A. C. N. Nambiar who had married Sarojini's youngest sister, Suhasini. Her brother Virendranath and her son Dr. Jaya Surya were both in Germany at the time.

<sup>26</sup> *Gandhi, his Life and Message to the World*, by Louis Fischer. A Signet Key Book, The New American Library, 1954, p. 94.

The Swaraj flag was unfurled at the 1929 Congress Session, and complete Independence was declared as the goal. The Congress instructed withdrawal from Legislatures and sanctioned civil disobedience and non-payment of taxes. The new Working Committee met on January 2, 1930, and twenty-seven members resigned from the Assembly. On January 18, Rabindranath Tagore, who happened to be near Sabarmati Ashram at the time, visited Mahatma Gandhi and expressed his full sympathies with Gandhiji's plans. January 26 became *Purna Swarajya* or Independence Day, and its observance proved a great success. Mahatma Gandhi now withdrew to his ashram to plan a campaign and the Working Committee met at Sabarmati on the 14, 15 and 16 February and resolved to ask the Mahatma to start a Civil Disobedience Campaign. The origin and history of Salt Duties were studied and discussed and Gandhiji felt the Salt Tax should be repealed. A conference was held at Sabarmati Ashram in Gandhiji's study. It was attended by Sarojini Naidu. Gandhiji was troubled as his Civil Disobedience, he felt, was not quite understood by the people and there were potential signs of violence and his campaign involved risks. This time he wished to make sure that his followers would be true Satyagrahis, as indeed they proved to be in the days to follow. One of the staunchest generals of Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent army was Sarojini Naidu, who strove with all her might to keep the Salt Marchers from retaliating violently when they were brutally treated by the police. After much discussion with the leaders and cogitation Gandhiji communicated with the Viceroy. Sarojini was present when he wrote the letter on March 2, 1930. The letter started "Dear Friend" and Gandhiji stated that before commencing his Civil Disobedience Campaign he would like to find a way out for Lord Irwin. He wrote: "I cannot intentionally hurt anything that lives, much less human beings, even though they may do the greatest wrong to me and mine. Whilst, therefore, I hold the British rule to be a curse, I do not intend harm to a single Englishman or to any legitimate interest he may have in India." Gandhiji did not "consider Englishmen in general to be worse than any other people on earth". He had the privilege of claiming many as his "dearest friends". But British rule had reduced Indians, politically, to serfdom and sapped the culture of the people. The British had no

real intention of granting Dominion Status. Even salt was taxed. The tax amounted to three days' income a year. The peasant required more salt than the rich man because of his work in the fields, where he perspired profusely. Also, there were the drink and drug evils, "maintained in order to carry on a foreign administration demonstrably the most expensive in the world." The Viceroy's salary was Rs. 21,000 per month apart from perquisites. He earned over Rs. 700 a day as against India's average daily income of 2 annas. The British Prime Minister only received ninety times the average Britisher's income. "Nothing but organised non-violence can check the organised violence of the British Government." Gandhiji asked Lord Irwin to remove the cited evils and open a way for a real conference "between equals." He gave a warning that if no heed was paid to his letter, he would start his campaign in March, 1930. He would proceed with such co-workers of the Ashram as he could muster, to disregard the Salt Laws. "It is, I know, open to you to frustrate my design by arresting me. I hope that there will be tens of thousands ready, in a disciplined manner, to take up the work after me."

This letter was taken to Delhi by Mr. Reginald Reynolds, a young Englishman who had been an inmate of the Ashram for some years. It was ignored by Lord Irwin, except that his Secretary acknowledged it. He refused to interview Gandhiji; neither was the Mahatma arrested. The Salt March was now inevitable.

In Mahatma Gandhi's programme, no women were originally included. He intended to march to Dandi to make contraband salt on the sea-coast. Sarojini, however, joined him at his destination. Her example influenced women at this critical time of the Freedom Movement. Willy nilly, whether the Mahatma wanted them or not, they came in shoals, and Sarojini Naidu was their leader. In the end Mahatma Gandhi was so overcome with the spontaneous and courageous help women gave him that he even advocated the predominance of women in his army of peace; the fear of violence would then be minimised.

## 10 *The Salt March*

March, 1930 arrived and all India and the world wondered what Mahatma Gandhi would do next. Villages and towns, the poor and the rich were agog with excitement. Christian ministers prayed for the Mahatma; the Rev. Dr. John Haynes Holmes wired from New York, "God guard you."

In the early morning, after prayers on March 12, the Mahatma set out from his Ashram with seventy-five chosen male members as his *Padacharees*. No women took part in the early part of the campaign. The party walked south towards the sea, night and day. Mahatma Gandhi was sixty-one and in broken health; but he never faltered. He led his stalwart band, leaning on his bamboo stick. The *Padacharees* marched about twelve to fifteen miles a day, and the Mahatma called it "child's play." While they marched the Working Committee of the Congress met at Ahmedabad on March 21, 1930 and fully endorsed Mahatma Gandhi's programme. In the meanwhile, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and Deshapriya Sengupta had already been arrested and were congratulated by the Working Committee. Mr. Sengupta was the Mayor of Calcutta and was arrested for reading "seditious" literature. A Satyagraha pledge was drawn up. As the *Padacharees* walked through hamlets, they were received warmly by villagers. National flags and decorations gaily festooned their arduous way. Meetings were held on the roadside and the people were exhorted to abandon the habit of drink and drugs and child-marriage and other social evils. They were to wear Khaddar and boycott foreign cloth. As the procession progressed, it swelled in size. The sea at Dandi, 200 miles from the starting point, was reached on April 5, after twenty-four days marching. There were now about 75,000 non-violent followers. Sarojini Naidu was at Dandi to meet Mahatma Gandhi and his procession.

The night of April 5 was spent in prayer, and in the early dawn the Mahatma and his followers went down to the beach. Gandhi first bathed in the sea and then defied the British salt law by picking up some salt which had dried on the sands from the sea water.

During this dramatic ceremony, not only Sarojini, but thousands

of women had gathered on the beach. They had arrived with their earthenware pots, their brass, copper and aluminium vessels to carry away the salt water God had made freely accessible to them, and to make contraband salt. These women had never left their homes before. They were orthodox and tradition-bound; but here was something they could do at last for their country, and Mahatma Gandhi's reluctance to include women gave place to open admiration. "The part the women of India played", he exclaimed, "will be written in letters of gold." Women soon became epic law breakers and not only broke the Salt Law but other laws as well in objection to burdensome taxes.

On that morning, as Mahatma Gandhi picked up the salt from the seashore, Sarojini at first stood silent and then she could not stop from crying out: "Hail, Deliverer!" The people waded into the sea to fill their vessels. The police on the alert, immediately started their arrests, as they did in cities and villages wherever packets of contraband salt were being sold. In Bombay, the Congress party headquarters had been raided and thousands sent to jail. The salt which Gandhiji picked up at Dandi now became so precious that it was auctioned and sold at fabulous prices. Leaders were arrested right and left and a number of Legislative Assemblies resigned en bloc in all parts of India. The whole country was in a ferment and 60,000 political "offenders" were incarcerated in jails. Right through the campaign the non-violent resisters remained peaceful and calm.

Mahatma Gandhi was arrested on May 5 near Dandi, while sleeping in a tent near the scene of his defiance. Sarojini, in a statement to the Press on the Mahatma's arrest said: "A powerful Government could have paid no more splendid tribute to the far-reaching power of Gandhi than by the manner of his arrest and incarceration without trial, under the most arbitrary law in their statute book. It is really immaterial that the fragile and aching body of the Mahatma is imprisoned behind stone walls and steel bars. It is the least essential part of it. The man and his message are identical, and his message is the living heritage of the nation today and will continue to influence the thought and action of the world, unfettered and unchallenged by the mandate of the most autocratic government of the earth." Mahatma Gandhi was quite happy in jail and wrote to Mira Behn that he was making up

arrears of sleep. Sarojini visited him in jail before she took up leadership. She told him that women had joined his army in saffron saris. A few days before his arrest he had warned the Viceroy that he would raid the Dharasana Salt Works, a hundred and fifty miles north of Bombay. The Viceroy sent him a curt reply and warned him in his turn of arrests. Gandhiji appointed Abbas Tyabji to act for him and on his arrest Sarojini was to succeed to the leadership. In early April, she had gone to Allahabad, but when Abbas Tyabji was arrested she hurried to Dharasana to keep her promise to Gandhiji. There were now 25,000 volunteers with her. She warned them that they would be beaten and maltreated. What a tremendous responsibility had fallen on this woman's shoulders! She was not only leader of a colossal army; but that army was strictly to follow the code of non-violence. Any divergence would immediately plunge her beloved leader into the rigours of another fast. Manilal Gandhi was there with Sarojini. She marched at the head of her peaceful army, and in spite of her ill health she kept on.

She was stopped when they reached Dharasana by the police, and the volunteers were severely beaten. Seeing that they could not proceed, they sat down on the sandy road. It was the middle of summer and a scorching hot day. They were cordoned off by the police and the salt field was fenced in by barbed wire. They were trapped there, without food or water. The young volunteers suffered from intense thirst, and in order to make them suffer more, the police, it was alleged, drove water carts through the rows of parched volunteers without allowing them a drop to quench their intolerable thirst. Sarojini Naidu sat in their midst in a deck chair. She never stopped smiling or encouraging her army and they were astounded to hear her cheerful remarks and her jokes. An American correspondent wrote: "A dusty road . . . filled with nationalists resting on the ground about a woman, who sat in an armchair passing away the time writing letters or hand-spinning. Facing her and her followers was an equal number of police, armed with sticks and guns. The police were polite, but they were determined that the women should advance no further in their proposed raid on the Dharasana Salt Works."<sup>27</sup>

It is worthwhile giving a detailed report of Mr. Webb Miller's

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in *Women Behind Mahatma*, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

experiences from his book *I Found No Peace*.<sup>28</sup> He was a renowned foreign correspondent for the United Press and wrote an eye witness account. He had seen two "serious riots at the Wadala Salt Pans" near Bombay, and he was told by a "Gandhi sympathiser" that a big demonstration was being planned at Dharasana. The sympathiser said: "Sarojini Naidu, the famous Indian poetess is leading a non-violent demonstration against the big salt pans near Dharasana. The nearest railway station is Dungri. It is an isolated spot and you will have to take your own food and water. You'd better telegraph Mme. Naidu to provide transport from Dungri, otherwise you will have to walk many miles. Be sure to take an adequate supply of bottled water, because the water from native sources is unhealthy for white men." When Mr. Webb Miller got to Dungri, no one met him, as Sarojini Naidu had not received his telegram; but he eventually reached Sarojini Naidu's assembly. Mr. Miller was welcomed and led to Mme. Naidu, "the famous Indian poetess, stocky, swarthy, strong-featured, bare-legged, dressed in rough dark homespun robe and sandals." She welcomed Mr. Miller and "explained that she was busy marshalling her forces for the demonstration against the salt pans" and would talk with him at length later.

"Mme. Naidu called for prayer before the march started and the entire assemblage knelt. She exhorted them: 'Gandhi's body is in jail but his soul is with you. India's prestige is in your hands. You must not use any violence under any circumstances. You will be beaten but you must not resist; you must not even raise a hand to ward off blows.' Her words were greeted with wild cheers."

The half mile march to the salt depots then commenced. The marchers cried: *Inquillab zindabad!* as they proceeded. Half a dozen British officials guarded the salt pans with 400 Indian policemen who carried *lathis*. Mr. Miller then describes sickening sights of beating and kicking on the marchers who never resisted. "At times the spectacle of unresisting men being methodically bashed into a bloody pulp sickened me so much that I had to turn away. The western mind finds it difficult to grasp the idea of non-resistance. I felt an indefinite sense of helpless rage and

<sup>28</sup> *I Found No Peace*, by Webb Miller, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1936.

loathing almost as much against the men who were submitting unresistingly to being beaten as against the police wielding the clubs, and this despite the fact that when I came to India I sympathised with the Gandhi cause."

The leaders were busy keeping up the morale of the resistance and exhorting them not to resort to violence in retaliation, even when the police started kicking the men when they sat in groups near the pans. Mr. Miller says: "I went to see Mme. Naidu who was directing the sub-leaders in keeping the crowds from charging the police. While we were talking one of the British officials approached her, touched her on the arm and said: 'Sarojini Naidu, you are under arrest.' She laughingly shook off his hand and said: 'I'll come, but don't touch me.' The crowd cheered frantically as she strode with the British officer across the open space to the barbed wire stockade, where she was interned. Later, she was sentenced to prison. Manilal Gandhi was also arrested."

Raids and beatings continued all over India for days. In a similar raid on the salt fields near Bombay, Sarojini Naidu's sister-in-law, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, at the head of a small group, was arrested on the eve of the raid. She was succeeded by her small son aged seven who proudly took his mother's place. Such was the spirit which fired rich and poor, men and women, young and old, under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Sarojini Naidu was called the Indian Judith. She was heard telling the police: "We ask no quarter and we shall give none, and I will cut the barbed wire with pliers, and seize the salt with my own hands." She also said: "In making the best of this heaven-sent opportunity, I find something to bless, not to fear and regret."

Sarojini and her followers were arrested on the 16th morning. When Sarojini was being taken to jail she said to her friends: "Quick, quick; pack up your tooth-brushes and come away to the van." Even on her way to prison her ebullient spirits did not desert her.

## *11 Before the Second Round Table Conference*

Pandit Nehru had been arrested on April 4, 1930, and taken

to Naini Central Prison. Mahatma Gandhi was arrested on May 5, and on the last day of June, 1930, Pandit Motilal Nehru joined his son in prison; to their mutual joy Sarojini Naidu was also arrested and sent to the women's section in Yeravada jail opposite the prison where the Mahatma was installed. In the meanwhile, Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, a former member of the Viceroy's Executive Council in Lord Reading's time and Dr. M. R. Jayakar, a lawyer of Bombay, contacted the British authorities as Lord Irwin was not averse to settlement. He had not bargained for so powerful an All India Civil Disobedience Movement, and he wanted the Round Table Conference to meet in London under peaceful conditions. On July 9, 1930, Lord Irwin addressed the Council of State and Legislative Assembly, the two Legislatures at the centre, expressing his wish that an honourable solution between India and Britain should be reached in which the interests of all parties could be accepted. Then some nationalist members of the General Legislature requested Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru and Dr. Jayakar to act as intermediaries and these two interviewed Mahatma Gandhi in Yeravada jail on July 23, 1930. Gandhiji could not commit the Congress to a decision without consulting the Nehrus. On July 27, therefore, Sapru and Jayakar went to Naini Jail and persuaded the Nehrus to see Gandhi. They were taken to Yeravada jail, but Vallabhbhai Patel and Abul Kalam Azad, who were both free, were not invited. Dr. Syed Mahmud was also in Naini jail and the Nehrus wanted him to go with them; this was allowed. On August 10, the Nehrus and Dr. Syed Mahmud were taken by special train to Yeravada jail and were conducted off the train at Kirkee, a wayside station near Poona. They reached Kirkee on the night of August 11, and large crowds greeted them. They were detained in separate prison barracks that night and the next day awaited Sapru and Jayakar's arrival. They came on August 13, and the Nehrus met them with Gandhi in the prison office. Sarojini Naidu was also present; she had been allowed to attend the discussions from the women's jail. In the meanwhile, Vallabhbhai Patel had been arrested, and he, with Jairamdas Daulatram was also present at the conference. They talked for three days, August 13, 14 and 15, and during this time Motilal Nehru was ill. They bade Gandhi good-bye on August 16, and returned by special train to Naini jail. Huge

crowds greeted them by the wayside. Sapru and Jayakar had tried their best to bring about a compromise and a letter was sent on August 15, by the Congress leaders thanking them for their good intentions. It was signed by the Nehrus, Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu, Daulatram, Patel and Syed Mahmud. Soon after, Lord Irwin invited Gandhiji to Delhi and suggested the Round Table Conference. Gandhiji accepted the invitation to go to Delhi.

Motilal, who continued to ail, was released on September 8, after ten weeks in prison. Jawaharlal Nehru was joined in prison by his brother-in-law Ranjit Pandit and was released on October 11, only for eight days. By this time Vallabhbhai Patel had started a no-tax campaign in Bardoli, Gujerat. Nehru and Kamala left on October 13, for a brief holiday in Mussoorie where Motilal was recuperating. On October 18, they went to the Peasant Conference, but Nehru was served with a notice under Section 144 of the I.P.C. not to speak in public. He, nevertheless, addressed about 2,000 peasants in Allahabad on No-tax and was clapped back into Naini jail. Motilal had come to Anand Bhavan to see his son but could not meet him.

The first Round Table Conference opened on November 12, 1930 at which Congress was conspicuously absent. Begum Shah Nawaz and Mrs. Radhabai Subbaroyan represented Indian women.

Mahatma Gandhi was released on January 25, 1931. In the meanwhile, on January 1, 1931, the Socialist Prime Minister, Ramsay Macdonald, came into power in Britain, and released a number of political prisoners on January 26 (India's present Republic Day). Sarojini had been released earlier as well as Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru.

By now Motilal Nehru was very ill, and Gandhiji hurried to his bedside. He came late at night; but Motilal kept awake, and dying he expressed his faith in the Mahatma. He died on February 6, 1931 at dawn. The delegates from the first Round Table Conference had returned at the time of Motilal's death. They were anxious for Congress and the British Government to come to terms.

Sarojini Naidu was at Anand Bhavan at the time. Robert Bernays, author of *The Naked Fakir*, went to Anand Bhavan and met Sarojini Naidu, for the first time. On February 13, 1931, when Robert Bernays sought an interview with Mahatma Gandhi,

Sarojini Naidu came to meet him and asked: "You want to see the little man?" and she took him upstairs immediately to meet Gandhiji. Writing of her, Bernays says: "Fortunately many Indians, for all their solemnity, have a sense of humour." On February 16, Bernays came across Sarojini Naidu again and says: "I came across one, with the quality (of humour) very highly developed. She was Sarojini Naidu, the Indian poetess. . . . We met at a local flower show, where Indians and Englishmen were self-consciously mingling together in brotherly love round the begonias. Mrs. Naidu had just come out of jail. I asked her about her experience. 'I had a splendid time,' she said, 'I did not want to come out. I had planted some beautiful anthirrhinums, and just as they were coming into flower, we were all put out again. I begged the civil surgeon to allow me to stay just an extra day to see my flowers, but he refused absolutely, and I had to turn out. Now will you take me to see the roses if you don't mind being seen with an old jailbird? What do you think of Gandhi—isn't he an ugly little man?'"<sup>29</sup> Robert Bernays came under her spell "like many young men before and since. It was clear that she had a great following, although she came to the show incognito." He writes, "Young men buzzed around her with cameras and she kept chattering on rather like Mrs. Patricia Campbell at the theatrical garden party."<sup>30</sup> Bernays could not reconcile the fact that a charming woman like Sarojini Naidu could be kept "under restraint" when she was sent to jail and that there were "boys, still in their teens, looking out on the blank towering mud walls of a prison."<sup>31</sup>

February 28, 1931, was the eve of the day on which Gandhiji was to see Lord Irwin. Was it to be peace or war? Bernays had a long talk with Sarojini on that day at Dr. Ansari's house. He says: "I like her enormously. She is kind, gentle, amusing and very intelligent. Incidentally, she is the one woman I have met who looks nice in Khaddar. She had realised that even home-spun cotton can be made to look smart if it is tailored well and made in attractive colours.

"She is not hopeful. She said, 'I have got my toothbrush already packed for my journey back to prison!'"<sup>32</sup> At that time, the Viceroy

<sup>29</sup> *The Naked Fakir*, *op. cit.*, pp. 105 and 106.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 105 and 106.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.      <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

refused to see Gandhiji, and the latter went away from Ansari's house with intentions of breaking off relations. On March 2, Bernays had a talk with Sarojini Naidu in which the prevailing political atmosphere was reflected. This was the night when Gandhiji returned from the Viceregal Lodge at 2.30 a.m. and everybody was keeping vigil. Sarojini Naidu said to Robert Bernays regarding the members of the first Round Table Conference: "They have just been passing the time in London; they represent no one out here. Their proposals are vague and nebulous. There may be something good in them but they were divorced from reality. Even Sapru has never been in touch with the people. He does not know how they live. Not one of them has any following. They are just a handful of amiable educated gentlemen."<sup>33</sup> Bernays comments: "No doubt there is a certain amount of engaging feminine pique in Mrs. Naidu's remarks for it must be a bit galling to come out of prison and find that the Round Tablers even temporarily have stolen the limelight." In this opinion, Bernays, I feel was quite mistaken. Sarojini Naidu cancelled going to the first Round Table Conference entirely on her own initiative, as Congress played no part in it. Neither did she at any stage grudge any publicity given to those who attended it, for she was never one of Jayakar and Sapru's political set. Sarojini Naidu was entirely following Mahatma Gandhi's lead in cancelling the participation in the first R.T.C. This was because the Government refused to include Dr. Ansari as a delegate. "Besides being a Congressman, he represented a great Party in India; the Nationalist Mussalman Party. The Mussalmans were not all reactionary. There was a distinct group which was nationalist in mind and plumbed for Purna Swaraj—*Mukammil Azzadi*. But it is an open secret that Lord Irwin had made a distinct promise at the instance of Gandhi to nominate three individuals, namely Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, and Doctor Ansari. While the former two were appointed, Doctor Ansari was cut out. It suited Britain's interests to make it appear at the R.T.C. that Mussalman India was against Swaraj."<sup>34</sup> Therefore, Pandit Malaviya and Sarojini Naidu cancelled their passages by the *Mooltan* on which

<sup>33</sup> *The Naked Fakir*, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

<sup>34</sup> *The History of the Indian National Congress*, Vol. I, *op. cit.*, pp. 485 and 486.

Sapru and Jayakar sailed. Bernays, however, adds, correctly: "But from what I have seen myself, I should say that her (Sarojini's) view is substantially accurate."<sup>35</sup>

The beginning of March 1931, saw the friendship between Gandhi and Irwin grow. Mahatma Gandhi called Irwin "the Christian Viceroy and Irwin remarked that Mahatma Gandhi was one of the greatest social reformers India had ever possessed." There followed the famous Gandhi-Irwin Pact; but Bhagat Singh was executed at this time and the Karachi Congress met "under the gloom cast by the news of the execution of the three youths, Bhagat Singh, Raj Guru and Sukh Dev. The ghosts of these three departed young men were casting a shadow over the assembly."<sup>36</sup>

Robert Bernays says he met Sarojini Naidu on March 10, 1931 at a lunch with the Schusters, and she remarked: "What is needed is a spectacular announcement that a powerful English delegation is coming out at once. We are losing daily that momentum of goodwill which came with the Gandhi-Irwin agreement."<sup>37</sup> On March 11, Bernays had another interesting talk with Sarojini Naidu and writes: "She is in favour of a small plenipotentiary committee in London to thresh out the Constitution at the next Congress. 'What we need,' she said, 'is a business committee of not more than a dozen Indian delegates. You cannot get a public meeting to make decisions.' She was referring to the previous R. T. Conference, where there had been seventy-three delegates from India, many of whom contributed virtually nothing to the councils." Sarojini then actually suggested that Mahatma Gandhi should be the sole representative of Congress—which indeed he was at the second R.T.C. She said: "It is the only way to get to business. Imagine, if in the recent conversations at Viceroy's House, Gandhi had a score of advisers and the Viceroy had had an equal number, all putting up suggestions and all getting in the way, no decisions would ever have been made at all. Let Gandhi represent us, and let there be two or three to represent the Moslem, and two or more to represent the princes, and so on. I believe it would have an enormous effect on opinion in England. It would

<sup>35</sup> *The Naked Fakir, op. cit.*, p. 187.

<sup>36</sup> *The History of the Indian National Congress, op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 456.

<sup>37</sup> *The Naked Fakir, ibid.*, p. 199.

show that India, so far as it was reflected in Congress, could speak with one voice.”<sup>38</sup> This suggestion got the support of the Government of India; but unfortunately, after some delay.

At the Karachi Congress Session, Mahatma Gandhi addressed a mass meeting on March 26, and Bernays had difficulty in getting a press pass and says: “I then set off to look for Mrs. Naidu. I felt that I should explode altogether if I did not soon find somebody with a sense of humour.”<sup>39</sup>

He at last found Sarojini and felt better over a hospitable soda water. Gandhiji had been attacked at a railway station the day before by an Indian boy with a black flag. Sarojini Naidu said to Bernays: “There must be no lollipop atmosphere in our next conference, as there was at the last. There must be no smoothing over difficulties with pious words.”<sup>40</sup> It was obvious that she paid little attention to the proceedings of the first R.T.C. She made an appointment at 6 a.m. the next morning with Bernays. She and the young British writer had become very good friends according to him and she told him many amusing incidents and anecdotes. Once she remarked on Gandhiji’s simplicity. He wanted to have a long conversation with her and came round to see her. She was just about to have a bath and Gandhi said quite naturally: “‘Well, I will come and talk to you while you have it.’ According to Mrs. Naidu he was genuinely surprised when she suggested that perhaps the conversation had better be postponed until after the bath.”<sup>41</sup>

On April 9, 1931, the great work Irwin had done in making a genuine friend of Mahatma Gandhi was broken by the appointment of Lord Willingdon as Viceroy.

A few days later, Bernays had a long talk with Sarojini Naidu in her room at the Taj Mahal Hotel in Bombay. The Karachi Conference had come to an end. She chatted with her new-found friend over “some wonderful concoction which is called iced coffee, but puts to shame any iced coffee that I have ever had in England,” says Bernays and then continues: “She is evidently uneasy about the truce and thinks that difficulties are growing.

<sup>38</sup> *The Naked Fakir, op. cit.*, pp. 201 and 202.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258.      <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 261.

She judges everything by Gandhi's reactions."<sup>42</sup> She discussed the division of Sind and the frontier and the franchise question. She felt everything was futile unless Gandhi gave his views. Congress wanted full adult franchise and Sarojini felt it was useless that a conference was going on at the time to discuss other fancy franchise grants. "The British Government ought to have a preliminary talk with Gandhi before the Conference meets."

In August 1931 the Socialist Government in Britain was replaced by a National Government of three parties headed by the Socialist Prime Minister, Ramsay Macdonald.

Gandhiji went to Simla to meet Lord Willingdon late in August and other Congress leaders joined him. Here Gandhi agreed to go to London for the second R.T.C. "An agreement was arrived at, with the Government on the one hand promising to investigate the Congress complaints and the Congress reserving to itself, should relief not be forthcoming, the right to take 'defensive direct action.'"

On August 27, Gandhiji hurried by train to Bombay to board the P. & O. liner *Rajputana* due to sail on August 29; Nehru went with him to Bombay. Gandhiji declared, "I go to London with God my only guide." With him travelled Sarojini Naidu.

## 12 *The Second Round Table Conference*

Those who were to travel with Gandhiji on the S.S. *Rajputana* were Sarojini Naidu and Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya. Sarojini was actually the representative for Indian women and not for Congress; but since Congress permitted her, she was also taken to be a voice, unofficially, for nationalist India. Mira Behn also accompanied the party and she was considered to have a position assigned to her—virtually, interpreter to Mahatma Gandhi's party. With Gandhiji went his youngest son, Devadas, his Secretary Mahadev Desai, who "out Boswelled, Boswell", Pyarelal Nayar and G. D. Birla.

Mahatma Gandhi's clothes, which continued to be a loin-cloth and shawl, drew much attention in London, but he naively remark-

<sup>42</sup> *The Naked Fakir, ibid.*, p. 297.

ed that the Prince of Wales was popular wearing plus fours whereas "I choose minus fours." Sarojini, earlier in the year, had told Robert Bernays, that she was going to knit Mahatma Gandhi a warm dressing-gown to wear over his clothes. She had also felt that Gandhiji should travel about in an iron cage in London, to prevent his being mobbed. As it happened, Mahatma Gandhi attracted immense crowds on the streets, but the feeling of goodwill and admiration for him prevented anyone from actually mobbing him, though the people around him were at times astounding in their numbers.

While Gandhiji was the sole representative of Congress, Dr. B. S. Moonjee and Dr. Jayakar also attended the conference. The nationalist Moslem Dr. M. A. Ansari was refused permission to be part of the Congress team by Lord Willingdon. Thus the communal question was made as difficult as possible and the fissure between Hindus and Moslems deepened. Negotiations between Gandhi and the minorities, headed by the Aga Khan, broke down. The British in their memorandum claimed for the minorities their statutory rights, representation through separate electorates and a declaration of civil rights. The minorities were Moslems, Sikhs, Untouchables, Anglo-Indians, Europeans, Indian Christians and other communities. Gandhi refused to consider these suggestions, as to him the question of communal differences never arose. All those who lived in India were one, and enjoyed the same rights. He resented mostly the demand for separate electorates for untouchables. He said this was "the unkindest cut of all" and would perpetuate untouchability. In the meanwhile, the political situation in India was rapidly deteriorating. Peasants of the U.P. were reluctant to pay the new taxes. Gandhiji advised patience from England. The Second R.T.C. ended on December 1, 1931 and Gandhi prepared to leave for India after visiting Romain Rolland at Villeneuve. Gandhiji's mission had failed. Ramsay Macdonald announced at the end of the R.T.C. that since no decision had been reached on the communal award, the British Raj would make its own decisions. Gandhiji left England on December 5, 1931. The first news he received on his return was that of the arrest of Jawaharlal Nehru and Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan. He said they were "Christmas gifts from Lord Willingdon, a Christian Viceroy."

This was the political set-up of the second R.T.C. The social was much more colourful and jovial, especially with Sarojini Naidu in her element.

When the delegates arrived in England, it was a cold rainy day. Along with Gandhiji disembarked Sarojini Naidu, "greatest Indian woman" according to John Haynes Holmes and others. Mahatma Gandhi landed on the English coast where Caesar and William the Conqueror had landed, and Mr. Haynes Holmes says: "This man a conqueror? The idea seemed completely ridiculous. Yet, in the next sixteen years he had defeated England, without violence or bloodshed, and India was free."<sup>43</sup>

A writer remarks<sup>44</sup> that the conference personnel included "Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, poetess, politician, walking encyclopaedia on everyone's affairs, combining the shrewdness of her years with the vivacity of a young girl. Almost more than any other Indian politician, Mrs. Naidu has the qualities which appeals to English people. While she can laugh at others (not without a pinch of malice), she can also convulse an audience with jokes against herself. There is not the suspicion of any inferiority complex about Sarojini Naidu, and she is impatient and outspoken when she meets this trait in her countrymen. Who will forget her indiscretion at the end of one of the sessions of the conference when she turned to look for Mr. Gandhi and asked: 'Where is our little Mickey Mouse?' Many will remember another occasion when a certain delegate had bored his colleagues almost beyond endurance by a repeat performance of his views in favour of second chambers. 'Why any second chambers?' asked Mrs. Naidu. She was, she said, in favour of third, or lethal chambers for certain politicians."

A great audience awaited the party at Friend's Meeting House. Lawrence Houseman, brother of the famous poet and scholar, A. E. Houseman, and himself an author of rare distinction and a champion of free India, presided. Sarojini Naidu shared the honours of this historic occasion with Mahatma Gandhi. His party consisted of Mira Behn, Sarojini Naidu, Pandit Malaviya and two secretaries. They were garlanded and taken into the platform. Mr.

<sup>43</sup> *My Gandhi*, by John Haynes Holmes, George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., Ruskin House, Museum St., London, 1954, p. 37.

<sup>44</sup> *India Today and Tomorrow*, by Margarita Barns, George Allen and Unwin, 1937, p. 62.

Houseman remarked that the meeting was "the greatest honour in his life." Sarojini, says Dr. Haynes Holmes, was "a magnificent specimen of womanhood, richly clad in native silk, erect in stature, commanding in mien, a potent and beautiful presence." As she entered the hall "and strode to her place, and received the rapturous acclaim of this crowded assemblage of Englishmen and women, one instinctively felt as though we were looking upon a queen."<sup>45</sup> Again, Dr. Haynes Holmes, who had met Sarojini Naidu previously in America, when she was on her tour there, goes into raptures over her. "Any list of Gandhi's friends and colleagues would be incomplete without mention of Mme. Sarojini Naidu, greatest of Indian women. In her I find a perfect illustration of Gandhi's power to capture the souls of men, and bind them to him with bonds not of steel but of the spirit. . . ."<sup>46</sup>

Dr. Holmes says Sarojini was asked by a visitor what free India was going to do with all the statues of Victoria scattered through the land, and she answered imperturbably and with her tremendous sense of humour: "Cut off their heads and put mine in their place." When the photographers clustered around trying to snap her, she cried: "Come on boys, hurry up, I am the same on all sides; fat and round!" "An inner spirit seemed to rise within her, and transfigure her appearance. She became suddenly regal in beauty. As by unique power, she became the central figure of any situation in which she found herself, without any effort on her part, she attracted and held attention. Even Gandhi had to share with her any company in which they appeared together."<sup>47</sup>

Sarojini Naidu attended a party at Buckingham Palace together with Mahatma Gandhi who was dressed in spotless white khadi. Sarojini was regaled in an exquisite white silk sari. Gandhiji was in his loin-cloth and remarked that his Majesty the king "wore enough clothes for two!"

Before attending the party, they all met at Knightsbridge, where Gandhi had an office nearer headquarters than his residence in the East End in Kingsley Hall. Here, Mira Behn and the others who were not invited saw the two invitees, Sarojini Naidu and Mahatma Gandhi off to the party. There was much laughter and

<sup>45</sup> *My Gandhi, op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 149 and 150.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

joking. When it was time to start, "Bapu" was still in the bathroom. Anxiously, the party scanned each others' faces. Would Gandhi be late on such an important occasion? And just then he walked in with a broad smile. Mira Behn says: "Bapu had only one big white double *pashmina* shawl which, being in continual use, I had not had a chance to wash, and I was anxious at least to turn it in order that the clean side should be outermost. So the moment he entered the room I said: 'Bapu, let me turn your shawl.'

"'Oh, I have already done it' said Bapu proudly, showing off the clean soft folds of his *pashmina*, and joining in the general laughter."<sup>48</sup>

They started for Buckingham Palace punctual to the minute. Tea was served in the Green Room and then they adjourned to the Picture Gallery where the String Band of the Scots Guards gave a programme of light music. They passed the time in pleasant conversation. There is a story which Miss Lester is said to have recounted: "Sarojini Naidu stayed in a hotel in London and once, she fell ill. Her room was upstairs and Mahatma Gandhi went to see her. He saw the open lift on the ground floor and went in and sat down, awaiting the lift boy. When the latter came in, he did not see Gandhiji at first; but finally received a shock when he saw the weird figure swathed in a shawl sitting in a corner of the lift and cried: "Why have you come here? Who do you think you are? Mahatma Gandhi? Get out."<sup>49</sup>

Mahatma Gandhi stayed in London from September 12 to December 5, 1931, though Sarojini left earlier. Mahatma Gandhi stayed most of the time as the guest of Muriel Lester at Kingsley Hall, an East Settlement House. Earlier, Miss Lester had stayed with Mahatma Gandhi in his Ashram, in India, where she had a chance of gathering material for her book, *My Host, the Hindu*. Gandhiji's visit had covered calls on well-known personalities including the King and Queen, the Dean of Canterbury, Bernard Shaw, Harold Lasky, General Smuts and others. General Smuts, remarked about their encounter in South Africa: "I did not give you such a bad time, as you gave me."

<sup>48</sup> *The Spirit's Pilgrimage*, by Mira Behn (Madeline Slade) Longmans, 1960, p. 138.

<sup>49</sup> *Mahatma Gandhi*, by Jaswant Rao Chitambar, Oxford, p. 132.

On the eve of the Minorities Committee meeting, Devadas Gandhi visited Ambedkar at his residence and an interview was fixed between Gandhi and Ambedkar at the residence of Sarojini Naidu between 9 and 12 o'clock. Ambedkar saw Gandhiji and placed his cards on the table. But Mahatmaji did not open his mind and said Ambedkar's demands would be considered if the others agreed. The Minorities Committee met on September 28, 1931. Sarojini Naidu called Ambedkar, "Mussolini." Some others described him as the British Bull Dog.

Sarojini Naidu did tremendous work for Indian women while in London. The India Society arranged a lecture on Angkor when an American artist, a connoisseur on Eastern Art, entranced the large audience. Many of the delegates of the R. T. Conference were present and were thrilled with the exhibits in the Royal Geographical Society's Hall opposite Kensington Gardens when the lecturer, Miss Douglas, took her audience through the Cambodia section and all its rich wonders. Sarojini Naidu was called upon by Sir Francis Younghusband to say a few words and she remarked: "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 realise how beautiful was the past of India. It was brave, adventurers from the South Indians who made possible 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 the revealer of life."

PART FIVE

*Freedom's Granaries*

“Give nought to me, but to the world winged words  
Of Vision, Valour, Faith—like carrier birds  
Bearing your message o'er all lands and seas,  
Scatter the lustre of resplendent deeds  
O'er journeying world winds like immortal seeds  
Of sheaves enriching freedom's granaries.”

RENUNCIATION

From: *The Feather of the Dawn*



## I *The Epic Fast*

The Round Table Conference bore no fruit as far as Congress was concerned, and the British Government announced placidly that the "true policy between Britain and India is that we should strive all we can to give effect to the views of India while preserving at the same time our own position which we must not and cannot abandon."

Sarojini Naidu left London a little earlier than the other delegates and travelled on to the Continent. She then returned to London and embarked for Cape Town on January 4, 1932, with the Hon. Mr. Srinivasa Sastri: for the South African Government had postponed consideration of the Bill to segregate Indians in the Transvaal until 1932, and the completion of the Second Round Table Conference. The Indian Delegation to South Africa was announced in December 1931 and consisted of Sir Fazl-i-Hussain, member of the Government of India in charge of Indians overseas, Sir K. V. Reddy, the Agent to the Government of India in South Africa and Mr. Srinivasa Sastri with Mr. Bajpai as Secretary. Sir Fazl-i-Hussain travelled straight from Bombay to South Africa together with the English representatives, Sir Geoffrey Corbett and Sir Darcy Lindsay. When the meeting opened, on January 12, 1932, Sastri playfully twitted Sarojini Naidu: "I wonder why Sarojini Naidu is in the Delegation." It was a mystery to him, he averred, to see her there. Prompt and pat came Sarojini's reply: "Mr. Sastri will be sorry that he demanded a public explanation. I only came here because my leader (Mahatma Gandhi) was not quite sure of the wisdom of the *men* of the East (laughter) and insisted on its being reinforced by the immemorial wisdom of the *women* of the East."<sup>1</sup>

Sastri and Sarojini Naidu were great friends and also held the privilege of being among the best orators in India. Sarojini felt

<sup>1</sup> *The Right Honourable Srinivasa Sastri, A Political Biography*, by P. Kodanda Rao, Asia Publishing House, 1963, p. 326.

a tremendous bond between herself and Sastri because he had succeeded her great friend and *guru* Gokhale and taken over the Servants of India Society when Gokhale died in 1915. Sarojini's tribute to Sastri on his death in 1946 reveals the depth of affection and respect she had for this liberal son of India. "In the death of Srinivasa Sastri," she said, "India has lost one of her most distinguished sons of the older generation. It is a grief to all who loved and admired his many brilliant gifts that death has silenced the golden voice that charmed innumerable men and women in three continents, the golden words that conveyed to the young nations of the West the gracious message of Indian culture and philosophy." She referred to Sastri as the greatest cultural ambassador after Rabindranath Tagore. "Shy and sensitive by temperament, his early training and experience made him more fitted for such international cultural embassies abroad than for the storm and stress of controversial politics at home; as he wrote to me long ago, 'I have lived too long in the shelter of the school-room to be able to adjust myself to the noise of the market place.'"

His approach to political problems was cautious, according to Sarojini, but "in recent years he seemed to have developed closer sympathy with the more dynamic ideals and programmes of the actively nationalist sections of the Indian people. . . . Though the night was still dark his eyes could see the faint glimmering of the colours of the dawn. I hope, nay, I think, he passed away happy in the belief and the certainty that the dawn was about to break in India."

While Sarojini was in South Africa, Mahatma Gandhi had returned to India on December 28, 1931, and was received in Bombay by a huge gathering. In memory of his historic but rather futile visit to England, he sent a watch to each of the Scotland Yard detectives who had guarded him during his visit abroad, with the inscription: "With love from M. K. Gandhi." The Second Round Table Conference had come to an end and Gandhiji declared on reaching Bombay: "I have come back empty-handed, but I have not compromised the honour of my country."

Two days before his return Pandit Nehru and others had been arrested to prevent the spread of Civil Disobedience and Gandhiji himself was taken to prison on January 4, 1932, without trial and with no fixed term of imprisonment. He was sent to Yeravada jail

in Poona. During January and February 1932 more than 30,000 political arrests were made. J. M. Sen Gupta was arrested on board ship in early January 1932 on his return journey from England and sent to prison in Darjeeling. Later he was interned in Ranchi where he suffered a stroke and died on July 22, 1933.

Sir Samuel Hoare was now the Secretary of State for India and Lord Willingdon the Viceroy. The British Government despite all Mahatma Gandhi's and the other leaders' efforts, persisted in its proposal of separate electorates. Mahatma Gandhi objected strongly to Ambedkar's desire to separate the Untouchables from the rest of the Hindus. But Ambedkar insisted that without separate electorates the Untouchables would not be fairly treated by the caste Hindus. Mahatma Gandhi felt this was nothing short of a grave sin; it would only serve to perpetuate the chasm between the Untouchables and the caste Hindus. He protested strongly to Sir Samuel Hoare and declared that he "would fast unto death" if separate electorates were granted. Thus began the Epic Fast.

At about the time of Mahatma Gandhi's arrest, Kasturba and Mira Behn were also arrested. Kamala Chattopadhyaya was incarcerated in Arthur Road Jail, Bombay with Mira Behn. They were A-class prisoners and Mira Behn records: "I had not been aware of the fact that as an A-class prisoner, I was entitled to all sorts of conveniences, but now the A-class outfit began to arrive in my Barrack for Sarojini Devi." This happened after Sarojini had returned from South Africa. She was sent to the same prison as Mira Behn, who gives an amusing account of Sarojini's arrival in prison. A number of "conveniences" were sent for Sarojini Naidu's stay in jail, including "a bed, a dressing table with brush and comb, a wash stand, a bath tub, etc. and even curtains. The matron was quite excited. Then the next day came Sarojini Devi, overflowing with vivacity and wit. She was of course exhausted with all the rush and excitement she had been going through outside, but neither her age nor her aches and pains ever daunted her. Now it was my turn to hear all the news, and there was plenty of it! One was only given the *Times of India Weekly* in jail, and even that sometimes had news items cut out. So the three or four days we had together was hardly enough in which to hear all the news, stories and anecdotes."<sup>2</sup> Sarojini was soon released

<sup>2</sup> *The Spirit's Pilgrimage*, by Mira Behn, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

because of the precarious state of her health which had again broken down, but not before she was transferred to the women's prison in Yeravada jail, from where she often went to visit Gandhiji in the jail opposite.

The three women who were closely connected with the Gandhian movement at this time offered a strange contrast which served to offset their different modes of devotion to their leader. Firstly, the poetess, Sarojini, gay and ebullient, described by Mr. H. N. Brailsford as one of India's greatest women; one "who could be as stern and courageous as any of the most gallant fighters in the war of Independence," and who at the same time could call Mahatma Gandhi "Mickey Mouse" and "even say in his presence that he looked exactly like a bat!"<sup>3</sup> Secondly, the aristocratic and sternly simple Englishwoman, Mira Behn, following Gandhiji in all his austerities and mode of living, and lastly, the gallant wife and right hand of the Mahatma himself, innocent, devout, a living example of the Indian *sati*. All three accepted suffering in their own way and offered unstinted service and obedience to the Mahatma who always evoked the love of women and was strangely effeminate himself. Once, he even wrote to Sarojini: "I hope you have not missed the woman in me."

On August 8, 1932, despite Gandhiji's protest against the communal award, Ramsay Macdonald proclaimed in favour of separate electorates and the next day Gandhiji wrote to the Prime Minister saying: "I have to resist your decision with my life." His Epic Fast was to commence at noon on September 20, 1932, and the Prime Minister expressed surprise at this move. At last the fateful day arrived and Gandhiji had his favourite song *Vaishnava Jana* sung to him at morning prayers. He then took his morning meal of milk and fruit. From 6.30 to 8 a.m. the Gita was recited to him and Smt. Raina Behn, the eldest daughter of Abbas Tyabji, the Grand Old Man of Gujerat, sent a beautiful song to him for the occasion: "Oh traveller, arise, it is dawn; where is the night that thou still sleepest."

Gandhiji was now removed to a segregated yard, in the prison compound, and reclined on a white iron cot under the shade of a mango tree. His two constant companions were Sardar Vallabhbhai

<sup>3</sup> *Sarojini Naidu, a Great Human Being*, by Mr. H. N. Brailsford, *Hindustan Review*. Special Sarojini Naidu Supplement, April 1949.

Patel and Mahadev Desai. Chairs were placed round his bed for visitors. Sarojini Naidu was specially brought from the women's jail. Pyarelal writes: "When the present writer visited Gandhiji on the afternoon of the 21st, she (Sarojini Naidu) had already constituted herself his (Mahatma Gandhi's) bodyguard. She mothered him throughout the fast and stood sentry over him from morning till evening, exercising a mother's and nurse's prescriptive right to tyrannise over her ward and the entire household."<sup>4</sup> Sarojini's spirits were, as ever, high. General Varma tells me he once called on her when she was in prison at this time. He took a book with him for her to autograph. It bore the title "Twelve in League Against God," and Sarojini gaily wrote—"One who is in league with God."

Mahatma Gandhi started his fast after tasting a glass of hot water with honey and lemon. Kasturba was transferred from Sabarmati prison to Yeravada jail for the occasion and on seeing her husband she said to him: "Again the same old story!" She was quite wonderful, and her presence cheered Gandhiji. On September 24, he reached a dangerous condition and the prognosis was alarming. Rabindranath Tagore arrived. He sang to Gandhiji and comforted him a great deal, while an endless stream of visitors continued to pour in. But nothing stopped Ambedkar from his bargaining with Hindu negotiators and raising new demands. He even called Mahatma Gandhi's fast "a political stunt." On the fifth day of the fast, it was thought Mahatma Gandhi would not survive and at noon Ambedkar came to him and after much discussion he and some Hindu leaders evolved a new scheme with the agreement of all parties and this agreement became known as the Yeravada or Poona Pact. The text was cabled to Gandhiji's friends Andrews and Polak in England who urged the Prime Minister to accept it. As Gandhiji's life hung in the balance the Prime Minister accepted the Pact and Gandhiji broke his fast after thirteen days at 5.15 p.m. The breaking of the fast was a spectacular occasion. The yard was sprinkled with water. Gandhiji lay on his bed and by him sat poet Tagore, Sarojini Naidu, Swarup Rani Nehru—Jawaharlal's mother, and many others. There were about two hundred people in all. Tagore led the prayer by singing a Bengali hymn from the *Gitanjali*. A fellow

<sup>4</sup> *Gandhi Reader, op. cit.*, p. 283.

prisoner from the leper yard of Yeravada jail recited a Sanskrit verse, after which *Vaishnava Jana* was sung. Then Kasturba handed her husband a glass of orange juice and Gandhiji broke his fast. Actually, the Mahatma's real purpose in fasting was to strive for a Hindu change of heart. What a magician he was! Hindus now really began to feel that Harijans were also human beings and a part of the Hindu set-up; but they were still not rid of their prejudices and Gandhiji soon went on another fast. He continued as a prisoner in Yeravada jail. Sarojini Naidu also continued as a prisoner in the women's section up to and during the early part of 1933. An interesting account of Sarojini's guardianship of Mahatma Gandhi is given by Miss Mary Barr, a Christian missionary devotee of "Bapu." One day, she went to visit the Mahatma in jail with Sham Rao, a Gandhian worker, and says: "I was amazed to see Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, the great poetess and orator, looking out at us from inside, like some magnificent bird of prey protecting her young. The prison guards appeared mild in comparison with her!"<sup>5</sup> Sarojini was serving her sentence, as did "so many of India's élite during Satyagraha movements"; but Mary Barr could not imagine what Sarojini was doing here, as she was supposed to be in the women's prison, separate from the men's section. "A few moments' observation, however, indicated that she was helping the guard to decide which of the numerous visitors could be allowed to see their imprisoned leader," for when Sham Rao's card was presented, Sarojini said: "You had an interview yesterday. You cannot come again today."

"But I have someone new with me today and she has come from far to see Bapu," replied Sham Rao, bravely.

"Will she be able to come tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"Well," concluded Sarojini, "there are too many people today. Bapu cannot do justice to them all, so come again tomorrow at 10 a.m."

Mary Barr says that she felt just then that she "almost hated this super-jailor-prisoner, but on seeing more of her later came to have an affectionate regard for her and to enjoy her frequently bantering conversation. Returning to Poona, Mary Barr and Sham

<sup>5</sup> *Bapu*, by F. Mary Barr, Second Edition, International Book House (Private) Ltd., Bombay, pp. 24, 25 and 26.

Rao laughed at the "curious situation in which a woman prisoner was acting as assistant to a jailor in a men's prison!"

The intrepid visitors presented themselves again at the prison gates the next morning and found a group of people under a mango tree "to which the warders apparently paid little attention, realizing, no doubt, the calibre of their prisoners." Gandhiji was talking to "two learned-looking gentlemen" when he recognised his friend Mary Barr and introduced her to them. Bapu was dressed as usual, but his secretary Mahadev Desai wore the prison uniform of coarse shorts and a shirt. Sarojini allowed them to have their interview and to visit the prison again the next day.

Sarojini's services were called for again; she was to act as Mahatma Gandhi's nurse in May 1933, when he once again went on a twenty-one-day fast in self-purification against the sin of untouchability. He was still in jail at the time and had been since January 1932 after his return from the R.T.C. He started the fast at 12 noon on May 8, 1933. He broke his weekly silence at 11.30 a.m. and took a glass of orange juice prepared by Mahadev Desai out of special oranges sent by Sarojini Naidu. She was the first to be allowed to see Gandhiji. Col. Doyle, the Inspector General of Police and pressmen were allowed inside. Gandhiji was seated on cushions and next to him sat Mahadev Desai, while Sarojini Naidu as his recognised nurse, sat on his right. Lady Thackersay and others were present. There was a ceremony of recitation of verses from the Gita followed by Mahatma Gandhi's favourite song again. When the ladies left, many of them wept and Gandhiji patted them on their shoulders and asked them not to be afraid. Then he handed the pressmen a written statement.

He was released on the same day—May 8, 1933, at 9 p.m. as the authorities had no desire to let him die in prison. At 7.30 p.m. three Government officials arrived and called Sarojini Naidu to inform her of the release. She hastened to Gandhiji's cell to give him the glad tidings. She then packed his things and the officials withdrew. Gandhiji conducted prayers with Mahadev Desai, Sardar Patel and Sarojini Naidu and bade good-bye to the first two at 9 p.m.; then the prison gates were opened. Gandhiji left, leaning on Sarojini's shoulders and accompanied by three officials. He was driven in a sedan car to Lady Thackersay's house. She was to be his hostess. At the entrance to the great mansion, Devadas

Gandhi received his father. The release changed the entire political atmosphere in the country. Gandhiji continued his fast in Lady Thackersay's house.

Exactly twenty-one days after beginning his fast Mahatma Gandhi broke it on May 29, at 12.30 p.m. No Harijan boy could be found to give him his glass of orange juice, so Gandhiji took half a glass given by Kasturba. A fresh impetus to anti-untouchability was given by the fast. During the entire period Kasturba, Devadas, and Sarojini were with the Mahatma in Lady Thacker-say's house. His recuperation took several weeks, but thanks to the devoted nursing of Sarojini and Kasturba, he finally recovered. After his recovery Mahatma Gandhi moved to his Ashram in Wardha in September 1933, where he spent six weeks and further recuperated before starting on his tour to every corner of the country to preach against the evils of untouchability. The tour, lasting nine months, ended at Benaras in July 1934. Mahatma Gandhi covered nearly 12,500 miles, on foot, by train, car and bullock cart and collected about Rs. 800,000 for the Harijan cause.

During this tour, he went to Sarojini's house in Hyderabad, and Mary Barr again met him with some of her friends. A long discussion on conversion to Christianity ensued. Gandhiji felt that anyone could elect his own faith; but then no individual should "impose" his faith on another. Intervening during the discussion Sarojini Naidu came in to say that it was time for others to have their interviews.<sup>6</sup> Even out of prison, whenever she was with the Mahatma, she continued to guard him!

## 2 *The Progress of Women*

Sarojini Naidu's interest in women's progress never flagged right through her career. In 1932 a heated discussion on divorce took place in Allahabad. Divorce was one of the burning questions of the day, and all the women's organisations were for securing that right for women. Why should men have the right to polygamy, to neglect one wife for another; and women be bound to men

<sup>6</sup> *Bapu*, by F. Mary Barr, *op. cit.*, pp. 73, 74 and 75.

with unbreakable bonds? Sarojini Naidu, too, was all for the reform. Yet her sense of humour often tempted her to crack jokes on the subject. Noticing a devoted wife arguing in favour of divorce, she called her aside and whispered: "Are you really for divorce? Don't you think you are a little too old for it?"

In 1933, she played an important part in the opening of the Lady Irwin College for Women. It owed its inception entirely to the All-India Women's Conference, and it was to be guided by a special committee of women who were educational experts.

At this time, Sarojini Naidu spoke once again to her beloved youth of India. She was back at home in Hyderabad, and her address was on "Youth and Tomorrow." She had been debarred from entering Hyderabad earlier for political reasons; but the ban had now been removed. Again she stressed the need for unity and international integrity. She had had wide experience in life and she felt that the future of mankind could only depend on unity. There were too many diversities of creeds, faiths, cultures and communities; but the aim of youth should be towards identifying itself with the great common ideals of life. A united Republic of Youth was coming into being, which was overcoming all racial barriers and those of religion. The morrow, therefore, held forth a common heritage. "The mission of youth tomorrow would be the creation of a new brotherhood," cried Sarojini, and the Editor of *The Indian Ladies' Magazine* commented: "Is this not the great work for Indian women today? Let us remember that Mrs. Naidu is a keen politician, and yet she can bow to international standards."<sup>7</sup>

The India Bill of 1935 opened the field for women to the General Elections in 1936. After the dramatic, historic and unprecedented Civil Disobedience Campaign which had so widely awakened Indian women, the common woman became an enthusiast in electioneering. It was evident that women voters, now raised in number to about five million, were well aware of their responsibilities. And here, a remarkable feature became apparent—that women never worked for communal favours or asked for special concessions for themselves in the form of reservation of seats. Party politics and communal differences would perhaps not have assumed the ugly proportions that they have if the principles of

<sup>7</sup> *The Indian Ladies' Magazine*, September 1933.

national integration and vote for the fittest had been followed instead of the insistence on communal awards against which Mahatma Gandhi so valiantly fought. Women wished to contest the elections on a par with men and be elected on their own individual merits. And they were not unsuccessful either. At this time, Sarojini Naidu pointed out the great strides the women's movement had made at a meeting of the Women's Indian Association in Madras on August 11, 1934, over which she presided. The Association had done admirable work since 1917 for seventeen years. Sarojini said that she and many of her colleagues in other fields could recall the fervour and rapture of the first enthusiasm. It was a tribute to the Association and a tribute to the cause it represented that it was celebrating the Seventeenth Anniversary of its work on behalf of womanhood. She would not say Indian womanhood, because the very name of the Association precluded so narrow a definition. The Women's Indian Association had a wider outlook, a larger purpose and a deeper understanding. After touching on the subject of suffrage and the historic deputation and other matters, Sarojini asked: "Is there not work to be done around you? Are not the orphans crying for compassionate help? Does not the wail of the widow reach down the corridors of time—not merely down the corridors of Yesterday, but knocking upon the gates of today—saying through the ages, 'Injustice has been done to us, let your generation redeem us from the slavery of our position.' Are not the illiterate women of this country calling out to you mutely, but none the less urgently? Are there not villages that need your counsel, your succour, your care and your guidance for the amelioration of their condition and the satisfying of their merest elementary needs?" Were there not sad little children undernourished and mentally or physically handicapped? Was there not the great Swadeshi Movement asking for missionaries to dedicate their lives to the cause—the symbol of which was the spinning wheel "the little thread that Mahatma Gandhi spins and goes winding itself into a great and unbreakable rope that links the whole country in one common purpose? How many have considered the romance and adventure of Swadeshi? Many people think that Swadeshi means making yourself look perfectly ugly by wearing the most unpleasing texture and colour of cloth, the more unpleasant it is, the higher the Swadeshi! But, I have quite a

different definition of Swadeshi. For me Swadeshi begins, maybe with Gandhiji's *charka*, but by no means ends there. For me it means the reviving of every art and craft of this land that is dying today. It means the giving of livelihood again to every craftsman—the dyer, the embroider, the goldsmith, the man who makes tassels for your weddings, the man who makes all the little things that you need for your home. All these dying industries—which Mahatmaji has called 'the small unorganised industries,' are awaiting the magic benediction of your hands to bring again livelihood and a living chance to thousands upon thousands of those who today, for lack of a little initiative or a little help, are among the unemployed and the desperate of your country. For me, it means the renaissance of all our literature, the revival of our music, a new vision of architecture that is in keeping with our modern ideas of life. It means for me a kind of experiment that explores and exploits every resource within the country. It means to me the spirit of Indian nationhood—I do not use the word 'nationalism' because it is a word I dislike intensely as it has an unpleasant aroma of exclusion. Every woman is a creator in this ideal of nationhood. I want the women of India to have a consciousness of the great and dynamic nation whose energies have to be mobilised and harmonised for common purposes."

Sarojini Naidu, it must be realised, while preaching the cult of the spinning wheel as a sound economic proposition, did not debar or prohibit the use of anything else which was basically Indian. She donned rich Conjeevaram, Kollegal, Kornad, Murshidabad and Kashmiri silks, and except at times of grave political crises, wore the silks of India more than Khaddar. Even when she wore Khaddar she beautified it by choosing rich colours and dressing neatly and with taste. There was never anything slovenly or hurried about her. She was aware that it was essential to dress well.

Continuing her speech to the Women's Indian Association, Sarojini in 1934, appealed to women "to specialise in some line of work and become an indispensable unit in the progress of India. She appealed to them to become fitted with a pride that was progressive and dynamic and to cast off stupid humility. Every woman should say to herself that in her lifetime she would see that the women of India suffered no longer from legal or social disabilities

and that the blot of untouchability was wiped out. Every woman must be faithful to her trust, for she was not merely the guardian of yesterday's ideals, but the creator of tomorrow's ideals as well."<sup>8</sup>

Sarojini reverted to her old theme of unity—"the representatives of the Hindu, Moslem, Christian and Zoroastrian faith in this country, once united by a common bond of love and understanding, would indeed become mightier than an army with all its brilliant banners, for on the banners of this force (of women) would be inscribed the words, 'We serve the world and that is why we are queens.'"

At an important session of the A.I.W.C. held in Karachi which was attended by Dr. Maude Royden and Mrs. Corbett Ashley and Sarojini Naidu, Sarojini dominated the scene and thundered from platforms to spellbound audiences to unite and be one and create a family of nations. Especially had women a task to perform in raising the status of their sex and building up a strong structure of love and unity.

Various resolutions were passed at the Seventh All-India Women's Conference and an interesting one was the condemnation of war. Sarojini Naidu, at this session, made some illuminating statements. No Indian could be loyal to the country and yet be narrow and sectarian in spirit. "The ideal and genius of India had always been inclusion, not exclusion of universal thought and culture. Once they understood the fundamental ideal preached by the world teachers of the indivisible oneness of man, they could give a mandate to the world to stop war. No matter whether it was temple or mosque, church or fire-shrine, let them transcend the barriers that divided man from man. They were, however, powerless to separate woman from woman, she being the element of Truth on which she founded the civilisation of humanity."

At this time, the world was again disturbed with hatred and national and racial fanaticism. Hitler was now Chancellor of the German Republic and from January 1933 the shadow of Nazism fell over Europe. In July, Dolfuss was assassinated in Austria. The Disarmament Conference in Geneva of 1932 had been able to do nothing concrete but dragged on and Hitler ordered the withdrawal of his delegates in October 1933. Between the years 1929

<sup>8</sup> *Stri Dharma*, Aug.-Sept. 1934.

and 1933 the whole economic structure of the world seemed to have crumbled. War loomed over Europe.

In India it was decided to contest the elections for the Central Assembly scheduled for November 1934, and Civil Disobedience was to be abandoned. The Government of India Act of 1935 followed and by 1937 an All-India Federation comprising Princely States and autonomous Governor's Provinces was envisaged. Provincial autonomy began in July 1937.

In order to contest the elections for the Central Assembly, some leaders went to Gandhi in Patna to secure his consent for entry into Legislatures. Mahatma Gandhi approved of contesting the elections for the Central Assembly, and the Congress decided to follow a dual programme of struggle within and without the Legislatures, but on October 28, 1934, Gandhiji retired from the Congress and undertook a khadi tour. In the November elections for the Central Assembly, Congress won forty-four seats in a house of 130.

Sarojini kept abreast of all these activities. The growing turmoil of the world increasingly disturbed her. The brotherhood of man and the unity of the world became more and more her concern, and soon she became known as the "peace-maker." In politics, in homes and from platforms, Sarojini ever busied herself in unifying one and all. She felt that in the world of art and music also—great encouragement was needed, and she never flagged in her encouragement of the arts.

October 1933 saw Sarojini at Anand Bhavan in Allahabad. Here she was able to meet her good friend Amarnath Jha. She went to tea at his home on October 25 where she spent one of her happy evenings amidst music and poetry. Sarojini much loved these musical soirées. The reading of Urdu and Persian poetry and singing was a passion with her, and many of her friends provided her with such entertainment. Amarnath Jha in particular indulged Sarojini in such pleasant functions. He says that later in the year he called on Sarojini at the Taj in Bombay and then met her at the Nehrus. Here Sarojini Naidu gave Mr. Jha letters of introduction to Bernard Shaw, Walter de la Mare, Humbert Wolfe, Mrs. Munro, and Laurence Binyon. "Each letter was delightfully phrased," says Mr. Jha. He was on the eve of his departure for England. When he met Bernard Shaw in London;

the latter made "kindly enquiries after Madame Naidu, regretting that on his recent visit to India (really only Bombay) he could not meet her, as she was in jail."<sup>9</sup> Later, after his return to India in December 1933, Mr. Jha met Sarojini at dinner in Mrs. Pandit's house and Sarojini asked him about her friends, including Walter de la Mare and H. G. Wells whom Mr. Jha had met in London.

In the summer of 1934, Sarojini made a clarion call to women when she spoke to the women graduates of the Indian Women's University at Bombay at their annual convocation. She expounded on her favourite theme of women not being isolated in their work. "You shall be the vessels of liberty and unity of future India," she cried. The object of the University was to train women in a natural manner for citizenship and responsibilities in life. True education recognised no geographical boundaries of race or creed. Educated women should creatively influence the destinies of the country. "Education should not be looked upon as so much knowledge in mental store-rooms."

As a peace-maker Sarojini was invaluable not only to Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent army, but to the various women's organisations. Her happy personality kept all factions together. She would not hear of disunity. Women had to work together as one, not for self-aggrandisement, but for the common good. Sarojini was far too noble to allow any petty jealousies or rivalries to creep into the Women's Movement, which was by now progressing at a tremendous rate. As a great mother, she kept her family together, even as she kept communities together in the freedom movement.

She led the people in mass revolts; but was one of the strongest influences in stopping any kind of violence from breaking out. She spoke to the crowds with a "passion of eloquence," and her sense of humour eased many a grave crisis. "Thus, on a certain day, she was leading a vast crowd of Indians who were demonstrating in the public streets, in non-violent opposition to the police. This swelling mass of men and women staged a sit-down strike, and brought the traffic of the city to a standstill. Mme. Naidu, in the forefront of the crowd, sat quietly on the pavement, inviting and thus awaiting arrest. But as time went on, hour after hour, this heroic woman found her seat becoming more and more uncomfortable. How long must she wait for the action

<sup>9</sup> *Sarojini Naidu*, by A. Jha, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

of the police? At last she rose, bade a servant to find a rocking chair, placed this piece of furniture in the middle of the street and sat down, rocking back and forth in perfect comfort."<sup>10</sup>

### 3 1934 to 1937

The years between 1934 and 1937 record nothing very outstanding in the activities of Sarojini Naidu. After the Government lifted the ban on the Congress in 1934, it was felt that an early session should be arranged as it was to meet for the first time after four years. The last week of October was arranged for the session and it was to be held in Bombay. It had already been decided that the A.I.C.C. should suspend Civil Disobedience and adopt Council entry. On October 26, the Congress officially adopted this policy; Mahatma Gandhi ceased to be even a four-anna Congress member. He declared the spinning wheel and the Khadi programme his main occupations; but his exit made the Bombay session anything but humdrum.

Congress Nagar rose almost overnight on the sea-shore of Bombay, and an extensive Khadi exhibition was arranged. It was thronged with crowds that could only be compared with those who attended the Wembley Empire Exhibition in 1932. There were 100,000 people present. Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the President, arrived with great éclat accompanied by "cavalry" troops carrying lathis. Behind them a coach and four followed in which sat in regal state, the President and his wife, Sarojini Naidu and also Mr. K. F. N. Nariman, the Mayor of Bombay. The President, paradoxically, was dressed as a peasant. The presence of Shrimati Rajendra Prasad was much appreciated. "Till that day not many knew that I had a wife," remarked Dr. Prasad, "because she had never attended any meeting or public function with me. Even that day, she would have gone straight to our residence if Sarojini Naidu had not insisted on her remaining in the carriage."<sup>11</sup> Sarojini certainly possessed a knack of bringing out women from their sheltered homes.

<sup>10</sup> *My Gandhi*, *op. cit.*, pp. 150 and 151.

<sup>11</sup> *An Autobiography*, Rajendra Prasad, *op. cit.*, p. 396.

The presidential party was given a mighty reception. Congress flags and bunting gaily festooned the streets. Arches were decorated with the commodity which was made in the immediate locality; for instance near the cotton market, cotton was used for decoration. Flowers and music accompanied the procession everywhere, and the presidential carriage was filled with offerings. Never before had the Congress received such an enthusiastic welcome, except perhaps in 1918; but the present reception was far larger and more magnificent. It took the procession three hours to reach Congress Nagar from Victoria Terminus. The open session was packed to capacity with a mammoth audience. On the platform sat Sarojini Naidu, Bhulabhai Desai, Nariman and others. Mahatma Gandhi arrived the next day and ensconced himself in the tent provided for him. During one of the tea intervals, Sarojini Naidu took Margarita Barns, a foreign writer, to the Mahatma's tent. There Sarojini met Mr. T. C. Goswami, in spotless Khaddar. She had last seen him in the Savoy Hotel in London, and she indulged in one of her jokes at seeing him here in such different attire. She then took her friend Mrs. Barns in to see Gandhiji. He was seated on a white mattress, and he asked his visitor if her troubles were over for obviously she had been in some sort of predicament. Gandhiji said: "The outlook is always bright if you feel it is bright." Mrs. Barns smiled and Sarojini replied: "It is not nearly so simple as all that, Mahatma."

"'I am sorry,' he replied and dropped the subject."<sup>12</sup>

After this 1934 Congress Session, Sarojini Naidu kept herself occupied with travelling to all parts of India and seeing her friends or meeting the leaders and discussing politics with them. She was again at her second home, Anand Bhavan in 1935, and as usual, she went to tea with her friend Amarnath Jha where she met a number of senior students eager to be acquainted with her. On one occasion, in May 1935, Sarojini seems to have discussed her poems with Mr. Jha for she confided to him that she thought her verse, *The Illusion of Love*, from *The Broken Wing*, the best she had written. She recited the poem:

"Beloved, you may be as all men say  
Only a transient spark

<sup>12</sup> *India Today and Tomorrow*, by Margarita Barns.

Of flickering flame in a lamp of clay—  
 I care not . . . since you kindle all my dark  
 With the immortal lustres of the day.  
 And as all men deem, dearest, you may be  
     Only a common shell  
 Chance-winnowed by the sea-winds from the sea—  
 I care not . . . since you make most audible  
 The subtle murmurs of eternity.  
 And tho' you are, like men of mortal race,  
     Only a helpless thing  
 That Death may mar and destiny efface—  
 I care not . . . since unto my heart you bring  
 The very vision of God's dwelling place."

And thus the years advanced and the world approached the war. Abroad, Abyssinia was invaded by Italy. Nearer home another tragedy overcame the Congress family. Kamala Nehru, extremely ill at the time, was taken abroad again in May 1935. On September 4, Jawaharlal Nehru was released from prison and hurried to Switzerland where Kamala passed away on February 28, 1936. During his stay abroad he was elected President for 1936. On his way back from Europe, he declined Mussolini's persistent invitations to visit him in Rome. When he returned home he presided over the 49th Congress Session held at Lucknow on April 23, 1936. He agreed with the policy of contesting the election, under the Government of India Act but opposed acceptance of office because it gave "responsibility without power." The Congress nevertheless formed Ministries in Provinces where it won the majority of seats. Nehru was full of socialist ideas and took three socialists into the Working Committee: Sri Jayaprakash Narain, Narendra Deo and Achyut Patwardhan; and "even Sarojini Devi was cut out from the Committee not without some internal commotion and had to be called back only in the middle of the year when some casual vacancy arose."<sup>13</sup> The vacancies were caused by C. Rajagopalachari and Jayaprakash Narain resigning, and were filled by Sarojini and Govind Vallabh Pant.

In the meanwhile Mahatma Gandhi continued his programme of peace. He laid greater stress on the work which his Ashram

<sup>13</sup> *The History of the Indian National Congress, op. cit., p. 11.*

should accomplish, and renamed it Sevagram. Both Sarojini Naidu and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur were present at the function. In fact, Sarojini Naidu was a frequent visitor to the Ashram, though she never became a member; the austere life was too much for her!

A letter to Pandit Nehru on November 13, 1937, written from Mahatma Gandhi's camp in Calcutta is revealing:

My very dear Jawahar,

I am writing from the modern version of the Tower of Babel. The Little Man is sitting unconcernedly eating spinach and boiled marrow while the world ebbs and flows about him breaking into waves of Bengali, Gujerati, English and Hindi. Bidhan and his colleagues are in despair over his stubborn indocility as regards his health. He is really ill . . . not only in his brittle bones and thinning blood but in the core of his soul . . . the most lonely and tragic figure of his time . . . India's man of destiny on the edge of his own doom. . . .

To you the other man of destiny I am sending a birthday greeting. . . . It will not reach you in time because of intervening eyes that must scan your correspondence. I have been watching you these two years, with a most poignant sense of your suffering and loneliness, knowing that it cannot be otherwise.

"What shall I wish you for the coming year? Happiness? Peace? Triumph? All these things that men hold supremely dear are but secondary things to you . . . almost incidental. . . . I will wish you, my dear, unflinching faith and unfaltering courage in your *via crucis* that all must tread who seek freedom and hold it more precious than life . . . not personal freedom but the deliverance of a nation from bondage. Walk steadfastly along that steep and perilous path . . . If sorrow and pain and loneliness be your portion, remember liberty is the ultimate crown of all your sacrifices . . . but you will not walk alone.

Your loving  
Sarojini.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4 *Haripura and Tripuri*

In 1938 Sarojini Naidu spent a good deal of her time in Calcutta, and we saw something of her during that year and the next few years. She came to our house in Jhautala Road to dinner and I remember we had invited no one else as she wished to have a quiet time and a long chat. We sat out on the terrace, and Sarojini,

<sup>14</sup> *A Bunch of Old Letters, op. cit., p. 247.*

so pleased to be with her old friend, Nellie Sen Gupta, told us many stories of recent happenings and political activities. One of the members of our family, Anil Sen Gupta, happened to come in late for dinner and was severely reprimanded by Sarojini, but he quickly stooped and kissed her and asked for her forgiveness which she granted with a laugh and a taunt at the gay time the younger generation were having.

On July 17, 1938, Sarojini Naidu opened the Hooghly Jute Mills Workers' Conference at Champdani and advised Labour not to resort to strikes in a light-hearted manner. Strikes, she felt, should be the last resort and before one started the workers should make sure they had the strength and resources to carry it through. Moral force was more important than strikes and Sarojini felt that there should be no reason for strikes at all. Labour should be free of all communal differences and should not possess any Hindu-Moslem prejudices. Employers, she was glad to see, were beginning to realise that workers were also human beings. They needed food, leisure and healthy living conditions, education for their children and other amenities. Women workers should be given Maternity Benefits and creches, but there was no point in workers putting forth impossible demands. Congress had been fighting for the freedom of the country for over fifty years. This meant food for all, for Sarojini said: "The first principle of political liberty is that in every level there must be enough food." She asked the labourers to join the Congress in the non-violent struggle. She said she had known Mr. H. S. Suhrawardy, the Bengal Labour Minister for some years. He had told her that he wished to do something for the benefit of the workers. Sarojini remarked that "although it was not proper to utilise a private conversation publicly she could not help asking Mr. Suhrawardy who now controlled the destinies of so many thousands of labourers to make good that excellent desire."<sup>15</sup> Netaji Subash Chandra Bose declared the conference open, and those present included Sarat Chandra Bose, T. C. Goswami and Mrs. Nellie Sen Gupta.

Among Sarojini Naidu's other activities in 1938, was the interest she took in the election of Amarnath Jha as Vice Chancellor of Allahabad University, during the absence on leave of Pandit Iqbal Narain Gurtu. She wrote in May;

<sup>15</sup> *The Statesman*, 17-7-38.

“My dear young V. C., Your well-deserved new honour has given me great pleasure, but it came as no surprise to me—nor to your many friends who have followed your career with such affectionate interest and pride.”<sup>16</sup> Later in the year, Sarojini went to Allahabad at Mr. Jha’s invitation to address the University Convocation, and she stayed at Anand Bhavan. From there Mr. Jha took her to some students’ Hostels for social gatherings and at one of these places Sarojini said that she was very pleased that Mr. Jha had been elected Vice-Chancellor. “You could not have a better Vice-Chancellor than Amarnath Jha, combining as he does the idealism of youth and the wisdom of experience,” she remarked. On November 19, Sarojini referred to Mr. Jha’s father, who was present during her convocation address, and said: “It is not enough that we should think only of how we have great industries in the country, there must be men working in the seclusion of their laboratories who should be able to sew the seeds of those industries. It is necessary that in the secret recesses where din and strife do not intrude, there must be dreamers and visionaries wrestling with the secrets of nature to discover what new gifts they can give so that humanity might be better. Universities, therefore, are the store-house, the conservatory, the treasure-house, of all true knowledge and inspiration, the teachers must be enchanters. They must be enchanted first and be the stimulus and pattern for knowledge that makes the inspired teacher.”

Mr. Jha gave a dinner in Sarojini’s honour at Vizianagram Hall that evening and the next day she stayed at Muir Hostel for three hours and praised the culture which prevailed in the Hostel. On November 21, she visited the Women’s Hostel in Allahabad. In this way Sarojini always kept abreast of university life, but politically she was no less active.

1938 and the first part of 1939 saw many convulsions in the Congress circle and Sarojini Naidu played an important part in bringing peace and goodwill between conflicting parties. A world war also seemed inevitable. What part would India play in this struggle? Mahatma Gandhi, though not a member of Congress was the power behind. A session was held in February 1938 under the presidentship of Subash Chandra Bose when contrary views on the subjects of violence and non-violence were expressed. A great

<sup>16</sup> *Sarojini Naidu*, by A. Jha.

deal of bitterness prevailed because of the hunger-strikers in jails and there was resentment against Congress Ministers for their slow progress. Subash Chandra Bose's policy was to force the British Government to abandon the Federal Scheme from being thrust down the throats of the people. Mr. Jinnah had also spoken at Mohamed Ali Park in December 1937, and had declared that "the Congress High Command must be brought to their senses."

The atmosphere within and without India was charged with electricity. Congress had not approved of the Munich Pact—it had to be studied along with the Anglo-Italian agreement and the recognition of "rebel Spain," which meant that Democracy was being betrayed. The treatment of Jews and other violent and cruel features were far too clear evidence that the world was in a chaotic state. In India, the introduction of Socialistic and Communistic ideas created fresh conflicts. Mahatma Gandhi undertook an indefinite fast in the first week of March 1939 on the eve of the Tripuri Congress Session because of the development of affairs in Rajkot. Another storm was created over the presidentship of the Congress Session at Tripuri. Subash Bose, as President, had been constantly ill. He had been elected President the year before at Haripura. Gandhiji had felt that Maulana Abul Kalam Azad's nomination as President would ease the Communal situation at Haripura, but in spite of this wish, Subash Bose's name had been filed. The Maulana's name had been announced at the Bardoli meeting in January 1938, and it looked as if his election was a foregone conclusion, but when he reached Bombay three names were announced in the Press, those of Bose, Azad and Sitaramayya. The Maulana had known nothing of this and had, therefore, withdrawn his name. So did Sitaramayya, but when the Maulana withdrew, Sitaramayya had to reconsider his withdrawal according to Gandhiji's wishes. Subash won over him by 95 votes but Gandhiji came out with the astounding statement that "the defeat of Subash's rival was his own defeat. This created consternation in the country."<sup>17</sup> Bose had been returned by a majority of the delegates but was in a minority in the executive of the A.I.C.C. How was he then, to form his executive?

"Would the A.I.C.C. accept his list for the Working Committee?"

<sup>17</sup> *The History of the Indian National Congress*, Vol. II, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

Would his own proposition be passed by the Congress?"<sup>18</sup> All these problems had an effect on Bose's health. He could not attend the Working Committee at Wardha on February 9, 1939. Thirteen members of the Working Committee resigned only leaving Sarat and Subash Bose on the personnel. Previously, a walk-out was staged at Delhi in September 1938, led by Narendra Deo. The harmony of the Tripuri Session which commenced on March 8, 1939 was marred by the sequel to the Presidential election and the Rajkot fast of Gandhiji. Also, the President himself was ill and he could not figure in the grand procession that had been arranged with a chariot drawn by fifty two elephants from the railway station to the Congress pandal at Tripuri. Gandhiji was absent because of the Rajkot affair. A photo of the President took the place of the President himself. The first tussle arose on the question of the adoption of the Secretary's report which had not been approved of by the Working Committee at Wardha; but the President ruled that it was not obligatory for the Working Committee to approve of it. It was finally adopted. Then there was an uproar against right wing leaders by delegates from Bengal. Much doubt and worry was felt by the old and tried leaders at the way things were going. Was Gandhiji's leadership being thrown aside? Govind Vallabh Pant and about 160 members moved a resolution that the A.I.C.C. "declares its firm adherence to the fundamental policies of the Congress under the guidance of Mahatma Gandhi and that there should be no break in these policies and that they should continue to govern the Congress programme. . . .

"In view of the critical situation that may develop during the coming year and in view of the fact that Mahatma Gandhi alone can lead the Congress and the country to victory during such a crisis, the committee regards it as imperative that the Congress Executive should command his implicit confidence and requests the President to nominate the Working Committee in accordance with the wishes of Gandhiji." This resolution could have amounted to a vote of no-confidence in Subash Bose. In the meanwhile Subash Bose was carried into the A.I.C.C. meetings on a stretcher, and was nursed and fanned on the platform by his near and dear. There was pandemonium whenever a Rightist member spoke until Sarat Bose quietened the audience and suggested that Pandit Pant's

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

resolution be referred to the A.I.C.C. so as to save unpleasantness in the open session; but this was objected to. The Tripuri Congress Session closed on an inconclusive note. No Working Committee was announced. At last, the A.I.C.C. took up the question again. It met in Calcutta in April-May, 1939, and headlines in the Press proclaimed the news of the first day's meeting: *Mr. Subash Chandra Bose Resigns. Congress Peace Talks Fail. No Agreed Personnel of Working Committee.*<sup>19</sup> Mahatma Gandhi had already come to Calcutta on April 27, but the talks between him and Bose had broken down and Bose had expressed his wish to resign. On April 29, 1939, a peace proposition was put forward by Pandit Nehru, first requesting Bose not to resign and secondly that there should be no election of a new Working Committee, but that the old should continue till necessary changes should be made. April 1 was momentous. There was much confusion in the morning, and in the afternoon session, Sarojini Naidu took the chair, as Subash Bose, in view of his wish to resign, felt it would be embarrassing to be Chairman. I remember attending this meeting. There were stormy scenes, and right through Sarojini conducted the proceedings with dignity and composure. Sarojini "expressed the hope that the House would unanimously accept Pandit Nehru's proposition. She did not, however, propose to take votes that night. This would give Mr. Bose the whole night to reconsider his resolution." There was much discussion during the meeting regarding Mr. Bose's resignation. He emphasised the necessity for forming a homogeneous working committee and said he hoped some consideration would be shown to his view point. If the house felt otherwise it could relieve him of his responsibility. He would willingly continue to serve the Congress loyally. Sarojini appealed to him: "We are all anxious, that Mr. Bose should continue as President of the Indian National Congress and lead the destinies of the Congress. We desire to co-operate with him. We desire his co-operation with us, we desire to express that the President of the Congress is not a nonentity. He is the true interpreter of the declared policy and progress of the Congress. We shall all give the necessary co-operation to Mr. Bose for the achievement of our goal." But Mr. Bose felt he had nothing further to say. He "wanted unity of action, and not unity

<sup>19</sup> *The Statesman*, April 28, 1939.

of inaction." Pandit Nehru then withdrew his proposition. Others tried to persuade Mr. Bose to withdraw his resignation; but it was of no avail.

The pandal was packed and minor scuffles took place. While the house was speculating as to the next move, Sarojini Naidu suggested a way out. "We cannot go on without a President," she said, and called on the House to elect one. The situation became tense when it was pointed out that a new President could only be elected by delegates. Sarojini rose to give her decision on points of order. A member pointed out that Bose's resignation had not been accepted but Sarojini said they had done their best. "I consider this House is competent to elect its President for the remaining period of the year." She was greeted with cries of "Hear, hear," and "Shame, shame." Then Mr. Chaitram Gidwani proposed Dr. Rajendra Prasad as President. Mr. Mohanlal Saxena seconded. Rajendra Prasad was declared President of the Congress. Agam cries arose: "Mahatmaji ki jai" and "Shame, shame."

The A.I.C.C. concluded its eventful session with Rajendra Prasad as the new Congress President, and members of the Working Committee consisted of Abul Kalam Azad, Sarojini Naidu, Patel, Seth Jammalal Bajaj, J. B. Kripalani, Pattabhi Sitaramayya, Bhulabhai Desai, Shankarrao Deo, Harekrishna Mahatab, B. C. Roy and P. C. Ghose. Subash Chandra Bose and Pandit Nehru declined to serve on the Committee, but offered their co-operation. When Dr. Prasad left Wellington Square, there was a disturbance and a lathi charge. Some leaders even booed at him.

Sarojini Naidu, while in the chair, had commanded a difficult situation without fear or hesitation. She had replied on the occasion to criticism against her: "Yes, I have got to act unconstitutionally." Characteristically she soon forgot the part she played and went on to her other interests. During the Divali of 1939 she wrote to Pandit Nehru from Hyderabad:

"My beloved Jawahar,

Your first half century of life has already passed into history, song and legend. May the early years of the next half century bring you the fulfilment of your great dreams and visions and immortalise you in the chronicles of human progress as one of the Supreme Liberators. . . .

"I cannot wish you the conventional 'good gift'. I do not think that personal happiness, comfort, leisure, wealth and such normal assets of the ordinary man and woman can have much place in your life. . . . Sorrow,

suffering, sacrifice, anguish, strife. . . . Yes, these are the predestined gifts of life for you. You will transmute them somehow into the very substance of ecstasy and victory—and freedom. . . . You are a man of destiny born to be alone in the midst of crowds, deeply loved and but little understood. . . .

“May your questing spirit find its goal and realise itself with splendour and beauty.

“This is the benediction of your poet-sister and fellow-seeker,

Sarojini Naidu

“I shall be in Agra on the 17th and the Holy Prayag at 2-32 a.m. on the 19th morning!!”<sup>20</sup>

## 5 *Second World War*

When war was declared on September 3, 1939, England appealed to all members of the Commonwealth to support its cause and fight the common enemy. “In the case of India, the Viceroy on his own declared war on Germany without even the formality of consulting the Central Legislature. The Viceroy’s action proved afresh, if further proof was necessary, that the British Government looked on India as a creature of its will and was not willing to recognize India’s right to decide her course for herself in a matter like war.”<sup>21</sup> India was declared a belligerent without being consulted. What was India to do? Maulana Azad at this time became President and took over from Rajendra Prasad. He reconstructed the Working Committee; but ten members were common, among whom one was Sarojini Naidu. Nehru had been absent in Prasad’s Committee; but Azad brought him back and added C. Rajagopalachari, Syed Mahmud and Asaf Ali. There were fifteen names in all.

In November 1939 Sarojini spoke at the Allahabad University Union together with Jawaharlal Nehru and Rajendra Prasad, and once more she contacted her friend—who was still Vice-Chancellor, Amarnath Jha. She was, therefore, not entirely pre-occupied with

<sup>20</sup> *A Bunch of Old Letters, op. cit.*, p. 397.

<sup>21</sup> *India Wins Freedom, An Autobiographical Narrative* by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Orient Longman’s, Bombay, Calcutta, Reprint, April 1959, p. 26.

the war and the situation it created in India. Her interest in students continued. The students wanted to fly the Congress flag during the Chancellor's visit, at the convocation; but the Congress leaders dissuaded them. Sarojini was one of those who was foremost in asking the students not to fly the flag, as it would have been embarrassing for the Governor and Chancellor, Sir Harry Haig. However, he did not attend the convocation, and many Government officials were also absent. Instead of the Chancellor, Amarnath Jha delivered the address and Sarojini Naidu remarked to Amarnath's father: "I am proud of the dignity and grace with which Amarnath spoke."

During this visit, Sarojini went to see the picture, "The Four Feathers," together with Jha, Ranjit and Vijayalakshmi Pandit and Panna Lal.

An "At Home" and a dramatic performance were held in the Women's Hostel at this time, which Sarojini attended, and for the next few days she actively participated in many university functions together with Vijayalakshmi Pandit. At Allahabad, Sarojini always delighted in listening to Hindu and Urdu poets and attending *Mushairas*. Some of the *Ghazals* and *Nazms* greatly pleased her, especially the function held on the occasion of a session of the All India Women's Conference in early 1940, held at Amarnath Jha's home. With Sarojini Naidu were Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Rani Rajwade and Rameshwari Nehru among others. The party continued till after midnight. Sarojini Naidu's activities were extensive in Allahabad in January 1940. She also gave a reading of her poems, relating the various occasions which had inspired her to write some of them.

March 1940 saw Sarojini in Bombay where she presided at a P.E.N. meeting at Madame Sophia Wadia's home. In October she went home to Hyderabad, and attended a meeting of the Poetry Society. Amarnath Jha was present and Sarojini said in her speech that nowhere in India was literature encouraged as much as in Allahabad, "all because of my friend Professor Jha." He lunched with Sarojini at Red Hill and appreciated the excellent "food and good table" provided by Sarojini. Lilamani gave Mr. Jha a "copy of the slender volume of poems brought out by the members of the Hyderabad Poetry Society." It was an attractive production with a cover design of a reproduction of one of the Ajanta fres-

coes, and printed on Hyderabad hand-made paper. In it were two poems not included in previous volumes. They were *The Flute Player* and *Little Kanhya*. This last poem is included in the latest collection of Sarojini Naidu's poems, *The Feather of the Dawn*.

In the meanwhile, matters came to a head at the meeting of the Working Committee of the Congress held in Poona in 1940. Two Resolutions were passed:

(1) That the policy of non-violence was the correct manner in which to attain freedom.

(2) In the war between Nazism and Democracy, India sided whole-heartedly with Democracy. "She could not, however, participate in the war effort of the democracies till she herself was free." Abul Kalam Azad felt that if India was given freedom she should unhesitatingly join the allies. Gandhiji felt that as adherents of non-violent principles, India could not do so. Finally, the Maulana was forced to give way. In any case, he felt the British Government would never grant freedom at that critical time. Individual Satyagraha was therefore started by Mahatma Gandhi. Sarojini unhesitatingly threw in her forces with him.

She spent some time at home in Hyderabad in 1941, as the following letter to Pandit Nehru, written on December 9, 1941, reveals:

"My dear Jawaharlal,

"Your beautiful letter from prison and your even more beautiful statement when you came out were very inspiring and comforting to my troubled spirit. I could not write to you earlier but I hope you have received my wire of welcome (Is it for the Xmas holidays?) I have passed through the most tragic three months of my life, that has not been wanting in tragedy, but personal sorrow and suffering are after all personal and private."<sup>22</sup>

Sarojini went on to describe the sufferings of a member of her family who was on her death bed. Apart from her own weak health and bouts of physical pain, the tragedies in her life were often so great that one would have expected a less courageous character to have succumbed. The death of her second son, Ranadheera, was especially a great shock to her. He was known to his friends as "Myna," and I remember meeting him as a young boy in Madras years earlier, when he came to stay with his aunts and uncles. His

<sup>22</sup> *A Bunch of Old Letters, op. cit., p. 461.*

death was premature and naturally a great blow to his mother, who not only stalwartly wrestled with her own ill-health, but was always anxious about the weak health of members of her family.

The war crisis now began to gather momentum and the Cripps Mission came to India. The first meeting was held at 3 p.m. on March 3, 1942, and the Congress Working Committee gathered together on March 29. The A.I.C.C. met the Cripps Mission on May 2. This had been preceded by another meeting of the Working Committee from April 27 to May 1. Sarojini, as a member of the Working Committee was actively present on all these occasions. The discussions were not a success and the situation deteriorated; Mahatma Gandhi moved towards a mass effort. The "Quit India" movement was broached on July 1, at a meeting of the Working Committee and on July 14, 1942, the "Quit India" Resolution was passed.

When the leaders met at Sevagram, Wardha, in July 1942, E. W. Aryanayakam and his wife Asha Devi, the pioneers of Basic Education in India, were at Wardha and Aryanayakam's office in the Ashram was used for the leaders to meet in and discuss their problems. Sarojini Naidu was among them. They were sitting in the office in the afternoon when a flight of sparrows flew in as evening approached. They had nested in the office for many days, and Aryanayakam had enjoyed their innocent company and mild chirping. "What are these visitors doing here among us?" laughed Sarojini as the twittering birds sought the various nests they had built in the friendly office. "Why don't you drive them away?" Aryanayakam smiled and Mahatma Gandhi commanded that they be left alone. But the sparrows afforded great amusement to Sarojini and were a welcome diversion for the leaders and their tense nerves.

Mira Behn was sent to the Viceroy after the "Quit India" resolution was drafted, but she was refused an interview. The Working Committee then met again on August 5 at Bombay and on August 8 "Quit India" was finalised. Mahatma Gandhi and Sarojini Naidu were arrested on August 9. At this time Churchill was extremely angry with Gandhiji and remarked that "All that Gandhi stands for must be crushed." He said he had not been "appointed Prime Minister by His Majesty, to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire." Sarojini admitted that though

she did not agree with Churchill for what he said, she could not help admiring him for what he was. She told a Reuter reporter that she admired him for his generalship, his eloquence; but above all for his bravery which could evoke an unquestioning responsive loyalty in his people, even unto the smallest child. She admired his eloquence which made all England refuse to fly from the enemies in the skies, enemies hurling down bombs which destroyed them but did not conquer them.<sup>23</sup>

### *6 The Aga Khan's Palace*

On August 8, 1942, Mahatma Gandhi addressed a public meeting at Bombay and delivered his "Quit India" speech. Thousands of people attended.

The next day Gandhiji was arrested at dawn, and with him Mahadev Desai, Sarojini Naidu and Mira Behn. Sarojini and Mira could not even collect their clothes before they left.

Mahatma Gandhi's party was put on a corridor train in which travelled most of the rest of the Working Committee from Bombay, including Pandit Nehru, Asaf Ali, Syed Mahmud and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. Gandhi and Sarojini were, however, in another compartment and during the journey, Sarojini was sent by Gandhi to Nehru's compartment as he wished to meet the leaders. They accompanied Sarojini to Gandhiji's compartment which was some distance away. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad writes: "I have never seen him (Gandhiji) looking so dejected. I understand that he had not expected this sudden arrest."<sup>24</sup>

While the leaders were talking, the Police Commissioner of Bombay who was in the train, came to the compartment. He told them that only Mrs. Naidu could stay with Gandhiji, and Pandit Nehru and Azad returned to their compartment. When the train arrived at the station where Gandhiji was to be detrained a little outside Poona, the overbridge was crowded and the platform full of police. The crowd shouted "Mahatma Gandhi ki jai" and the police made a lathi charge at them. Jawaharlal Nehru then lost his temper and dashed out of the train crying: "You have no right

<sup>23</sup> *The Women Behind Mahatma Gandhi, op. cit.*, p. 216.

<sup>24</sup> *India Wins Freedom, op. cit.*, p. 85.

to make a lathi charge.”<sup>25</sup> The Police Commissioner ran after him and tried to bring him back and literally had to carry him into the compartment. Then the Police Commissioner came to Azad and said: “I am very sorry Sir, but these are my orders and I must carry them out.”

Maulana Azad writes: “From my window I saw Mrs. Naidu and Gandhiji taken out of the train. We later learnt that they were detained in the Aga Khan’s house, popularly known as the Aga Khan Palace.” The rest of the prisoners including Nehru, Azad and Patel were taken to Ahmednagar. Rajendra Prasad was arrested in Bombay and detained in Patna.

When Mahatma Gandhi was whisked away to jail at dawn on August 9, Kasturba and Sushila Nayar were left alone. The gallant little wife of the Mahatma felt she would have to carry on her husband’s work and said she would address the meeting at which her husband was to have spoken. She and Sushila Nayar were then arrested. Kasturba had fever; but the next morning, her temperature fell. She and Sushila Nayar were taken to Mahatma Gandhi’s prison. Those imprisoned with Gandhiji included Mahadev Desai, Pyarelal, Sarojini and Mira Behn. The Mahatma and his wife were 73 and Sarojini ten years younger. Sarojini was indignant at having been whisked away without having time to pack her bag and later she wrote to the prison authorities asking for a few of her things, but received no reply. No correspondence with friends or relations was allowed the prisoners and they were completely cut off from the outside world. By now, however, the whole country was in a turmoil. About 4000 arrests had been made in all parts of the country.

Sarojini Naidu was anything but well at the time of her arrest, and another cause for worry was Mahatma Gandhi’s contemplated fast. Sarojini was most troubled as to the consequences of this fast; but in her usual cheerful manner, she kept herself busy plucking the glorious flowers in the garden and arranging them, cooking and looking as happy as she possibly could. One day, she was suddenly told that Mahadev Desai had died. He had suffered a heart attack. The shock was more than the gallant group of prisoners could bear and a feeling of deep melancholy descended on the palace to which even Sarojini for many days succumbed.

<sup>25</sup> *India Wins Freedom, op. cit.*, p. 86.

After Mahadev Desai died, Mira Behn says: "Sarojini Devi was indomitable" in keeping up their spirits. October 2, was Gandhiji's birthday. Sarojini felt something special had to be done to celebrate the occasion. Then came Divali and again Sarojini felt that some form of celebration should be organised. "None of us," says Mira Behn, "not even Bapu had realised up to this time of incarceration together in the Aga Khan's palace the full richness of Sarojini Devi's nature. Of course we all knew of her poetic genius, her amazing oratory, and her sparkling wit, but it was only now, through direct experience, that we came to know of the bigness of her motherly heart, and the strength of her character in moments of suffering and sorrow." She occupied a large room with a back verandah. This became the dining room and kitchen of the prisoners over which Sarojini presided. No outside help was permitted, and a batch of convicts with "a jamadar and two sepoy in charge were sent every day to work in the garden, look after the goats and keep the place clean. One of these sepoy, a quiet young man, used to help Sarojini Devi with her cooking. We also helped, but it was her domain, over which she ruled like a benign empress. She would sit there on the back verandah on a stool, little charcoal stoves on the floor in front of her, and stir her pots with a long spoon. Though she would be dressed in an old silk dressing gown with her long hair falling loosely over her shoulders, yet she would never for a moment lose her royal aspect. She thought of everybody's needs. She would make us—Sushila, Pyarelal and myself—sit down as if we were her children and serve us with her own hand. And on one occasion when I was ill she insisted on cooking me special dishes and bringing them to my room. Yet she was sixty four, and none too well in health."<sup>26</sup>

After long, lonely days, the prisoners were at last allowed to write to their families. Sarojini wrote to enquire about her daughter Padmaja's health. Clothes were also at last brought to her. But Mira Behn was allowed neither clothes nor letters. Desai's death was kept a secret from his family and Mahatma Gandhi refused to write letters. So did Sushila Nayar. During this imprisonment her sister-in-law died giving birth to a child. Her mother was ill. Sarojini suggested that Sushila should go under parole to her sick mother. But Kasturba decided to write to her son Devadas, who

<sup>26</sup> *The Spirit's Pilgrimage, op. cit., p. 241.*

lived near Sushila's mother and give her news of her daughter. But inaction was killing everyone. "Even Sarojini Naidu, who had always met danger blithely, who had regularly defied death, succumbed to the weight of inaction." In the past twenty years she had been in prison repeatedly. But now, she, who had been called "the Indian Judith," seemed to lose strength, not merely physically, but in spirit. How many years, if not to death itself—would they remain in this luxurious tomb, the prisoners wondered.

The only break in the deadly monotony was provided by visits to the place where Desai had been cremated. Kasturba became more and more lethargic and even lost interest in spinning. But Mira tried to be cheerful and organised tennis, badminton and carrom. Some say that Sarojini even tried to make Mahatma Gandhi play ping pong!

The Mahatma now contemplated seriously his proposed fast. The growing anticipation of this dreadful ordeal caused all those near him to suffer acutely. He was determined to undertake the fast in protest against "the complete isolation from his people." Everyone was concerned and apprehensive. Sarojini Naidu felt Mahatmaji could not survive this ordeal and that it would be too much of a trial for his wife. Fearlessly she told him: "Bapu, your fasting will kill Ba." He laughed and reminded her of the time she had come from prison to watch him dying a decade earlier; she had even distributed his belongings to the attendants!

## 7 *The 1943 Fast*

On February 10, 1943, six months after the Congress leaders had been imprisoned, Mahatma Gandhi went on fast. He was to live on unsalted water without even fruit juice; but when death was near he consented to have a little fruit juice. Before Mahatma Gandhi undertook the fast he received a letter from Lord Linlithgow dated February 5, 1943, to the following effect: "You may rest assured that the charges against the Congress will have to be met sooner or later and it will then be for you and your colleagues to clear yourself before the world if you can. And if meanwhile you yourself, by any action such as you now appear to be con-

templating, attempt to find *an easy way out*, the judgment will go against you by default." So convinced were the British of the rightness of their policy and the wrongness of Gandhi's methods! But Mahatma Gandhi certainly did not contemplate finding a way out in death. The British Government felt the fast held an element of coercion in it. "Ever since Cripps made his broadcast speech in Delhi on the 11th April, 1942, a day before his departure to Karachi, it became the habit to give the Congress a bad name with a view to hanging it one day." The Government of India repeated its charge that Congress wanted power for itself.<sup>27</sup>

The fast became known to the public only on its second day. Sarojini, Kasturba and Mira Behn were with Gandhiji throughout as were Sushila Nayar and her brother Pyarelal.

Among the first visitors were Mrs. Mahadev Desai with her son and a nephew of Mahatma Gandhi. "The sight of the widow and the orphaned youth must have been indescribably trying to Gandhi on this, the first occasion they met after the tragedy of tragedies which shaped in one sense and in a measure the History of India."<sup>28</sup>

On the fourth day of the fast nausea set in and on February 15, friends and relations began to gather in Poona, fearing the worst. Dr. B. C. Roy arrived on that day and stayed with Mahatmajji until March 3. Gradually, the action of the heart began to weaken and on February 19, uraemia set in. From that day bulletins were regularly published under the signatures of six doctors. On February 21, a crisis took place at 4 p.m. At this time Sarojini Naidu herself was ill and Kasturba was praying in her room. Sushila Nayar alone was with Mahatma Gandhi. When she realised he was sinking she put some lime juice into the water he was to sip and gave him a drop at a time and gradually Gandhiji began to recover, but his condition had been so precarious that it was remarked that even the sandalwood required for his cremation had been kept ready by the Government. There was also another rumour that Government would declare a National holiday and would fly flags at half mast if anything happened to the Mahatma.

The fast came to an end on March 3, 1943. It had been a severe ordeal, not only for Mahatma Gandhi but for all those around

<sup>27</sup> *The History of the Indian National Congress, op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 470.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 471.

him. Three days later, permission to receive visitors in the prison was withdrawn and Sarojini could no longer see her friends and relations. Sushila Nayar and Pyarelal refused to be downcast, but a foreboding of her fast approaching death assailed Kasturba and a deep depression seemed to crush her spirits. Lord Wavell, the new Viceroy, began seriously toying with the idea of dividing India and Mahatma Gandhi began to feel that they may remain prisoners for another seven years. Sarojini Naidu's buoyancy also began to flag as Government refused to let them know when they would be released. Her wit and humour began to desert her though she still teased Mahatma Gandhi at times. She was attacked by a bout of malaria. Her condition soon began to cause much anxiety and as Mahadev Desai had already died in prison, the Government felt that the risk of keeping Sarojini incarcerated was too much. She was far too popular a figure to be allowed to die in prison. She had been treated by the prison doctor but had shown no improvement. She was set free unconditionally though reluctantly on March 21, 1943. Her fever was so high that she had to be taken out on a stretcher. Mira Behn who was one of those sad prisoners left behind says: "How much we missed her, especially myself! But we are all thankful to think of her out of a house already haunted in its associations." On February 22, 1944, Kasturba died at the age of 74. Mahatma Gandhi was released on May 6, 1944, because of ill-health. This was his last imprisonment. He had spent 2,338 days of his life in jail.

### *8 Release and After*

On release, Sarojini decided to take complete rest and retired to Hyderabad for some months. But while she was still "resting" she took charge of the "Quit India" movement as almost all the other Congress leaders were still in jail.

Though she could not be very active, as a member of the Working Committee she issued a statement to the Press on August 9, 1943, the Anniversary of the mass imprisonment. The Congress still persisted in a No-Change policy. The statement ran as follows:

“Following the arrest of Mahatma Gandhi, and of the Working Committee, there seems to have arisen some confusion of ideas and some conflict of opinion among the Congress workers who were suddenly left without a definite mandate or any recognised leadership. I wish to clear any lingering doubts by stating that no authority was delegated either by the Working Committee or by the All-India Congress Committee to any individual or groups within the Congress, nor, as has been sometimes alleged, but which I am loathe to believe, to further secret activities directly opposed to the accepted creed and traditions of the Congress.

“Neither is it open to any member of the Congress to amend its constitution or alter its decision at this juncture. Nevertheless, in absence of the leaders, it is equally the responsibility of all of us to continue without interruption on our own part the authentic work of the Congress in the service of the country. Spectacular programmes assuredly have their special place and purpose in the scheme of national life, but today they can have but a limited and doubtful value, confronted as we are with the problems that demand a supreme and undivided dedication of all national thought for their solution.

“The heart-breaking and universal misery of the people<sup>29</sup> cries out to us from myriad mouths of hunger and not one of us dare be deaf to the poignant call for help. Though I am still too ill to take any active share in the beneficent work of relief, I am in daily contact with the work of the unofficial Committee in Hyderabad for relief; I am for that reason increasingly conscious of the desperate agony of the poor and increasingly certain that the permanent, indeed at present almost the sole task before us, is to try and bring some measure of succour and solace to ameliorate their desperate plight.

“Also from my daily experience, I can bear testimony to the splendid manner in which instinctively and automatically sectarian interests, communal quarrels and political controversies subordinate themselves before a great human claim that transcends all lesser considerations. An enduring national unity can only be built up on the foundation of sincere co-operation in the service of the people.

<sup>29</sup> The Bengal Famine had by now set in.

“The initial and ultimate word of inspiration was uttered by our own illustrious leader, Mahatma Gandhi, when, in a prophetic mood, he said as long ago as 1921, that, before the hungry, even God dare not appear except in shape of bread.”

One of Sarojini's first public activities, after ten months silence and rest, was her appearance on January 7, 1944, to give a “fillip” to the coming Independence Day celebrations on January 26. Again, as an annual feature, arrests were taking place all over the country; but the nation solemnly avowed its intention of gaining independence, and took the pledge.

On January 25, Sarojini delivered her message of independence and gave out a fiery press communiqué denying the absurd report which had been set afloat that Mahatma Gandhi had been prompted from Wardha before his arrest in 1942 to “torpedo” the Cripps Proposals. While Sarojini was in the Aga Khan Palace and during the fast, she had written on this subject to the Home Department, Government of India. At the Press Conference on January 25, 1944, in Delhi, she described verbatim Gandhi's conversation with Cripps: “You are a very wicked man to have brought these proposals to influence the Indian mind.” She repudiated the wild report that Gandhiji had said the proposals were “a post-dated cheque on a crashing bank.” “She recalled several facts—namely, how Cripps had started talks with a reference to the Cabinet system and how Maulana Azad had written during the Bombay meeting of the A.I.C.C. a letter to Mr. Jinnah confirming that the Congress agreed to the League forming a Ministry at the centre. She explained how Gandhi in his pre-fast correspondence asked the Viceroy to send someone who knew the Government's mind to his abode in the Aga Khan Palace and convince him that he was wrong, and having convinced him, put him in touch with the Working Committee. ‘Why’, she asked, ‘were Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, Dr. Jayakar, Mr. Rajagopalachari and Mr. Philips not allowed to see Gandhi?’ She roundly rated those Congressmen who were wavering and those others who were abjectly and helplessly pleading for the release of Congress leaders and admonished the Government to rectify their mistake. Having correctly explained and vindicated the Congress position and having reiterated that Gandhiji never intended to start any movement straight away, the

idea being that failing negotiations, some action might or would be taken and that was left to some future time. Mrs. Naidu made a further effort to bring about a true understanding when she added 'Now is the occasion for Government to rectify past mistakes with the right gesture. We have made our gesture. I think it is possible to find some way to make a break in the wall, if they would let people meet and talk to Gandhiji and let him meet the Working Committee and find out for himself what they thought and what was happening in the country'.<sup>30</sup>

Sarojini's press interview not only cleared misconceptions regarding Gandhi's policy, but emphasised the national demand. Congress had never for a moment sided with Japan and "was determined to resist it in its own way." It had no intention of starting a mass movement at the moment and awaited the results of an interview between Gandhiji and the Viceroy, which the former sought. Congress also, Sarojini emphasised, could never surrender the desire for Independence and a National Government during the war. "The Congress was not a baby to 'go to grandma and take a plum, a cherry and a pudding'," said Sarojini.

On January 26, 1944, Sarojini travelled to Lahore from Delhi to see her sister; but an order was passed by the Punjab Government, as she arrived at the station. It read as follows: "In exercise of the powers conferred by sub-section (1) of Section 3 of the Restriction and Detention Ordinance, 1944, the Governor of the Punjab is pleased to direct that Mrs. Sarojini Naidu—(1) Shall not, without the permission previously obtained in writing from the District Magistrate, Lahore, join or take part in any procession or meeting; (2) Shall not make any speeches in public; (3) Shall not, without the permission previously obtained in writing from the District Magistrate, Lahore, make any communication to any newspapers." The order, though it should have borne the signature of the Chief Secretary, only bore that of the D.I.G., C.I.D. of police. When the notice was served on Sarojini Naidu and she was asked for her signature, she wrote at the back of the notice that she was under Doctor's orders not to address meetings or join public processions, "therefore so far as she was concerned the order served on her was non-existent." Then she came out of

<sup>30</sup> *The History of the Indian National Congress, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 574.*

her railway compartment and remarked: "The Punjab is an interesting Province and the Police here are even more interesting."<sup>31</sup>

The order served on Sarojini became the subject of an animated debate on February 7, in the Central Assembly. The Civil Liberties of Indians were indeed being curbed too strongly. Sir Reginald Maxwell remarked that the Government had no idea Sarojini would recover so quickly from her illness. The Congress pledge was "a seditious document," and as such the Government opposed it, but it was not against the idea of "Independence." Sir Reginald Maxwell said that the Government had never charged the Congress with being pro-Japanese.

Sarojini's health was by now more or less repaired. She presided over a meeting to save children soon after the Mahatma's release; 400 children were to be sheltered in Bengal. But Sarojini was forbidden to speak in public. At another meeting funds were raised for Kasturba's memorial in which movement Sarojini took an active part. She also spoke at the Faculty of Students at the Calcutta University in 1944. She asked: "What part are we to play in building up a new world after the war? Are we simply to listen to terms dictated to others, or shall we state that *we* must have a voice in framing the new Charter of Liberty?"

Eventually the leaders were released and the war came to an end, nothing could have upset Sarojini so much as the communal rioting which started almost immediately. When Gandhiji stepped out of the Aga Khan Palace on May 6, 1944, it was expected that negotiations would be taken up where they were abandoned on August 8, 1942, when the leaders had been arrested. But Hindu-Moslem relations were now so strained that all Gandhiji's efforts were given to bringing about an agreement between the two communities as Lord Wavell wanted peace before any promises for independence were made. The tension now grew so serious that Mahatma Gandhi decided to live among the Moslems in the troubled villages of Noakhali in East Bengal and in Bihar. Here he toured, holding prayer meetings and striving to bring about peace and supplant love for hatred. All those who attended the prayer meetings at this time will remember the thousands of peace-seekers seated on the ground around Mahatmaji while *Ram Dhun* was sung and prayers to the Almighty offered. Sarojini was

<sup>31</sup> *The History of the Indian National Congress, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 578.*

in and out of places striving arduously to create love between Hindus and Moslems. How hard she had worked for this cause all her life, and how pitiable were the Hindu-Moslem riots which were taking place everywhere! Her health however, prevented her from touring the Noakhali villages with Mahatma Gandhi and she expressed her great sorrow at this handicap in a letter to Gandhi, written from Santiniketan on December 26, 1946.

"This is not a letter, it is an affirmation of love and faith. Had it been possible I should have tried to reach you if only for a moment. You will, I know, approve of my leaving Bengal without even making the effort. I neither need to see you nor speak with you, because you dwell in my vision and your message always sings itself to the world through my heart.

"Beloved Pilgrim, setting out on your pilgrimage of love and hope, 'Go with God' in the beautiful Spanish phrase. I have no fear for you—only faith in your mission.

Sarojini"<sup>32</sup>

Nirmal Kumar Bose, in his book, says that Gandhiji discovered this letter many weeks later and wanted to destroy it; but gave it to the author "on condition it would never be published; for as he said, the letter was no more than praise for his work, which he did not need." "But," says Mr. Bose, "I took it away from him with the assurance that it would not be published during his lifetime without permission."

## 9 *At Home*

In spite of all her political activities soon after her release, Sarojini spent most of her time at home and immensely enjoyed this respite. Amarnath Jha who went to Hyderabad in December 1943, says that he received a letter from Sarojini Naidu asking him to have a "quiet cup of tea" with her one afternoon. But he found a party of over thirty and remarked: "Her idea of a quiet tea!" She was still very weak, but "in spite of her poor health, she was cheerful and vivacious as usual."

<sup>32</sup> *My Days with Gandhi*, by Nirmal Kumar Bose, Asia Publishing House, 1953, p. 139.

At this time, Beverley Nichols visited India to pass his unsolicited "verdict" on the country. Though this book is a reflection of a disgruntled mood, full of complaints, its one entertaining feature is his encounter with Sarojini who proved an equal match to Nichols.

One day, when we went to call on Sarojini Naidu soon after the publication of the book, I happened to ask her what she thought of *Verdict on India*; for it had caused much indignation in the country, though not such a storm as Miss Mayo's *Mother India*. Sarojini Naidu did not agree with my view on the *Verdict*. On the contrary, she twitted me and remarked: "I didn't think it was so bad. At least Mr. Nichols praised my cat."

Beverley Nichols himself recounts his visit to Hyderabad in a graphic manner. He says he saw one of Jamini Roy's paintings first in Sarojini Naidu's house in Hyderabad and later "discovered considerable collections in Calcutta, Lahore and other places." In a chapter headed "The Gaol Bird," he paints a lively picture of Sarojini. On ringing her up one day, he heard a voice "light and musical and full of laughter" at the receiving end. It said: "I was in gaol when you first arrived, which is why we have not met before. However, I'm out again, for the moment at least. So you will come to tea? This afternoon then, at 5-30?"

Beverley Nichols jotted down on his telephone pad. "Gaol-Naidu-shock." This entry was made with a "simple" purpose. He wished to remember the shock those words conveyed to him. To a strait-laced Englishman, fully approving his Government's conduct and rule in India, it could not have been easy to understand with what pleasure and scorn Indian political leaders stepped in and out of gaol. Sarojini was a cultured lady. Was going to prison no disgrace? Little could he understand the Congress pride in jail sentences. He continues that he was always "stunned with shocks in India. . . . However, 'I was in gaol'" still evoked a feeling of surprise, particularly as it was associated with that "charming voice, so very sweet and—if she will forgive the suggestion—so very Mayfair."<sup>33</sup>

In October 1944, Beverley Nichols journeyed to Sarojini's home in Hyderabad and paused on the Threshold to remark: "A word must be said about her importance on the Indian scene. Apart from Dr. Ambedkar, she is the first major political figure who had

<sup>33</sup> *Verdict on India, op. cit.*, p. 148.

made her appearance in this book." He goes on to say that "This omission has been deliberate." While delivering his verdict on India he felt "it was futile to plunge into politics." He had, however, given a background of major Indian politicians. He says: "Among these figures Mrs. Naidu stands out, and always stood out, in high relief. 64 years old, she has lived—to put it mildly—a full life. She was the first Indian woman to be elected President of Congress; wherever the fight had been thickest, she was to be found, fluttering a gaily-bordered saree, with feminine defiance, in the face of the British Raj. She had been swept into *lathi* charges, had held Gandhi's hand at some of the most crucial moments of his career, and . . . while finding time to produce a considerable family, had written a great deal of enchanting poetry. One feels a temptation to say, with Pater, that 'all these things had been to her as the sound of flutes,' but perhaps that would be going a little too far. The fact remains that she still gives the impression of being a young woman. She has allure, and she knows it."<sup>34</sup>

Beverley Nichols visited Sarojini Naidu on appointment, punctually, "and found her sitting cross-legged on a divan." She was "talking with a bubble and brilliance that was reminiscent of Lady Oxford at her best, in the old Bedford Square days, when yellow tulips were two shillings and sherry was just a drink, and not an Event."

It is strange but nevertheless true, that there are not two opinions in whatever society Sarojini mixed. From the sombre white-clad Congress Satyagrahis to the highest British or American personalities, from the ignorant woman in the village to writers and artists and intellectuals of all countries, Sarojini was always ebullient, bright, romantic, brilliant in conversation, kind-hearted and colourful—an attractive figure.

She warned Beverley Nichols of the medley of people and animals he would find in her house and he was not surprised to see "a very thin daughter" bobbing up from behind his chair with a "deep Girton voice." Considering that Lilamani went to Oxford, Nichols was probably, like most visiting journalists, prone to mix his facts. It was Sarojini who had gone to Girton. Lilamani had heard Nichols at Oxford, and she cried: "What has happened to you? When I heard you speak at Oxford you were plump and

<sup>34</sup> *Verdict on India, op. cit.*, p. 149.

brilliant; now you are thinner than I am and you haven't said a word." Another "not-so-thin daughter rushed into the room proclaiming, fiercely, 'If you've come here for a lesson in anti-imperialism, you've certainly come to the right place!'

"'Be quiet my dear,' intervened Mrs. Naidu, 'Mr. Nichols hasn't had his tea yet'."<sup>35</sup>

Nichols then described a son "who seemed wrapped in yogic meditation" and another son with "a black beard, who proved to be an Ayurvedic doctor" who was trying to cope with some Ayurvedic principles of the "Solar system." Nichols was trying to struggle with some very slippery cucumber sandwiches at the moment and admits that he may not have quoted the Doctor correctly, but "that was the general idea." Nichols obviously was encouraging his own powers of exaggeration and misinterpretation. Other people included Sarojini's husband, "who looked amiably puzzled by the general uproar," accentuated by servants entering "every other minute" with envelopes containing money for the Famine Relief Fund. Sarojini slit open the envelopes "with a whoop of joy" and waved "rupee notes over her head" commenting on the generosity or otherwise of her donors.

Nichols then comments favourably on Sarojini's Siamese cat, which pleased her so much and at last "the circus folded up and the journalist was alone with his 'chief performer'."

Sarojini asked "What shall we talk about?"

"Gaal, if you don't mind."

"Why should I mind? I've nothing to be ashamed of. And some of it was very entertaining."<sup>36</sup>

She told him of the mass arrests in August 1942, and Nichols with the usual British pride felt that the arrests would "record an emphatic vote in favour of the British Empire. If it had not been for those arrests the whole of India would have been plunged into bloody chaos within a week." Sarojini naturally, did not agree with this. She maintained "that the majority of Congress were innocent lambs, who had no subversive intentions; and as far as she herself was concerned" says Nichols, "she may be quite right. We will not go into all that. It is more interesting to consider

<sup>35</sup> *Verdict on India, op. cit.*, p. 150.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

her merely as a cultured charming woman, swept into gaol as the results of her convictions."<sup>37</sup>

Nichols goes on to relate how Sarojini had sensed and predicted the arrests on August 7, and on being asked why she felt this prognosis, she had replied: "Because the British always get in a panic if we even begin to blow our noses." Sarojini's hunch had been so strong during the night that she got up and had a cold bath and began to pack. Sure enough at 4 a.m. the bell rang and "there they were." When they saw me all dressed up and waiting for them, they looked so astonished that I couldn't help laughing. "But Madame," they cried, "how did you know? We were only told an hour ago." "Just a hunch" she answered and they had to believe her because there was no way in which she could have received the information. The house had been guarded all night and the telephone wires cut. This report does not tally, with the one earlier mentioned that Sarojini had no time to pack her clothes when she was taken away to prison.

Sarojini was the only one dressed properly at the station. Some of the others were "disgruntled" as they had been taken aback. Gandhiji had been saying his prayers and Sarojini commented: "I must say that the police were very courteous and stayed outside till he finished. . . . But I don't think Patel had been saying *his* prayers and judging by the expression on the faces of some of the others, they hadn't been saying them either."<sup>38</sup>

Forty leaders had been arrested and the C.I.D. Inspector came to Sarojini Naidu and said he hoped there would be no trouble. She replied "So do I."

"Will you sit with Mr. Gandhi?" he asked, "In the train and keep him quiet?" "I *had* to laugh again." She was honoured to sit with Gandhiji, but there would have been no need "to keep him quiet." He certainly wouldn't try to jump out of the window or pull the communication cord or anything like that. And of course, Gandhiji was as quiet as a mouse. He wasn't even angry, all he kept on saying was, 'But it's so *silly*, so very *silly* . . . just when I was about to negotiate with the Viceroy'."<sup>39</sup>

Sarojini wondered where their destination would be. She hoped

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>38</sup> *Verdict on India, op. cit.*, p. 152.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

it would be the same prison she had been in ten years earlier “and where she’d planted 108 trees, or 109?” But instead it was the “So-called Aga Khan Palace.”

Nichols asked “Why so-called?”

“Well, you know, it’s not really so much of a palace, not when you think of the Aga Khan. Another nut? Or one of these things with cherries?”

“No thank you.”

Sarojini said she was quite comfortable in prison. “The rooms were pleasant and the food was good, and the British were most polite. But . . . and here a dangerous gleam came into her eyes. . . . ‘What they didn’t seem to realize was that we would far rather have starved on a rubbish heap, in freedom, than have been kept inside in luxury. We were utterly isolated, but *utterly*. Not a fly came in from outside. We saw nobody but the Doctor, and he always looked at us in a sort of terror as though he thought we were going to be tactless enough to die or fade away or do something generally embarrassing. And for three weeks we had not a scrap of news. All the papers were banned, and there was no radio, even our families had no idea where we’d been taken. We were guarded like precious jewels in a casket . . . are you sure you won’t have another cup of tea?’

‘No thank you.’

‘It’s cold and it’s black, but it *is* tea. Still, if you insist. Where was I?’

‘Being guarded like a jewel in a casket.’

‘So I was. Well. . . .’<sup>40</sup>

Nichols felt that the description of prison life was monotonous even “when it centres round so sparkling a personality as Mrs. Naidu.”

Sarojini described Gandhiji’s famous fast in February 1943 to Nichols and the unkind remarks made about it, such as “Black mail” “masochism.” It was no “fake.” Sarojini said that to all appearances Gandhiji had died on the 7th day when his pulse had stopped. “It was as though a light had gone out of the world.” She could not explain how he came back. It must have been a “supreme effort of will.”

Renuka Ray visited the Golden Threshold in the same year as

<sup>40</sup> *Verdict on India, op. cit.*, p. 153.

Nichols, and had a sumptuous meal with the Naidus. The house was full of cats, she told me, and beautifully decorated with flowers. The garden also was very lovely and a riot of colour. Sarojini's great passion was flowers and a whole section of *The Bird of Time* is devoted to springtime and flowers. She delights at the "old earth" breaking "into passionate bloom."

"The bright pomegranate buds unfold,  
The frail wild lilies appear,  
Like the blood-red jewels you used to fling  
O'er the maidens that danced at the feast of spring  
To welcome the new-born year."

Sarojini's flowers, *Gulmohurs*—"rich red of wild bird's wing," *Nasturtiums*, "exquisite and luminous," *Golden Cassia*, "golden lamps for a fairy shrine, golden pitchers for fairy wine," *Champak Blossoms*, "Amber and ivory petals" and "petals of carven jade," all these intoxicated Sarojini; and in her garden she found her shelter from the overwhelming responsibilities of the outside world.

### 10 *In Lighter Vein*

Sarojini Naidu's visits to Bengal were frequent during the years 1944 to 1947 partly because she had to visit her doctor, B. C. Roy. A great deal of her time from 1937 was also spent in Delhi where she moved freely with the leaders and became a frequent and welcome guest in the homes of many politicians and industrialists. At parties, she was the focal point among Indians as well as foreigners. In 1946, Amarnath Jha went to see Sarojini at Shankar Lal's house and attended a party given by B. K. Nehru, where he was not surprised to see Englishmen crowding round her. In the summer of 1946, Sarojini was in a very jovial mood when Mr. Jha again called on her and talked for two hours. She discussed Wavell, Jinnah, Dennis Stoll, E. M. Forster, Hermann Ould and Gawsworth. She gave a copy of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad's *Ghubar-i-Khatir* to Jha and commented on Azad's wide

reading. She also gave him a copy of Pattabhi Sitaramayya's *Feathers and Stones*. On June 30, she attended a *Mushaira*. During this visit she told the story of a Pathan who met her in a shop. The man from the North West Frontier, an old acquaintance, saw Sarojini while shopping and asked her if she was Sarojini Naidu. On being assured that he was correct in his supposition, the Pathan cried: "*Hai, Gayi jawani* (Alas, youth is gone)." The Pathan had last seen Sarojini twenty-five years earlier. Sarojini commented: "That was the frank and uninhibited Pathan. A man from the United Provinces might have felt similarly, but he would never have blurted it out in a shop."

In 1946, Sarojini wished to stay with her old friend Mrs. S. C. Mukherjee. She had come to Calcutta in connection with the Hindu Code Bill. There was to be a large meeting at the Indian Association Hall, and Sarojini was to preside and move a resolution in favour of having the Bill enacted. At the meeting there were many orthodox ladies who objected to the Bill and created a constant disturbance. Sarojini was determined to control the meeting. She began to scold the orthodox section and succeeded in quietening them. She then said that the Agenda must be followed after dead silence was reached, and asked her friend, Renuka Ray to speak. Mrs. Ray was then able to explain the many sections of the Bill and show the reactionary audience the great need for its speedy enactment.

In 1946, Renuka Ray was with Mahatma Gandhi in Noakhali. She was to go to a village, crossing a river near Chandpur. On the way, the jeep in which Renuka travelled fell into a ditch. It was fortunate that the water in the river softened the fall. The police were most helpful in rescuing her, for she was unconscious and her companion, Mrs. S. K. De, ran to the nearest Moslem village for help. The Moslems gave immediate help and picked up Mrs. Ray and the others who were hurt and carried them to Chandpur Ghat. She was finally brought home to Calcutta. She was ill for some time and had to lie upstairs in her room, unable to come down. At this time, Mrs. S. C. Mukherjee, Mrs. Ray's mother, received a telegram from Sarojini Naidu that she would be coming to Calcutta and wished to stay with her. Mrs. Mukherjee's house was under repair, and she put Sarojini up in Mrs. Ray's house. Due to the fact that Sarojini too was ill, she could

not go upstairs and had to stay in a room downstairs. Here she was commanded by Dr. B. C. Roy to be as quiet as possible, to eat only light invalid food and not to receive any visitors. Sarojini meekly listened to all these orders, but the moment the doctor was out of sight she forgot them. Her room, for one thing, was full of the young friends of Rathi, Renuka's son, with whom she would endlessly crack her jokes. She loved these boys and said that the company of the young kept her young herself. "Life must be worth living," she would exclaim, "and the young sustain me."

Dr. B. C. Roy's diet chart was also conveniently ignored. Sarojini particularly loved Bengali food, and nothing would stop her indulging this taste. Whenever Mr. S. N. Ray, Renuka's husband, came home he brought chocolates or chicken patties for his sick wife upstairs. Sarojini would call him and ask: "What have you brought in those parcels?"

"Chocolates and chicken patties" Satyen would reply, and Sarojini would ask him to leave a few with her.

"But Dr. Roy has asked you to have light food," Mr. Ray would protest. Nothing daunted, Sarojini would happily go through the patties and chocolates and possibly feel all the better for it! To be an invalid, to be restricted to an insipid diet, was something alien to Sarojini's nature.

Good food, good cheer and good friends were her standby, despite bad health. No namby-pamby snivelling pain and sorrow here! Her life would not be "purposeless," she would not fear the "hour of bitter suffering," and in majestic splendour, eating, joking, rejoicing in the gleam of ornaments and silks, Sarojini lived.

In 1946 she came again to stay with her friends the Mukherjees, when they had moved to Roland Road, and again she was ill and Dr. Roy would come to visit her, restricting her to a strict diet. But Sarojini would call for *kababs* and curries and enjoy these. When she heard Dr. Roy's booming voice approaching she would hurriedly ask for the dishes before her to be removed and remark "Megaphone is coming—there's the Dictator—quick, take these things away!" It was such school-girl behaviour which keeps Sarojini's memory fresh and sparkling in the minds of her friends. Her name for Dr. Roy, whom she regarded as her own brother, was often "Megaphone" because of his booming voice.

Renuka and Satyen Ray have many anecdotes to relate about

Sarojini. Once, Sarojini was staying in the Taj Mahal Hotel in Bombay—she usually had a room booked for her there. She was in her room when two university students from Ahmedabad sent in their cards and were shown in.

“Who are you? What do you want? You’ve come all the way from Ahmedabad to do what?”

“We wanted to see the sights of Bombay, Madam,” was the timid reply.

“Do you think I am one of the sights of Bombay?” asked the great lady, and so nervous were her visitors that they exclaimed without thinking, “Yes, Madam, you are.”

Once, there was a dinner at the Volga in honour of Sarojini, and it was arranged upstairs. Due to Sarojini’s poor health she found it difficult to climb up. Immediately a number of guests hurried to her aid and she cried “So many come to help an old woman!”

Sarojini Naidu also enjoyed a great friendship with her other Doctor, S. K. Sen (Budda). He has some stories to relate. He once went to a dance recital at Delhi and had to leave in a hurry during the intermission. In his haste, he stumbled on the foot of a portly, elderly lady. She bellowed at him: “Clumsy fool—and don’t leave your scarf on my lap.” Dr. Sen apologised and beat a hasty retreat. That same evening, he went to a dinner party which happened to be in Sarojini’s honour. He says: “She pulled my leg and told everyone of my clumsy escape from an exhibition of poor dancing on the proverbial doctor’s excuse and she condescended to say, ‘And now you have acquired another free patient on your list.’”

Dr. Sen remarks that “Sarojini Naidu was the most outstanding woman in the galaxy of leaders assembled at Simla. Her quick wit and brilliant repartee invariably produced a lighter vein in the strained atmosphere of long discussions.” Dr. Sen was charmed because Sarojini “had the amazing ability to fit into any age group. Her caustic wit could be irascible and devastating and she had everyone in fits of laughter with the uninhibited mimicry of personages, important and self-important.” Inordinately fond of good food, she never hesitated in asking him or other friends to take her out for a second meal after some formal dinner which she described as “terrible.” When Independence was declared and

various potentates took their places as hosts at banquets it was "the age old custom of being served by magnificently liveried footmen in white gloves, a most incongruous picture with the host in simple white khadi and slippers and the meal served in frugal vegetarian Gandhian style." Once, says Dr. Sen, "Sarojini was served, with great *éclat*, a plate of rice and vegetables with dal and curds. She knew my hobby of cooking and how happy I am to have an appreciative guest. She rang me up: 'Are you free? Good. I am coming over. I am starving!' She arrived in a few minutes in a magnificent car, complaining vociferously: 'I have just been subjected to a grass meal'."

Could any Indian politician have been happier and gayer and yet so serious and sincere? It was no wonder that she was described as the "licensed jester of the Mahatma's little court." Neither would she have resented this description, for no one knew better than she that her "jests" did not lack dignity.



PART SIX

*The Poignant Hour*

“Death stroked my hair and whispered tenderly:  
‘Poor child, shall I redeem thee from thy pain,  
Renew the joy and issue thee again  
Inclosed in some renascent ecstasy . . . .  
Some liltng bird or lotus-loving bee,  
Or the diaphanous silver of the rain,  
Th’ alluring scent of the Sirisha-plain,  
The wild wind’s voice, the white wave’s melody?’

I said, ‘Thy gentle pity shames mine ear,  
O Death, am I so purposeless a thing,  
Shall my soul falter or my body fear  
Its poignant hour of bitter suffering,  
Or fail ere I achieve my destined deed  
Of song or service for my country’s need?’ ”

DEATH AND LIFE

From: *The Bird of Time*



## I *Asian Relations Conference*

Sarojini Naidu was at the peak of her career in March 1947, when she presided over the Asian Relations Conference. Once before, when she was President of the Indian National Conference in 1925, she reached perhaps a higher peak, for she was the first Indian woman to have been recognised as great enough to be the head of the Congress; but now she was the chosen leader for Asia, not only India. Though India convened the Asian Relations Conference, a non-political and unofficial gathering to review the post-war condition of Asia, the idea had occurred to many Asian countries—to form a common platform where the many problems facing the East could be discussed.

The burning question of the day was the need to terminate foreign rule in Asian countries. As this depended so much on economic development, ways and means had to be thought out to make Asian countries compete in the foreign market and raise their own standards of living. The real aim of the Conference was to create a definite "Asia sentiment" and a desire among the Asians to take part in world affairs. Pandit Nehru was one of the first to realise the necessity for, not only India, but the whole of Asia to unite in a combined effort. He interviewed Mr. B. Shiva Rao, Correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian* and *The Hindu* and stressed the need for an Asian Conference. The same idea was expressed to him by General Aung San when Panditji went on a tour of South East Asian countries in March 1946, and the Indian Council of World Affairs felt it could undertake such a venture. Despite its being a young organisation, it had already a number of members, and had established a Quarterly journal and sent out five delegates to the Conference of the Institute of Pacific Relations at Hot Springs in 1945. The Conference, therefore, was held under its auspices.

At an informal meeting in April 1946, it was decided to study the many problems in Round Table groups under the subject headings of National Movements for Freedom, Migration, Racial Pro-

blems, Economic Developments and Social Services, Cultural Problems, and Women's Problems. All Asian countries and Egypt were to be invited. Australia, New Zealand, Britain, the U.S.A., and the Soviet Union were to be included as observers. Preliminary meetings were held in 1946 and Pandit Nehru was made Chairman of an Organising Committee of 69 members, with a small working committee. Pandit Nehru, with his one-world outlook, had set his heart on the conference. A meeting of the Steering Committee was held on March 23, 1947 at 11 a.m. in the annexe to the Constitution House Lounge. Sarojini Naidu presided. The opening Plenary Session took place at 5 p.m. the same day at Purana Qila (Old Fort) in a large pandal. The pandal was fan-shaped, 300 ft. by 400 ft. in area. The rostrum was in the centre and was 100 ft. long. A great gathering of delegates was present and over 10,000 guests filled the pandal, consisting of foreign diplomatic officials and visitors. At the back of the dais a picturesque background displayed a large map of Asia and flags of all the Asian countries. The map showed the capitals, population, air routes, natural resources, flags and coats of arms of the various Asian nations. As President of the Conference, Sarojini was also the leader of the Indian delegation.

Before the procession started, all the delegates gathered in a Shamiana outside and formed the procession in alphabetical order, countrywise. In front marched the royal figure of Sarojini together with Sir Shri Ram, Chairman of the Reception Committee. On mounting the dais, Sarojini took her chair, and called on Pandit Nehru to ascend the dais and "give his support." The names of the delegates were then called out and representatives of the various countries ascended the platform. Sir Shri Ram then welcomed the delegates and ended his speech by saying: "It would have been appropriate if someone better qualified than I, chosen from among the many distinguished countrymen of mine present here, eminent in arts, science and letters, had been asked to occupy my place here today, but Mrs. Naidu, whose command I cannot disobey, was insistent that I should take this place, and while her decision will not have benefited the Conference, it has certainly benefited me in that it has given me the pleasant and enviable privilege of welcoming such a distinguished gathering to my country and to my city."

Pandit Nehru next inaugurated the Conference, speaking first in Hindustani and then in English. He said India had no designs against anyone except the great design of promoting peace all over the world. "We propose to stand on our own feet and co-operate with all others prepared to co-operate with us." His address was illuminating and inspiring. There was a tremendous ovation after which Sarojini gave her Presidential address. She rose amidst continuous cheers and hailed the audience as "Comrades and kindred of Asia."

As usual she wondered why a mere woman had been chosen to occupy such an honoured place; but came to the conclusion that this was because "India has always honoured women." She continued: "I am so deeply moved when I behold this marvellous gathering of the nations of Asia, that almost, but only almost, I am stricken dumb. It takes so much to strike a woman dumb (Laughter). My brother and leader and the hero of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, has said all that could be said, and said it beautifully. I can only paraphrase and re-echo in my own poor manner the great thoughts that he has put into words in welcoming you today."

She went on in a few poetic words to aptly describe the modern three ways of travel. "I wonder how many of you who have come journeying across steep mountain passes, floating on the vast bosom of many-coloured seas, riding amid the clouds of dawn and darkness realise that we stand today, here and now, not only in the heart of Asia, but the very core and centre of India's heart." A poetic and historic description of Purana Qila followed. "History is in every stone, history sleeps hidden but living in every acre, in every patch of the soil of Hindustan. Kings have walked here, warriors have walked here, where little children are playing today. But today, because it is not the time for children's play, we have summoned you to a great gathering of the nations of Asia to make a great declaration for the future of Asia. We may leave our own movements of freedom, but we have come here to take an indestructible pledge of the unity of Asia so that the world in ruin could be redeemed from sorrow, unhappiness, exploitation, misery, poverty, ignorance, disaster and death."

Asia had been dubbed cruel, barbarous, but it beckoned everyone to come "and partake of the common ideal of peace—not the

peace of negation, not the peace of surrender, not the peace of the coward, not the peace of the dying, not the peace of the dead, but the peace, militant, dynamic, creative, of the human spirit which exalts. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru has told us of the human spirit being but a demonstration of the renaissance of the spirit of Asia. Has human spirit ever died? Human spirit may sometimes be defeated, but it can never die."

All the countries in Asia, small and big were alive today. After being buried for centuries and forgetting the great past, they had awakened again to the springtime. "Is there any man so dead, so deeply buried in the tomb, that his heart does not beat to the calls of the birds of springtime? . . . What will Asia do with her renaissance?" Sarojini summed up the future programmes of Asia's coming free countries. They would not go to battle or exploit other countries. "My great and beloved leader Mahatma Gandhi, has taught us that not through bitterness, but through compassion, love and forgiveness, shall the world be redeemed. And this is not a new message. It is an old message of Asia reinforced by the experience, adventure, suffering and hope of the Indian people. By love and not by hate shall the world be redeemed." And therefore, India had called the Asian nations together. There was no idea of forming an Asian bloc against Europe. "Diversity of culture" and "unity of heart and pursuit was needed." India was a civilisation of many units . . . many civilisations had united to make up Indian life and culture. Therefore India had a right to invite the other nations.

Sarojini bid the delegates welcome to "My mother's Home. I bid you welcome so that once more you may remember your ancient greatness and so that you and we together may dream a common dream of our Asia and how one Asia can redeem the world. Asia shall not be a country of enemies—Asia shall be a country of fellowship of the world."

Asia was "at the first spring time of the world; when the birds sing, when the waters smile at the sight of the sun, when flowers blossom and young brides put flowers on their hair, and children make garlands of them, and when you remember all those who have gone before. I bid you, arise from your grave; I bid you, become the bard of eternal springtime; I bid you, arise and say, 'there is no death,' there shall be no death for those who move

onward, united in a spirit of indefeatable hope and courage. . . . It is part of my creed and tradition, part of my heritage to believe that nothing can die that is good. When my father, who was one of the great men of the world, was about to die, his last words were, 'there is no birth, there is no death, there is only the spirit seeking evolution in higher and higher stages of life.' That is the history of India, that is the history of Asia. And I bid you, whatever your creed, whatever your faith, whatever your tongue, remember there is no birth, there is no death, we move onward and onward, higher and higher till we attain the stars. Let us move on to the stars. Who will forbid us and say 'halt, thus far and no further?' . . . We do not cry for the moon. We pluck it from the skies and wear it upon the diadem of Asia's freedom." Sarojini saw before her the great unity in peace of the hitherto sleeping nations of Asia awake once more and outshining their ancient glory.

## 2 *The Asian Scene*

Sarojini Naidu's Presidential speech was widely praised. Its pure English eloquence astonished the delegates and visitors. To quote but one observer, Sarojini Naidu's speech "was a stupendous feat of rhetoric." She spoke with no notes and never faltered. "The stream of flawless English flowed on."<sup>1</sup>

After her speech, the President called upon the representative of China to speak. He said: "On behalf of the Chinese delegation I should like to express my thanks for the warm welcome extended to us by the distinguished chairman of the meeting who is the leader of the Indian delegation. Mrs. Naidu is well-known to us as one who combines the best of Asian and Western cultures. In this she typifies the genius of the Indian people who have the eminent gift of harmonising various elements from many civilisations into one whole. . . ."

The opening session adjourned to meet the next day, March 24, at 5 p.m., when Sarojini was again in the chair. Before the speeches

<sup>1</sup> *In the Path of Mahatma Gandhi*, by George Catlin, Macdonald and Co. (Publishers) Ltd., London, 1948, p. 264.

began, she introduced the leader of the Egyptian Feminist Union who read a message from Madam Sharani Pasha. Messages from all Asian nations were also read. Major General Bijoya Shumshere Jung Bahadur Rana of Nepal, in the course of his speech remarked: "Whatever I may say of our President, the nightingale of India, the mellifluous Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, will be too little adequate to express what we feel and what she has accomplished. None of us who heard her moving address last evening can ever forget her appeal for unity, goodwill and understanding among all Asian people. I am sure I voice the feelings of all when I express our heartfelt gratitude for her untiring exertions in this most noble cause. She has been so hospitable to us, and has anticipated our wants so well, that we give her our respect and affection as to a mother, or as she likes to call herself, a grand mother."

The Conference at the end of the opening broke up into Round Table groups and group Plenary Sessions.

Group discussions took place for three days and closed on March 27, 1947 and on March 28, a reception was given by Lord and Lady Mountbatten at the Viceroy's house at 6 in the evening. The function was like another Thousand And One Nights, with the brilliant costumes, the fountains and the flowers. The British flag still flew and the British National anthem brought the reception to a close. Pandit Nehru also gave a reception at 9-30 the same night at his residence.

Mahatma Gandhi attended the Conference on April 1, 1947. Lord Mountbatten who had just become Viceroy had invited Gandhiji to Delhi and he had arrived on March 30 from Patna. Sarojini was ill at the time, and spent most of the time, when she was not on the platform, in bed. She held court in her bedroom, however, and was always surrounded by friends. On March 31, Mahatma Gandhi, with Sardar Patel, called on her at the residence of Shankar Lal where she was staying.

Mahatma Gandhi was able to attend the two concluding sessions of the Asian Relations Conference. When he entered the packed pandal with Pandit Nehru and Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the audience rose in a wave of enthusiasm. There was a great ovation as Sarojini called on the Mahatma to speak, during the course of which he said that the conference marked "a great event for all of us who belong to Asia." He pointed out that all the

important religions had originated in Asia and that this great continent could conquer the world with truth and love. Delhi, he warned, was not India, which really existed in its villages. The leader of the Chinese delegation called Mahatma Gandhi the spiritual leader of India, the light of Asia and a great man of the world.

The closing Public Plenary Session took place on April 2, at 6 p.m. Sarojini Naidu was in the chair again and the pandal was packed with about 20,000 visitors. It was a fitting finale to the great ten-day meeting and Mahatma Gandhi's presence and that of Dr. Shariar of Indonesia enhanced the assembly. Great hope was felt for Asia. The President welcomed three more delegates who had arrived late, and Dr. Shariar expressed his wish for "One Asia." At the end, Mr. George de Silva of Ceylon presented on behalf of the Conference, silver salvers to the President, Sarojini Naidu and Pandit Nehru, after which Dr. Appadorai of the Indian Council of World Affairs gave his vote of thanks. The Conference concluded with two speeches. One from Pandit Nehru and the other from Sarojini Naidu. After thanking various people Sarojini Naidu started her brilliant closing address.

She remarked about the foundation stone having been "well and truly laid, the stone of the great edifice which is to be the common sanctuary of all Asian people." There was an urgent need for Asian countries to form a brotherhood, and this desire could be felt among those who had gathered at the Conference, the "urge for understanding, friendship, co-operation and a free and united Asia." Her cherished dream of a united Asia and even further, a united world was within sight. "Today," she cried, "after many years of dreaming, painfully, I find the beginnings of realisation. . . . In this heart of Delhi, in this heart of the old Hindu empire, we have founded today a new world brotherhood, not an empire which monopolises power for any one section or another but a federation of free peoples where every individual is equal to everyone else, where there will be no leaders and followers, but all brothers in the mighty task of regeneration." The ancient East had a lesson to teach the world . . . the lesson of peace and freedom. The heart of Asia was really indivisible and one. Mahatma Gandhi had declared his message to "love and forgive, love and create, love and be free." It was the message of India. Sarojini

pleaded with the delegates to take this message to their respective countries. Asia was poor, but the poverty of the spirit was more terrible. The tragedy of humiliation and bondage was more disastrous than the suffering of the flesh. She called on fellow Asians to arise and to remember the night of darkness was over. Together, they were to march forward towards the dawn.

After the speech, leaders of delegations speaking languages from Armenian to Chinese, approved of the Conference. It was decided to form a permanent organisation and the following resolution was passed, moved by a Chinese delegate:

“The members of the delegations from the Asian countries assembled in the first Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi, firmly believing that the peace of the world, to be real and enduring, must be linked up with the freedom and well-being of the peoples of Asia, are unanimously of the opinion that the contacts forged at this conference must be maintained and strengthened, and that the good work begun here must be continued, efficiently organised and actively developed. They accordingly resolve to establish an organisation to be called the Asian Relations Organisation with the following objects:

(a) to promote the study and the understanding of Asian problems and relations in their Asian and world aspects.

(b) to foster friendly relations and co-operation among the peoples of Asia and between them and the rest of the world, and

(c) to further the progress and well-being of the peoples of Asia.”

A provisional General Council to further this end was to function, and a President and two General Secretaries were to be appointed, one from the country where the Conference was held and one from the country where the next Conference was to be held.

The Asian Relations Organisation was to be composed of national units, one in each Asian country affiliated to the Organisation.

The next Conference was to be held in 1949 in China.

Pandit Nehru was unanimously elected President of the Provisional General Council and Sarojini Naidu a member.

### 3 *Eve of Independence*

The transfer of power from British hands to India was one of the greatest events in world history after the Second World War. The consistent non-violent struggle which India had put up for decades led to freedom without bloodshed and India's independence was the precursor to the freedom of other Asian nations. Perhaps, in the rapid crumbling of Imperialism and Colonialism, few realised that it was Mahatma Gandhi and his faithful comrades and leaders who really inaugurated the spreading of Independence from which the rest of Asia, and later Africa, benefited. Certain it was that Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent methods set Asia free, and Sarojini Naidu, a mere woman as she so often termed herself, was very much at the helm of the freedom movement.

At the time, when Mr. Attlee (created later a peer of the realm), invited Lord Mountbatten to be Viceroy of India and to succeed Lord Wavell in December 1946, India was in the grip of serious communal rioting and violence. Lord Mountbatten was sworn in on March 24, 1947; the Asian Relations Conference had already commenced a day earlier. Delhi was therefore in gala mood both politically and socially. In the Viceroy's garden, the red cannas and flaming gol mohur were in bloom. Delhi was not only the centre of international attention, but exhibited an air of buoyant expectancy. An English reporter says that at the inauguration ceremony of Lord Mountbatten, when he went to deposit his hat in the cloak-room, he found only one Ascot top hat, hanging in the midst of other nondescript headwar—"a memory of past pomp." In the great hall Pandit Nehru sat on one side of Lord and Lady Mountbatten and Liaquat Ali Khan on the other. Lord Mountbatten had told Pandit Nehru: "I want you to regard me not as the last Viceroy winding up the British Raj, but as the first to lead the way to the new India." Nehru had been intensely moved, and had answered: "Now I know what they mean when they speak of your charm being so dangerous."<sup>2</sup>

In July 1947, Alan Campbell-Johnson, author of *Mission with Mountbatten*, went to visit Mahatma Gandhi's Bhangi colony.

<sup>2</sup> *Mission with Mountbatten*, by Alan Campbell Johnson, Robert Hale Ltd., London, 1951, p. 45.

Asceticism had its administrative problems and Mr. Campbell-Johnson says: "The famous Mrs. Sarojini Naidu was once moved to exclaim about the Bhangi Colony: 'If only Babu knew the cost of setting him up in poverty.' But the poverty was real enough. The Colony stands on the verge of wasteland and encircles Delhi, and is set against a background of barren boulders and dusty earth."<sup>3</sup>

Earlier, on May 30, 1947, Sarojini, who had stayed on in Delhi after the Asian Relations Conference, went to visit Mahatma Gandhi at noon. He was having his customary midday drink of hot water, lemon and honey, and she twitted him in her usual manner: "What, hot lemonade in hot weather! Let me make you a nice, cool, refreshing lemon-drink." But Gandhiji persuaded Sarojini to taste his concoction instead, and Sarojini remarked that it was not so bad after all! Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru arrived soon after and Sarojini Naidu ordered hot lime juice for him also, and Gandhiji set the whole company laughing by demanding royalties for the exploitation of his patent. Sarojini's reply was immediate: "Give me first my fee for acting as your advertising agent—have I not secured the patronage of India's future Prime Minister?"

Sarojini Naidu was perhaps the one human being who really understood Mahatma Gandhi's great unhappiness at the decision to divide India. Gandhiji had put forward a plan to Lord Mountbatten in April, 1947 but it was not accepted. Gandhiji wished to represent no one but himself. He wrote to Lord Mountbatten: "And if you ever need my service on its merits it will be always at your disposal."

Alone, he left for Patna, it was almost as if the Viceroy, the Working Committee, and the Moslem League, though differing from each other, had no use for Gandhiji, "With her motherly instinct Sarojini Naidu described the poignant pathos of the situation, his utter spiritual loneliness, the wide gulf that separated him from his friends and opponents alike, and which at three score and eight was sending him once again to plough his lonely furrows in Bihar, that land of devastated villages and ruptured human relationships, where over a quarter of a century ago he had made his *début* in Indian politics and launched upon a career which in the

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

course of a single generation had changed the face of the country under his very eyes.”<sup>4</sup> Sarojini wrote:

Beloved Pilgrim,

You are, I learn, setting out once more on your chosen *Via Dolorosa* in Bihar.

The way of sorrow for you may indeed be the way of hope and solace for many millions of suffering human hearts. Blessed be your pilgrimage.

I am still incredibly weary or I should have attempted to reach the Harijan Colony to bid you farewell.

But even though I do not see you, you know that my love is always with you—and my faith.

Your Ammajan  
Sarojini.

Mahatma Gandhi himself did not lose faith, either in his own mission or in humanity for he told Rajkumari Amrit Kaur a few months before Independence: “You must not lose faith in humanity. Humanity is an ocean. If a few drops of the ocean are dirty, the ocean does not become dirty.”

About a month before Independence, in July, 1947, Sarojini’s old friend Amarnath Jha visited her in Delhi. At a lunch party arranged by him, Sarojini asked him to have “pilau and ice-cream” on the menu. Pleasure and the enjoyment of life never deserted Sarojini even in the midst of the most serious situations.

At last, the Eve of Independence dawned. Sarojini was to be Governor of the United Provinces or Uttar Pradesh, as the State was renamed. Sir Francis Wylie, the last British Governor of the U.P. wrote to the Governor-designate: “I am waiting to hand over. When are you arriving?”

She replied in her inevitable bantering style: “I shall come with a note book and pencil to learn the art of administration from you.”<sup>5</sup>

The Governorship of the U.P. had first been intended for Dr. B. C. Roy. If he had accepted, as he was intended to have done, Sarojini Naidu, after spending all her life in the struggle for freedom, would scarcely have had a place in the new Government; but like Mahatma Gandhi she was above a place, just as, in 1937, she did not stand for election or seek a ministerial post. And

<sup>4</sup> *Mahatma Gandhi, the Last Phase, op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 85.

<sup>5</sup> *Sarojini to Giri*, by S. K. Rau, Saraya Publications, Lucknow, p. 1.

yet, one wonders—why was she not sent abroad as Ambassador after freedom was declared? When she had so successfully acted as unofficial Ambassador so often, would she not have been an admirable interpreter of the new India? But her destiny led her to the Governorship of the largest province in India.

In July 1947, Dr. B. C. Roy was in the U.S.A. when he received a telephone message from Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru asking him to accept the Governorship of the U.P. "I had no conception," revealed Dr. B. C. Roy, "what this meant under the new dispensation, but I felt sure that this was not my job. I told Pandit Nehru that I could, if there was any great urgency about it, accept the post for a period not exceeding five months, but, I could not return to India before September as my eye doctor wanted me to be there under observation till then."<sup>6</sup> Later Dr. Roy was informed that Sarojini Naidu had agreed to act for him, though his appointment had been gazetted.

Sarojini never really cared for being a figure-head, though her love for raising and practising the standards of good living was fully satisfied, for if ever a Governor made an art of living, it was Sarojini. She continued, however, to feel she was in prison—a caged bird.

On November 1, 1947, Dr. B. C. Roy returned to India. "I found," he remarked, "much to my joy that Mrs. Naidu was quite happy in her new position and performed her duties very well. On my way back to India I had definitely decided to resign from the post of Governor." He confided his decision to Pandit Nehru in Delhi and met Mahatma Gandhi that evening. The Mahatma greeted him saying: "Bidhan, now that you have resigned from the Governorship, I cannot call you 'Your Excellency' any more."

B. C. Roy replied: "Gandhiji, please do not worry about it, as I can give you a better alternative to call me by! I am Roy, therefore, I am Royal. Moreover, I am taller than many others. Therefore, you may in future address me as 'Your Royal Highness.' At this Gandhiji had a hearty laugh."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Dr. B. C. Roy*, by K. P. Thomas, West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee, 1955, pp. 221 and 222.

<sup>7</sup> *Dr. B. C. Roy*, *op. cit.*, pp. 221 and 222.

#### *4 First Woman Governor*

Sarojini was welcomed warmly by the people of Uttar Pradesh when she became Governor. She was a familiar figure in the Province and a frequent visitor. The schools and colleges had often seen and heard her in the company of their Vice-Chancellor, Amarnath Jha and were extremely fond of her. They felt honoured at possessing the first woman Governor of Independent India and were well aware of her brilliance, her abounding charm, her poetic talent and her distinguished career as a non-violent fighter for freedom. The press went into raptures over her appointment despite her casual and almost reluctant acceptance of the post.

The swearing-in ceremony at Government House on August 15, 1947, was unique. An order was issued that no western dress was to be worn, and a conglomeration of sartorial fashions were prominent at the function. There were a thousand guests. Pandits adorned in saffron robes, divines of all religions and other spectacular and nondescript guests welcomed their new Governor. Sarojini Naidu was sworn in to the accompaniment of recitations of Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, Christian, Moslem and Sikh scriptures. The oath of allegiance and office was administered in Hindi by the Chief Justice of the Allahabad High Court.

Sarojini Naidu's speech on August 15 stressed the note of freedom in a lyrical outpouring: "Oh, world of free nations, on this day of our freedom we pray for your freedom in the future. Ours has been an epic struggle, covering many years and costing many lives. It has been a struggle, a dramatic struggle. It has been a struggle of heroes chiefly anonymous in their millions. It has been a struggle of women transformed into strength they worship. It has been a struggle of youth suddenly transformed into power itself and sacrifice and ideals. It has been a struggle of young men and old men, of rich and poor, the literate and the illiterate, the stricken, the outcast, the leper and the saint.

"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 of living seas, whose doors are always open to you. Do you seek shelter or succour, do you seek love and understanding, come to

us. Come to us in faith, come to us in hope, come to us believing that all gifts are ours to give. I give for the whole world the freedom of this India, that has never died in the past, that shall be indestructible in the future, and shall lead the world to ultimate peace.”

Sarojini Naidu, as Governor, realised that the resplendent glory which this position once held had now vanished. In fact, a great deal of the luxuries and grandeur of past Governors were curtailed. Sarojini was soon faced with the strictures made by Pandit Govind Vallabh Pant, Chief Minister of U.P. almost from her inception. He decided to do away with many of the amenities which Governors had hitherto enjoyed. A number of important officials were retrenched. Only one Secretary was allowed and even the *chaprasis* were reduced in number and their quarters given to members of the U.P. Government. But Sarojini, nothing daunted, sailed through her difficulties in the happiest of moods. “It was all song, joy and merriment. Her drawing room resembled a Nawabian durbar; poets, scholars, politicians, students, had free access to it. She regaled them with poems, anecdotes and jokes.”<sup>8</sup> For lack of servants, she is even at times said to have swept the floors; but she never lost her dignity. “A good Governor must be a good sweeper also!” she exclaimed. She never bothered with official routine, such as sending fortnightly reports to the Governor General; for bureaucratic traditions and formalities were anathema to her. Alan Campbell-Johnson, remarks that in September 1947, he came across a charming letter from “the famous Sarojini Naidu to Lady Mountbatten.” He continues: “Before the transfer of power there had been some speculation as to what position Mrs. Naidu, one of the great Congress personalities, would hold in the new regime. When the time came she was offered, and accepted, to the surprise of many, the Governorship of the U.P. The post was quickly to become one of tremendous importance, as on the ability of the U.P. Government to prevent the Punjab troubles spreading across its own borders largely depended the fate of the whole of Northern India.”<sup>9</sup> Sarojini Naidu wrote to “The Governor General’s lady from a mere Governor,” and expressed her admiration for Lady Mountbatten’s “untiring and infinitely fruitful spirit of com-

<sup>8</sup> *Sarojini to Giri, op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> *Mission with Mountbatten, op. cit.*, p. 194.

passionate and effective service.” She mentioned that she sent the Governor General a bracelet (Raksha Bandhan) which Hindu women, high or low sent to those men whom they honoured and trusted and relied on as friends. Rajput queens sent these on full moon nights, she said, to Moghul Emperors. She ended her letter by saying: “I don’t know how long I shall be in these provinces, but my one real gift has been having full scope and bearing real fruit. My gift of friendliness. Men and women who have not spoken to each other for years meet under my roof every day in a cordial manner after an initial moment of uncertainty . . . oh yes—the lions and the lambs lie down very pleasantly together in my green pastures. Each of us can only do our best, as Browning says: ‘There shall never be one lost good.’ What a comforting belief.”<sup>10</sup>

Sarojini Naidu proved herself to be one of the most outstanding Governors of the first days of Free India. The Governors of the British regime were said to have held supreme sway over their provinces. All at once, the same position had to be filled in free India with the same dignity but without the previous power of old. Sarojini was by far the most competent to fill this role, for added to her natural qualities, she possessed enough authority to demand unity, friendship and love amongst those who had otherwise no inclination to be on amiable terms. Truly did Sarojini bring the lions and the lambs to lie down together in the green pastures which she created.

### 5 *A Governor’s House*

In the Government Houses of Lucknow and Naini Tal during her short tenure of two years of Governorship, Sarojini kept continually on the move, entertaining, playing the gracious hostess to Indians and foreigners, opening institutions, presiding over functions, delivering speeches and holding her fascinating soirées. Wherever she went, she was adorned in gala dress, and her speeches resounded across the Kumaon Hills or the broad river-swept plains of the U.P. True, she complained that a wild bird had been

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

caged when she was first made Governor; but she whole-heartedly appreciated her duties which were arduous enough, but her prison days were over; here she was in her ivory tower again.

I remember meeting her and her husband Dr. Naidu and her eldest daughter Padmaja when they visited Calcutta one winter. It was the first time I had seen the quiet unassuming Doctor. A quiet dignified man, he sat by his wife in Raj Bhawan, happy to be with his brilliant partner again who was in the best of humours and sparkled with wit and laughter. Sarojini was one of the first new Governors of free India we had met, and she struck us as simple and kind, when compared to the pomp and power which had enveloped previous British Governors.

Sarojini's home in Lucknow was so beautifully kept that it is still spoken of as one of the best Governor's houses which Free India has ever known. One of her outstanding characteristics throughout her life and during her Governorship was the time she could spare for her friends. She never turned them away with that hateful adage of the great: "I have no time." She always kept some leisure hours apart when she could relax with those she loved. Mr. U. S. Ahmad of the Indian Police and an old friend of Sarojini's recalls his visit to her with his small daughter. He made no appointment, and visited her casually. Sarojini Naidu was trunk-calling the Prime Minister, Pandit Nehru, at the time and Mr. Ahmad encountered her in the passage. She immediately beckoned to him and his little daughter and insisted on his staying on. When she had finished her telephone conversation she took her visitors into the drawing room and played with the little girl. She also made it clear that at parties at the Government House Mr. Ahmad's little daughter would be welcome without being invited.

Indeed, those who were fortunate enough to meet Sarojini as Governor in her palatial home remember many intimate glimpses of her wonderful house and hospitality. Her beautiful table, full of splendid fare, fit for Roman banquets, her exquisitely furnished and ornamented rooms replete with rich textiles and arts and crafts, and above all her own gay, ornate appearance.

To be austere, to dress always in white or sombre colours, to live on meagre meals, was anathema to Sarojini, and she was among the few Indians to realise that the love for ornaments and gaily coloured clothes was a part of village life. It was wrong to

interpret the people of rural India as austere in dress and manner. They were forced to be modest and austere through economic distress and not because it pleased them. One had but to visit a village fair, Sarojini felt, or go to a Puja pandal to see women decked out in all the splendour they could afford. Gay-coloured saris, ornaments and flowers in the hair were flaunted, little girls intertwined their sleekly-oiled braids with green, red and yellow ribbons and mothers adorned themselves in purple and scarlet saris. The people were a free uninhibited race, only reduced to simplicity because of the dire poverty in which they were forced to live. Why then be shy of colours and ornaments?

As so many of her friends realised, "Sarojini had Indian art and culture ingrained in her." Personal ornaments and gay clothing were important for the poor if it was possible to buy them. Those who could not afford real gold, silver or precious stones wore garlands of beads, shells, flowers and even ordinary metal ornaments. Silver jewellery was always less expensive and therefore more popular. Heavy anklets, charms, ear-rings, necklaces, collars, armlets and bracelets were part and parcel of a village woman's make-up. When the family was in want the women sold these ornaments until their economic conditions, if fortune permitted, allowed them once again to rebuy their jewellery. Coloured clothes and gay patterns were also a traditional part of Indian culture. It was only in the West that grey and black and restrained use of ornaments prevailed, never in India. Though Sarojini was strictly Swadeshi in all she wore or purchased, as she was pledged to it, she never associated "drab white" as the only form of clothing Swadeshi could produce. Even when she went on Khadi campaigns, her Khaddar was often coloured and gay. Sushamma Sen says: "At a meeting of the A.I.W.C. I had on a lovely pair of sandals and carried a beautiful Santiniketan handbag with the Taj engraved on it. These at once caught Sarojini's eyes, and she made signs of approval with her 'talking eyes.' I ordered these for her, and years later, when I met her as the Governor of the U.P. she had preserved these and showed them to me. How artistically she had decorated the Raj Bhawan at Lucknow! She had fitted it up with the choicest of things from all parts of India. It was a joy to see her artistic taste and the interest she took even amongst her multifarious duties." One day Sushamma Sen, Sarojini Naidu, and a

Brahmo religious devotee, an admirer of Sarojini's, were passing a well-known jeweller's shop in Calcutta. Sarojini insisted on stopping and trying on a few ear-rings and eventually bought a pair. This shocked the poor missionary and he was silent for the rest of the journey. He felt that Sarojini had gone down in his estimation. Mrs. Sen explained to him that he should have a larger vision of life.

Social life in Government House was gay and happy and ringing with women's voices, for Sarojini kept open house for her friends. She held women's gatherings and receptions and parties in Raj Bhawan. She gave an immense purdah party once at Kanpur, reminiscent of the sumptuous gatherings in Hyderabad. There were about 200 invitees. Once, a meeting of the A.I.W.C. was taking place in a university building. Amarnath Jha was in his room upstairs, and on hearing the voices of women in the hall below raised in serious discussion, led by Sarojini, he came and looked down on them from the balcony. Immediately Sarojini looked up and saw her friend and exclaimed: "Now the Vice-Chancellor will address us." On hearing these bantering words, Mr. Jha took fright and disappeared into the seclusion of his room.

Sarojini's connection with the renowned family of Ramnanda Chatterjee had lasted over two generations, and she was fond of Kedar Chatterjee the Editor of the *Modern Review* and the illustrious son of Ramananda. His daughter Roma has related the following interesting experience to me "It was in the year 1948," she writes, "round about early November, that I found myself and my two sisters, visiting Lucknow for the first time. Before starting on our trip, we had called up Sm. Naidu's sister-in-law, Sm. Usha Chattopadhyaya—who was also planning to be in Lucknow at that time—and promised to look her up when we called there.

"Well, we arrived and put up at the local YWCA hostel. That same afternoon, just after lunch, I rang up Raj Bhavan in order to keep my promise. A deep voice answered in extremely polite Urdu, and wanted to know my business. I answered in very execrable Hindi and explained my reason for calling. And so went on the brief conversation, till I reached the point where I was giving my antecedents. Here, I was pulled up with a sudden jerk, as the deep voice barked at me in crisp, correct and most perfectly

pronounced English: 'Why don't you speak in English, you foolish child? And what do you mean by saying that you are here, and intend to visit Usha only, and at that, in my house?' It was Sarojini Naidu herself, the Governor of Uttar Pradesh, who was speaking to me! She told me later that she always answered the phone in the lunch siesta period, herself giving the Raj Bhawan staff a rest.

"The upshot of the conversation on the phone was that, at tea time, the same evening, a large American limousine, bearing the Raj Bhawan crest, arrived at the hostel, much impressing all the inmates, and we sailed off to our destination. Arriving, we were salaamed out of the car by a most impressive major-domo, who then proceeded to pass us on to a very dashing young A.D.C., and then, through a series of ante-rooms and a lovely salon, out into a wide-open balcony. Our hostess was there and received us with all the warmth and grace for which she was renowned. After greeting her, we went and sat down on chairs which had been arranged so that a very large number of people could sit, converse with each other, and yet be facing her. Tea was being served, and a multitude of eats, both sweet and savoury were being passed around.

"The balcony overlooked a beautiful sweep of lawn, and there were literally hundreds of giant yellow and golden dahlias—rather early I thought—nodding and dancing their heads in the breeze. After a most pleasant interlude of eating and contributing to the hum of conversation, I suddenly noticed a large Alsatian dog padding in from one end of the balcony. Sm. Naidu had had some knitting in her hands whilst chatting, and with much *éclat*, proceeded to point out to us that this was an intended garment for the animal! Whereupon one of the guests remarked that this accomplishment of our hostess did not seem to be generally known...thereby producing much laughter from all around. Naturally we were contributing to the noise when her well-known voice cut through, and fixing me with a penetrating glance, Sm. Naidu said: 'Well, cousin Kedar's daughter, I understand you have inherited your mother's famous talent. Why haven't I heard you sing before? SING!!!'

"What was I to do but comply with her request? But my habit is to have the words of a song in print before me, as I can never

remember them. That evening I started off quite well till I reached the end of a verse. Then I could not remember the next line and looked agonisingly at my sister Ishita, who despite a phenomenal memory, failed me. I stopped, started again and again came to a stop. 'I'm so terribly sorry, I cried, but what can I do? Tagore uses words which I can never remember, you know, and I have no book with me.' The reply came with a rich chuckle: 'Well, well! many things have happened to me in my life, but this I must say has never occurred before. You are a very naughty girl...never mind, I'll hear you sing again soon, I'm sure, one of these days.'

"And then, with characteristic tact, she took a look around, picked out her sister, Sm. Gunu Chattopadhyaya who was also there at the time, and sent us off on a tour of the house. What an evening!

"The pity of it was that I never did get that other chance to sing before her—a song intact with words and melody."

Such memories of friends who met and experienced the hospitality and kindness of Sarojini Naidu in the resplendent days when she was Governor of Uttar Pradesh are innumerable.

Though Sarojini was gravely concerned about Hindu-Moslem unity and worked all her life to bring about peace between the two communities, she also seemed to have regarded the Christian community as an integral part of India. Along with other Congress leaders, she cherished her Christian friends. In 1922, at the memorial service on the death of Pandita Ramabai, Sarojini declared her as "the greatest Christian saint among the Hindus." She attended Christian services at times and on August 15, 1948, the first anniversary of Independence, Sarojini Naidu attended the evening service in Christ Church, Lucknow. "Though there were several State functions on that day," says Mr. A. J. Appaswamy who was preaching on that occasion, "She made time to come to the service."<sup>11</sup> Later, Mr. Appaswamy visited Government House and had a long chat with the Governor. "She was sitting on a sofa in one of the beautifully furnished parlours in the Government House, Lucknow. It was a morning hour, and she was quite busy. Her private Secretary came

<sup>11</sup> *The Christian Task in Independent India* by A. J. Appaswamy, London, S.P.C.K., 1951, pp. 14 to 16.

in every now and then to get her instructions. Visitors also arrived. I noticed that she was autographing her volume of poems entitled *The Sceptred Flute* . . . to make conversation she asked what true greatness was, and she began defining it. The true greatness of man did not consist in the multitude of people whom he swayed by the magnetic power of his personality. If it had been so, Hitler would have been a truly great man for there were millions of people who were willing to do his bidding. But true greatness consisted in absolute selflessness. Among people she knew there were only two whom she would be inclined to call truly great—her own father and Gandhi. . . . Her own special mission in life, she seemed to suggest, was to help in establishing communal unity. Mahatma Gandhi had urged her to accept her appointment as Governor of the United Provinces, as he was sure she would be able to help in bringing about communal peace and love. As a result of the partition of India, streams of refugees from the Punjab had poured into the neighbouring United Provinces and her hands had been quite full trying to serve them to settle down to a useful way of life.”

## *6 Public Duties*

Despite approaching the administrative duties of her Governorship in an unconventional manner, Sarojini Naidu immediately plunged into the spirit of her public responsibilities, and is even today praised by the people of Uttar Pradesh as an outstanding diplomat and administrator. She delighted everyone with her wit and humour and yet she was in her naive simple manner, cleverer perhaps than many a hardened statesman, for she always approached every problem from the human angle, with understanding, but with organised discipline.

At the U.P. Legislative Assembly she made history by delivering a brilliant extempore address; much to the surprise of her audience, who wondered how she remembered her facts and figures. It was, however, more a “political thesis” than a “policy statement from the head of a province.” As with many of her speeches, the listeners felt there was little to discuss or debate. “A Niagara of

words flowed when she spoke, full of wit, humour, sarcasm and satire." Due to the fact that she never read her speeches, they were seldom correctly recorded and Sarojini often complained of the manner in which her words were mangled and distorted by the Press, which could never cope very well with her rapid flow of words, except to dish out scrappy and inadequate summaries. Her speeches in the capacity of Governor were mostly delivered in English but at times she was forced to speak in Hindustani. At a police parade she began in Hindi but switched to English by saying: "You have heard me speak ungrammatical Hindustani and now let me speak grammatical English." She continued by giving a wonderful exposition of the role of the police in a democratic country. She concluded a speech made at an Annual Police Parade with the beautiful Urdu words: *Mah Nahariat Hun ke duniya kya se kya hegaigi*.<sup>12</sup>

On October 2, 1947, Sarojini made a memorable radio speech as Governor of the U.P. on the occasion of Mahatma Gandhi's 78th birthday. "Let the whole world honour this man," she cried. "It was on the eve of the last Great War (1914), that we heard the rumour that a strange man was coming to England from South Africa. There was great interest in his coming. It was said that he had enunciated a strange gospel, alien to the ancient world. His name was Gandhi." She went on to relate her first historic meeting with him which started such a lasting friendship.

She remarked that great men have existed through the ages, "Today, there is Gandhiji a tiny man, a fragile man, a man of no worldly importance, of no earthly possessions, and yet a man, with his crooked bones, his toothless mouth, his square yard of clothing . . . he passes meekly through the years, he faces embattled forces, he overthrows empires, he conquers death, but what is it in him that has given him this power, this magic, this authority, this prestige, this almost godlike quality of swaying the hearts and minds of men? It is a quality he shares with that small band of world teachers, who inaugurated great religions. He shares with them the hope of bringing courage to those who have fallen, of soothing down the beastly passions of those who have lost all sense of sanity and humanity, that love is the fulfilling of the law. . . . Therefore, today, a broken world ruined by wars and hatreds, a

<sup>12</sup> "I am amazed at what the world will be like in the future."

broken world seeking for a new civilisation honours the name of Mahatma Gandhi. . . . This transcendental love of humanity recognises no limitations of race, no barriers of country, but gives to all, like a shining sun, the same abundance of love, understanding and service." The age of miracles had not passed, exclaimed Sarojini for there was a "supreme example of embodied miracle in our midst." The whole world should honour this little man. He had taught the world that "hatred cannot be conquered by the sword, that power cannot be exploited over the weak and the fallen, that the Gospel of non-violence, which is the most dynamic and the most creative gospel of power in the world, is the only true foundation of a new civilisation, yet to be built." Mahatma Gandhi was Sarojini's leader, friend and father, and she paid her homage to him. "Between him and me," concluded Sarojini, "friendship began with a jest, but has grown to be a relationship between a teacher and a disciple, between a father and a daughter, and yet an intimate relationship of true comradeship and fellowship, because he the saint and I the singer seek the truth in our different ways, but strive for the same goal."

On Mahatma Gandhi's birthday (October 2, 1947), Sarojini was due to retire shortly from her Governorship and hand over her duties to Dr. B. C. Roy. Characteristically, she wrote to Gandhiji: "My days of being a *she-lat* (Lady Governor) are coming to an end . . . by the end of October, and I shall be a free bird out of the cage again . . . it is only rarely that I yield to my temptation to intrude on your thought or time if only as lightly and briefly as a butterfly. Today, I yield both to the desire and temptation and send you one little word of greeting. . . . I am now partially convinced that I am really rather a sweet old lady!"<sup>13</sup>

The Rev. John Haynes Holmes, that admirer of Sarojini Naidu, whom he called the "greatest of Indian women," remarks that he last heard Sarojini speak at the convocation of the Benares Hindu University on December 14, 1947 when "we received together honorary degrees. A vast audience of some 15,000 students, graduates, faculty and the general public were present. I shall not soon forget the ease with which Mme. Naidu caught up that gathering and swept it with the singing emotion of her speech. In dress and bearing like a queen, she seemed to rise in stature as her words

<sup>13</sup> *Mahatma Gandhi, The Last Phase, op. cit., p. 459.*

flowed on and became the dominating figure in that great assembly.”<sup>14</sup> Her message was one of joy in the new free India. She wanted the students to be worthy of their country which they were born to serve. As Governor, she spoke with authority. She held “vast stores of information, stern and unshakable convictions and power of personal expression,” according to Mr. Holmes.

As Governor of the U.P. Sarojini now became Chancellor of the Allahabad and other universities of the State. She was able therefore more frequently to contact her friend Amarnath Jha. On September 11, 1947, she was invited to a party in the Senate Hall and in her speech she made many kind references to her friend. She said that Prof. Jha was the first Allahabad student she had met and that apart from having been a great Vice-Chancellor, he had remained her friend for over thirty years. Amarnath had a quiet dinner with Sarojini at Government House that night. It was followed by a recital of poems by Hindi and Urdu poets. The next day, there was a reception at Government House and Sarojini in the midst of a large crowd, came to Amarnath and said: “Don’t stand here, smoking your big cigar. See that you have some refreshments and others have some too.”

During a luncheon party in October 1947, Sarojini related some amusing anecdotes. One was of the Chairman of a meeting in Madras who introduced her to the audience as “Mrs. Naidu, who is so well known that the less said about her, the better.” Another story was of a South Indian friend she had met while she was a student in London. She met him again many years later and asked him what he was doing and whether he was married. “I hope you have married a pretty wife,” said Sarojini.

“What pretty? Tolerable, decent, will do, will do,” was this reply.

Once a member of the Council of State told her that he had the privilege of taking senior ladies into dinner at banquets. Sarojini asked: “Of what do you talk to them?”

“What, you think I can’t chit-chat. this-that?”

“Of course, you can chit-chat, this-that; but how do you start a conversation?” persisted Sarojini.

“That’s easy,” replied the member of the Council of State. “When the lady sits down and I sit down, I turn to her and ask, ‘Madam, how old are you?’ ”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> *My Gandhi, op. cit.*, p. 151.    <sup>15</sup> *Sarojini Naidu*, by A. Jha, p. 45.

Luncheons and receptions, even the formal ones were enlivened by Sarojini's humour. At the Jubilee Convocation of the Allahabad University on December 13, 1947, an honorary degree was conferred on Amarnath Jha and on many others. Sarojini Naidu said: "Amarnath Jha had grown from power to power, from fame to fame, but for me he still remains the young collegian I met thirty years ago. If anyone truly deserves a tribute at the hands of the University it is Dr. Amarnath Jha whose name is writ imperishably on the University." The evening came to a close with a social at Muir Hostel attended by Sarojini Naidu, Pandit Nehru, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, and Dr. Rajendra Prasad.

Early in 1948, when Sarojini Naidu was returning to Government House from the Magh Mela Camp she said that she had asked Lord Mountbatten to see her before he spoke at the Benares Hindu University, which he had been scheduled to do later. She had advised him to shake his finger at the students and say: "You naughty naughty children." Lord Mountbatten had replied that he had "neither the advantage of her sex nor her prestige to be able to get away with that."

Later in the year, Sarojini visited Benares and saw the victims of the floods at Benares. A baby had been born in the camp and Sarojini cried: "In spite of flood and famine, life goes on."

At this time, in the autumn of 1948, Sarojini met with an accident and injured her knee. She had to be carried about in an invalid chair for a while. In October 1948, there was a meeting of the Post-War soldiers settlement at Government House, at which Sarojini presided. Shri Sampurnanand, Amarnath Jha and others were present. They later lunched with Sarojini and she told Mr. Jha always to ring her up and have lunch with her when he visited Lucknow. A month later, Sarojini was worried about the Vice-Chancellorship and wrote:

My dear Amarnath,

My Excellency is very disturbed and anxious about the Vice-Chancellorship. It is bad for an old lady nearing seventy, with a groggy heart, high blood pressure, and an injured leg to be so disturbed....What are you going to do about it?

Yours Affectionately,  
Sarojini Naidu.

She tried her best to persuade Amarnath Jha to stay on as Vice-Chancellor though he was Chairman of the Public Service Commission. When his bronze statue, by Shudir Khastgir was unveiled at the Muir Hostel, Sarojini was far from well. Her eyes were swollen and she was overtired, but she was as gracious as ever and said: "I have the most pleasant memories of my first meeting him in 1917; and I am extremely happy to have the opportunity of unveiling his bronze head. You cannot lose Amarnath Jha whether he is here or not; he will go on for ever. He has served the University with rare devotion and gave of his best to it. He was both the guardian and the comrade of the students. For this Hostel he bore the same love and affection as a mother for her child. This Hostel is really his creation. I have great affection for Amarnath Jha. . . ."

In December 1948, Sarojini went to Santiniketan and lunched with Rathindranath Tagore at Uttarayan. She was Acharya Devi and presided over the convocation. From Bolpur, Sarojini visited Calcutta, where, as usual, she was feted and feasted. It was on this visit that I saw her for the last time at a reception given by Sir B. L. and Lady Mitter. Sarojini was in the best of spirits and insisted on some of the ladies present singing her Tagore songs.

At the special convocation on the occasion of the Silver Jubilee of Lucknow University, on January 28, 1949, just a little over a month before she breathed her last, Sarojini made her last speech. It was a most memorable event and she excelled herself in the comments made during the conferring of honorary doctorates on distinguished people. She had known almost all the recipients as personal friends and co-workers during her life and her remarks were apt and full of trite humour. When she conferred the degree on Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, she remarked: "How shall I describe you? Crusader, poet, statesman, dreamer, political and spiritual heir to Mahatma—a leader, also our playmate and our friend and my brother and my son. . . ." She admonished him to write another book entitled "India has fulfilled her destiny." Nehru was greatly moved and raised his joined hands in a respectful *namaskar* in complete silence.

Her comments on her Chief Minister, Pandit Pant, were always courteous, and she remarked: "If I begin praising my Premier it will be like offering bribery and corruption. But I am not

afraid, because he has given me all he could and I knew that he would be only too glad if he could do more. . . . I do not know when he sleeps.”

Dr. K. S. Krishnan was admonished not to be too modest, not to hide his light under a bushel.

She asked Sir Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar how he dared to become her rival by writing poetry. “As if it is not enough that you have conquered a large part of the scientific world must you also invade my territory?” To Homi Bhabha she declared that she had known his family for three generations, and she did not know, if she lived long, how many more generations of the Bhabhas she may not see! It was clear then that Sarojini had no premonition of her approaching end.

During the year of the Silver Jubilee of the Lucknow University, there had been trouble between the students and Dr. Sampurnanand and the University had been closed for a month. When an Honorary Degree was to be conferred on him at the special convocation the students wanted to create a disturbance. Dr. Sampurnanand was not present on the occasion and the degree was conferred in absentia. A commotion took place when the Vice-Chancellor read out Dr. Sampurnanand’s name. But Sarojini was immediately alert to the situation and cried from her dais: “I wish very much that the students who are exhibiting a very misplaced sense of humour at this moment, would realise the difficulties of administering so great a province as the U.P. and would realise that night and day Shri Sampurnanandji works for the welfare of the students of this Province. No students nor those who incite them have a right not to believe that their ministers are doing their utmost.” On hearing this, some of the students shouted “No, No,” and Sarojini turned to them and said: “You will keep quiet while I am speaking.” There was a pause and then pin drop silence and Sarojini continued: “A man honoured for his intellectual integrity, would do his best for the young students of the country, on whom lies the future destiny of India. Therefore, I ask you to accord with me a tribute of praise to Shri Sampurnanandji, our Education Minister.” There was great applause in response. Could anyone but Sarojini have so dominated the situation that a seething mass of students with their ever-ready grievances should be silenced at her command?

## 7 *Hé Ram*

The dawn of 1948 saw Mahatma Gandhi working even harder than ever for Hindu-Moslem unity. On January 13, he entered into his last fast for this cause at Delhi. On the 6th day, Hindus and Moslems pledged themselves to see the end of fratricide and murders between the two communities. The leaders pledged themselves to root out the evil. But on January 30, Mahatma Gandhi was shot dead by Nathuram Godse. Gandhiji's last words were, "Hé Ram." Sarojini Naidu arrived from Lucknow the next morning. She found Delhi in tears and the Nehru family steeped in shattered grief. Sarojini's own face was drawn and haggard, but she did not weep, though her eyes gleamed with unshed tears. She realised that she must be strong in order to give strength to the weak. When she saw people weeping she cried: "What is all this snivelling about? Would you rather he died of decrepit old age or indigestion? This was the only death great enough for him."<sup>16</sup> A day after the funeral, dressed in mourning, Sarojini broadcast to the people of India on February 1: "There is no occasion for me to speak today. The voice of the world in many languages has spoken already. . . . Some of us have been so closely associated with him that our lives and his life were an integral part of one another. Some of us are indeed dead in him. . . ."

"Of what avail will be our faith, our loyalty to him, if we dared not believe all is not lost because his body is gone from our midst? The time is over for private sorrow. The time is over for beating of breasts and tearing of hair. The time is here and now to stand up and say, 'We take up the challenge with those who defied Mahatma Gandhi! . . .'

"We are his living symbols. We are his soldiers. We are the carriers of his banner before an embattled world! Our banner is truth, our shield is non-violence, our sword is the sword of the spirit that conquers without a blow. Shall we not follow in the footsteps of our master? Shall we not obey the mandates of our father? Though his voice will not speak again, have we not a million, million voices to bear his message to the world here and now? I for one, before the world that listens to my quivering

<sup>16</sup> *Prison and Chocolate Cake, op. cit., p. 220.*

voice, pledge myself as I did more than thirty years ago to the service of the Mahatma! Mohandas Gandhi, whose frail body was committed to the flames today is not dead. May the soul of my master, my leader, my father, rest. Not in peace! Not in peace—my father—do not rest. Keep us to our pledge! Give us strength to fulfil our promises—Your heirs, your descendants, guardians of your dreams, fulfillers of India's destiny! . . . Alas for the Hindu community that the greatest Hindu ever born, the only Hindu who was absolutely true to the doctrine, ideals and philosophy of Hinduism, should have been slain by the hand of a Hindu." Sarojini felt that it was right that the funeral took place in the midst of the dead kings who were buried in Delhi for "he was the kingliest of all kings."

On Gandhiji's death, Campbell-Johnson says: "Nearly every Congress leader has spoken, several with outstanding eloquence and with an astonishing mastery of the purest English prose. Among the thoughts and phrases that have remained in my mind was Sarojini Naidu's assertion, 'It is therefore right and appropriate that he died in the city of kings,' and her dramatic plea, 'my father do not rest. Do not allow us to rest, keep us to our pledge'."<sup>17</sup>

Sarojini Naidu now had a tremendous task to fulfil as Governor of the U.P. for Allahabad was to be the main place for the immersion ceremony. Gandhiji's ashes had been placed in simple brass urns to be sent out to the different States where they would be immersed by the Governors in the respective sacred rivers of the Provinces. Allahabad, where the sacred Triveni Sangam unites the three rivers, the Ganges, the Jumna and the invisible Sarasvati was to be the scene of mourning of the leaders. Sarojini, in order to make adequate preparations had left Delhi a few days earlier and was ready to receive the Asthi special, in which the urn travelled, at Allahabad on February 12. After the cremation there had been thirteen days of mourning and the day for immersion was scheduled to be the same in all parts of India. The Asthi special which was to travel to Allahabad was fitted out with 3rd Class compartments and places for leaders and those who wished to travel with the ashes were reserved by Ramdas Gandhi. One carriage in the centre was arranged as a catafalque with a platform covered with

<sup>17</sup> *Mission with Mountbatten, op. cit.*

marigolds on which was placed the urn. The carriage was brightly illuminated so that people could find their way to the train on its many stops en route for *darshan*. Huge crowds surrounded the train wherever it stopped, and as it left they shouted "Mahatma Gandhi-ki-jai." The Asthi special reached Allahabad at 9 a.m. on February 12, and Pandit Nehru, Pandit Pant and Sarojini Naidu were on the platform to receive the urn. Then the long march to the Sangam began. Two million people lined the roads, and the procession halted before various religious buildings, so that each religion could pay its homage to one who believed in the unity of religions. A vast choir sang "Lead Kindly Light" before the Cathedral.

The march was long and exhausting, but Sarojini Naidu was actually heard to say she would like to walk all the way. She was however persuaded to travel in a vehicle together with the other leaders, and stood beside the urn. The procession consisted of military jeeps, carriers and mounted police. A decorated trailer carried the urn. A special military "Duck" was boarded at the Sangam and the urn reverently placed in it in the midst of marigold garlands. The leaders stood around the urn. They were Pandit Nehru, Sardar Patel, Sarojini Naidu, Abul Kalam Azad, Govind Ballabh Pant, Padmaja Naidu and Ramdas and Devadas Gandhi. The "Duck" sailed towards the Saraswati Ghat, and the crowds on the banks bowed their heads and paid their last homage to the Father of the Nation. The "Duck" then turned and cruised along the river towards the sacred confluence. Planes circled above, swooping low over the amphibian and unloading showers of flowers. At last the boat reached the South-west end of the Sangam where the last rites were performed according to Vedic dictates. Shortly before 2 p.m. a huge crowd, exceeding 3,000,000, watched the immersion ceremony, weeping silently. The plain copper urn was immersed by Ramdas Gandhi, and many thousands waded into the water up to their waists in respect. After the ceremony, the last post was sounded and troops stood to attention.

Vincent Sheean writes in his book, *Lead Kindly Light*, that he called on Sarojini Naidu at Government House a few days after the immersion ceremony. "She had been ill," he says, "but she received me at once, sitting up in bed and displaying no sign of debility." He understood then why her charm and wit had been

so much appreciated wherever she went. "She it was who succeeded Mahatma Gandhi in the Salt March, made salt after him and went to jail for it. She told me how that, at the time, she had not really understood the full power of the symbol. She had done it because it was what he wanted done, but without the comprehension that came later. She also told me how she had first met him in London in 1914." Sarojini told Mr. Sheean a number of wonderful things about Gandhiji, ending with "He taught us to be just."<sup>18</sup>

Sarojini Naidu was interviewed for an exclusive message to *The Leader* on February 13, 1948, at the Government House, Allahabad; it appeared under the heading: "Governor's Message on Immersion Ceremony." "Mahatma's Name will Illumine History of Humanity." She said: "My province holds the most sacred rivers of India and I am proud that my people co-operated in such a wonderful fashion to make such perfect arrangements for the last journey of our beloved Mahatma, whose ashes were immersed with such unprecedented love and worship at the Sangam yesterday. It was one of the spectacular and splendid functions in the world's history befitting the last rites of him whose name will always illumine the history of humanity with a glory of his gospel of love, truth and non-violence.

"The Ganga and the Yamuna have been throughout the ages the classic rivers that have taken into their bosom the ashes of many millions of men and women who sought the final absolution in the united waters; but never in the history of India have the Ganga and the Yamuna received the ashes of so glorious a human being whose life and death are an imperishable example for us to reverence and emulate.

"I offer my special thanks to the triple authorities, civil, military and police for the efficiency of their organisation and the united spirit of their labour of love in the preparation, so splendidly achieved, for the last mournful pageant that conveyed the mortal ashes of the immortal Mahatma to the sacred water."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Lead Kindly Light, op. cit.*, p. 226.

<sup>19</sup> *The Leader*, February 14, 1948.

## *8 Farewell*

Sarojini Naidu was seventy on February 13, 1949. On February 10, she fell ill, but nevertheless travelled to Delhi the next day. On the way she felt sick and badly hurt her head; but on arrival at Delhi, she refused to cancel her engagements. She returned to Lucknow on the 15th and suffered from severe headache on the journey back. The headache continued to trouble her, and her blood-pressure rose alarmingly. She also felt it a strain to breathe. She was examined by Dr. B. C. Roy on February 20 and was advised to take complete rest. Dr. Misra and Dr. Bhatiya examined her again on the 25th, and again prescribed rest.

On February 18, oxygen was administered which afforded a little relief to her breathing, but the trouble returned the next day, and Sarojini could not sleep even with the help of oxygen. On March 1, she felt restless and her head ached intolerably. Her heart also had grown weaker, and blood transfusion was given to her at 9-30 p.m. She now felt a little rested and slept soundly for a while. At 10-40 p.m. Sarojini awoke and asked her nurse to sing to her and apologised for the trouble she was giving her. Sarojini then closed her eyes and listened to the song and uttered her last words: "I don't want anyone to talk to me." She then fell asleep and suddenly she awoke, at 2-45 a.m. and coughed; she breathed her last at 3-30 a.m. before the attending doctor could help her. This was on the morning of March 2, 1949. The news of her death was conveyed by telephone to the Governor-General, Shri Rajagopalachari, the Prime Minister, Padmaja Naidu and Shri Kailash Nath Katju, who were at Allahabad at the time for the opening ceremony of the Begum Azad Ward of the Kamala Nehru Hospital. Her husband and her daughter Lilamani were also told by telephone.

Shri Rajagopalachari, Pandit Nehru, Shri G. B. Pant, Lady Mountbatten and her daughter Pamela, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, and Padmaja Naidu arrived at Lucknow by special 'plane on the morning of the 2nd.

Thus the *Bharat Kokila* passed away, one of the greatest of India's daughters. Gradually all the leaders gathered at Raj Bhavan, Lucknow, to pay their respect to this great woman who had died so simply, in profound dignity.

Had Sarojini any premonition of her death? At the Silver Jubilee Convocation of Lucknow University in January, she had seemed well and happy. But earlier, at a public meeting in Naini Tal, in June 1948, she had remarked that she would not be at the hill-side resort the next year, nor be their Governor. She had also expressed the same thought while congratulating Sir C. V. Raman on his 60th birthday. But death was not feared by her. Like her father, she believed that it was merely a process of passing into a higher and nobler life.

The heart-broken leaders gathered on the morning of March 2, dazed and sorrow-stricken, to discuss arrangements for the funeral. At noon, she was brought into the north verandah of Government House. One of those who carried her was Pandit Nehru. He also personally supervised all arrangements at Government House. *Ramdhun* was now sung as flowers were strewn on the body and wreaths placed. All Government and public institutions in every part of India were closed. The Legislative Assembly did not meet till the next day, when both houses were to pay their respects to the great lady.

Lucknow was steeped in grief. Government House was opened to the public and streams of people, old and young, poor and rich, sick and well, passed by to have their last *darshan* of their beloved Governor. They were overpowered with sorrow. In the spacious verandah, judges of the High Courts of India, Provincial Ministers, Government officials and Congress leaders stood silent, many weeping. Every shop in the city was closed. The bazaars covered their entrances with black curtains. The Capital of the U.P. in one instant was stricken dumb. The other cities not only in the U.P. but throughout India, seemed paralysed. The flag of India House in London was flown at half-mast and all functions of the Embassy cancelled.

The funeral procession left Government House at 4-15 p.m. amidst scenes of utmost grief, expressed especially by the staff of Government House for Sarojini was a much-loved mistress and like her mother had made a personal friend of each of her servants. They found it hard to say good-bye to her. The body, covered with flowers and draped with the Indian Tri-colour, was carried out in the midst of sacred music and prayers. It was placed on a gun-carriage with the assistance of Pandit Nehru, Pandit Pant and

Padmaja Naidu. On the carriage, beside the bier, stood Dr. Jaya Surya and Padmaja. Pandit Nehru stood in the rear and Pandit Pant in front. The chief mourners included near relations and friends, Lady Mountbatten, Lady Pamela Mountbatten, the Governor-General, the Prime Minister, the Chief Minister of the U.P., the Chief Justice, Ministers of the Union Government and the Provincial Government, including Maulana Azad and Rafi Ahmed Kidwai. An Army, Air Force and Police contingent and mounted police marched with the procession. The two and a half mile route was thronged with weeping people and lined with police.

Slowly, the procession, a mile long, wound its way to the University sports ground on the bank of the river Gomati. All along the routes, passing through Mahatma Gandhi Marg and Hazratganj, men, women and children placed wreaths on the carriage. The silence and discipline were exemplary.

Arrangements for the cremation had been made on a large platform at the sports ground. About 20,000 people had gathered here, awaiting the procession. It arrived, headed by the mounted police at about 5-30 p.m. and the crowd swelled to about 60,000.

The last rites were performed according to Vedic law, and a number of pandits recited mantras. As the sun set in the Western sky, beyond the domes of the Chhater Manzir, across the Gomati river, the last post was sounded. The officers and men of the armed forces and the police stood at the salute as Dr. Jaya Surya circled slowly around the pyre and set it ablaze. Thousands of brimming eyes watched. The leaders sat at a distance. Slowly the flames rose in a silence punctuated only by sounds of weeping. No longer would the voice of India's beloved daughter be heard, which had echoed throughout the country for fifty years, resound in crowded halls, or provoke laughter in elegant drawing rooms. As the flames mounted, Shri Rajagopalachari spoke to the vast crowd of mourners. His voice was choked with emotion as he cried: "Sisters and brothers, it is my melancholy duty today to speak a few words to you. We have joined together to consume to ashes the earthly remains of our beloved sister. All that was spirit in her went away early this morning. What is left behind is common earth, air and water. We have joined together to give back to the mother earth and mother air all that belonged to them. The Vedic hymn that

was chanted contained the prayer that the golden lid of truth be lifted so that we may be enabled to see the truth.

“How long we have to wait for the solution of the mystery of life and death. From time immemorial, we have seen life and death. It still remains a mystery. The restless spirit encased in Sarojini Naidu has found eternal rest at last.

“Sisters and brothers, let us be worthy of the illustrious dead whom she has joined. Let us be large-hearted and never small-minded. That is what Sarojini instilled in the country. May her will continue. May her spirit move to bless us.

“My great and beloved sister, our incomparable playmate and fellow toiler who carried peace and compassion and goodwill wherever she went, who knew everybody in this country and abroad, left us for ever early this morning.

“God will help us to bear our blow if we keep our hearts pure and our minds straight. I know how many leaned on Mrs. Naidu in these days of trouble and puzzlement and what a great blow it is to them to be deprived for ever of her noble help.”

Tributes poured in from all parts of India.

A black bordered *Gazette of India Extraordinary* was issued on March 3, announcing Sarojini Naidu's death. The Government paid its tribute by calling her “a brilliant orator, great poet, a person endowed with unusual charm and sense of humour as well as a genius in oratory, administrative skills and popular leadership.”

Sarojini's own epitaph expresses her philosophy of life and death:

“Farewell, O eager faces that surround me,  
 Claiming the tender services of my days  
 Farewell, O joyous spirits that have bound me  
 With the love-sprinkled garlands of our praise.

“O Golden lamps of hope, how shall I bring you  
 Life's kindling flame from a forsaken fire?  
 O glowing hearts of youth how shall I sing you  
 Life's glorious message from a broken lyre?

“To you what further homage shall I render,  
 Victorious city gilded by the sea,

Where breaks in surging tide of woe and splendour  
The age-long tumult of humanity?

“Need you another tribute for a token  
Who reft from me the pride of all my years?  
Lo! I will leave you with farewell unspoken,  
Shrine of dead dreams! O temple of my tears!”

A memorial stands today on the banks of the Gomati river. Every year, on March 2, the State pays homage to Sarojini's memory and a wreath is laid on the Samadhi and each new Governor offers his homage here before he takes up office.

### 9 *Life's Work*

After Sarojini Naidu's passing away an editorial in *The Statesman*<sup>20</sup> remarked as follows: “Death has removed yet another outstanding personality in India's struggle for freedom. A brilliant daughter of Bengal, Mrs. Sarojini Naidu had for almost thirty years been closely associated with the national movement and with the women's campaign for social and legal reform. Before these achievements absorbed her almost limitless energy, she had attained wide fame in Britain, the U.S.A. and wherever English literature is treasured, as a sensitive artist in lyrical poetry.” *The Leader* praised Sarojini's “mastery of the English language” which was “the admiration of eminent critics and excited the wonder of many abroad.” Sarojini was a “tactician, counsellor, public speaker.” She brought to the Congress a distinctive viewpoint,” taking no sides, and introduced a very practical robustness which demolished humbug and pretence. She was “intensely human and sociable,” winning hearts. She was an excellent choice for an unique form of Governorship. Praises of Sarojini also resounded in all Indian papers and her death was mourned abroad. There was not a heart untouched by her passing.

Sarojini Naidu's achievements during the life-span of one human being were almost unbelievable. She was Fellow of the Royal

<sup>20</sup> *The Statesman*, March 3, 1949.

Society of Literature, received the Freedom of the Cities of Madras, Calcutta and Karachi, was member of the Bombay Municipality from 1923-29, delivered convocation addresses at most of the leading universities of India, played the role of poet, peace-maker, orator, acted as Mahatma Gandhi's right hand and ended as the first woman Governor of free India. She organised flood relief in Hyderabad and was awarded the Kaiser-i-Hind gold medal, which she returned in 1919, and together with Abul Kalam Azad, she was instrumental in bringing about a truce between the Congress and Swarajists in 1922. She was a member of the Congress Working Committee for many years and the first Indian woman to be President of the Congress. She was a member of the Second Round Table Conference in 1931. She was arrested and imprisoned; first on May 29, 1930, when she was released on January 26, 1931 after the Gandhi-Irwin pact, then again after returning from the Round Table Conference in January 1932 for participation in Civil Disobedience. After her release, she became a member of the Government of India's delegation to South Africa "where her fearless speaking was a feature of her negotiations." She was arrested for the last time after the "Quit India" Resolution of August 1942. This time it was the memorable imprisonment in the Aga Khan Palace. She travelled extensively in Europe, America and Africa. Her publications include *Poems* (1896), *The Golden Threshold* (1905), *The Bird of Time* (1912), *The Broken Wing* (1917), *Select Poems* (1930)<sup>21</sup>, *The Sceptred Flute*<sup>22</sup> with an introduction by Joseph Auslander, *The Sceptred Flute*<sup>23</sup> published again in India and *The Feather of the Dawn*. Apart from her poetry, Sarojini's speeches up to 1925 have been published in three impressions by G. A. Natesan and Co., Madras. Pamphlets and brochures with her speeches and poems have also periodically been published. Other contributions have appeared in various journals abroad and in India.

As an orator, Sarojini was among the most talented and inspired English speakers in India and perhaps had only one rival, in the Golden-voiced orator, Srinivas Sastri. Her eloquence, spontaneous

<sup>21</sup> Oxford University Press, edited by H. G. Dalway Turnbull, Bombay, 1930.

<sup>22</sup> Dodd, Mead and Co., America, 1937.

<sup>23</sup> Kitabistan, Allahabad, 1958.

expression of moods, of humour and pathos, her love for the truth and hatred of any form of humbug and her splendid command of both English and Urdu, made her a unique, outstanding orator. Her poetic, political approach to subjects in her speeches put forward a philosophy which possessed few hard facts, but left an indelible impression on the listener. Her words cascaded with a rush comparable to the force and majestic beauty of a waterfall. A biographer praises her thus: "That unbroken flow of sonorous and dignified language, the symmetry thereof, the nerve, the fire, the passion and sensitiveness of her utterances, vivid imagery, her modulations, her silvery voice sometimes waxing warm and becoming piercing, sometimes mellowed, would keep the audiences all the time in a state of animation."<sup>24</sup> She exercised a strange and compelling magnetism which conquered audiences in all parts of the world. It is strange that no volume of Sarojini's speeches are available today.<sup>25</sup>

A criticism often levelled against Sarojini's speeches was that though her language was perfect, constructive points were absent, and after a speech, the audience came away bewildered with the sheer beauty of the language; but unable to realise what her points actually were. Perhaps one of the reasons why Sarojini failed to give many constructive suggestions was because she never carried notes with her and always spoke extempore. One wonders whether she made a deep study of her subject before a talk or whether she trusted to her poetic eloquence and quick grasp of situations to support her. Often, her metaphors were mixed; but her eloquence overpowered what may be minor faults. Pandit Motilal Nehru, for instance, was suspicious of excessive emotion in politics. After hearing Sarojini's poetic and impromptu presidential address at Kanpur in 1925 which moved most of the audience to tears, his only comment was: "But what did she say?"<sup>26</sup>

Sarojini's memorials increase as the years pass by and more and more is her worth and her unique personality being recalled and appreciated. Colleges and institutions in her name are being inau-

<sup>24</sup> *Sarojini Naidu, the Greatest Woman of Our Time*, by Prof. K. K. Bhattacharya, *Modern Review*, April 1949.

<sup>25</sup> Those published by G. A. Natesan and Co., are out of print.

<sup>26</sup> *The Two Nehrus*, by B. R. Nanda, Allen and Unwin, 1962, p. 230.

gured in all parts of India and February 13, her birthday has become "Women's Day." It is celebrated widely in women's institutions. A postal stamp has been issued of Sarojini Naidu and often her genial face confronts us as we open our letters. A series of Sarojini Naidu lectures has been endowed by Asia Publishing House in connection with the Indian School of International Studies. These lecture series are to stimulate interest and research in international studies. Under the endowment prominent Indian and foreign scholars will be invited to deliver lectures. In this annual series on international affairs, political, economic, historical and legal subjects are covered. Thus a feeling of understanding has been created which should provide some contribution towards world peace. The lecture series is named after Sarojini Naidu because of her being the first President of the Asian Relations Conference.

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, President of India, inaugurated the series on April 9, 1962, and the first lecture was delivered by the late Sardar K. M. Panikkar. It was entitled "In Defence of Liberalism."

Dr. Radhakrishnan in his inaugural address remarked: "Sarojini Naidu was never tense or stern but always relaxed and easy. A vivid, warm, vital and intense personality, she beamed radiance and benevolence wherever she was. She was the most outstanding Indian woman of her generation. She was notable as a liberal thinker, a literary artist, a social reformer and a political fighter. . . ."

"When the University Education Commission visited Lucknow towards the end of 1948, we were her guests at the Government House, Lucknow. In our travels we were guests at several Government Houses and it was our unanimous feeling that Lucknow Government House over which she presided was the best in the country. She drew us out and made us feel at home. She was friendliness and charm made visible. She is the only woman in the Hall of Fame in our Parliament. I count her affection and friendly feeling for me among my most precious possessions.

"Sarojini Naidu embodied in herself the most valuable elements of India's composite culture: Hindu and Buddhist, Muslim and British. She is a happy blend of the values of both East and West."

## *10 On Wings of Song*

The pros and cons of Indians writing in English have been discussed so minutely in recent years that there remains little more to be said on the subject. It is enough to repeat that the urge to write in the medium one chooses will persist however much Pundits argue and disagree as to the literary merits of such writing. Many Indians, willy nilly, without even giving a thought to the fact that English is a foreign language, have written and will continue to write in that language. Neither will they consider that English is foreign to them, having been born and bred in the language. Despite the critics, many Indian writers in English have reached a high standard of poetry and prose.

Sarojini Naidu was one such Indian writer. As Sri Aurobindo has so neatly put it: "It is not true in all cases that one can't write first class things in a learned language. Both in French and English, people to whom the language was not native have done remarkable work, although that is rare. . . . Some of Toru Dutt's poems, Sarojini's and Harin's have been highly placed by good English critics, and I don't think we need be more queasy than Englishmen themselves. . . . If first-class excludes everything inferior to Shakespeare and Milton, that is another matter. I think, as time goes on people will become more and more polyglot and these mental barriers will begin to disappear."<sup>27</sup>

Sarojini's medium became English from the moment her father locked her up in a room because she would not speak the language, and she emerged with the firm intention of becoming master of English. She could not have written in any other language in spite of her being an Urdu scholar. She wrote as the mood took her, and no one can deny the beauty of her songs.

"No matter how natural or familiar an Indian may be with English, he or she cannot keep abreast of English thought out here in India, and therefore, English is bound to be a foreign language. To write English poetry one has to live in an English country, otherwise it does not ring true. Many Indians who have been to public school and Oxford or Cambridge, even though their Eng-

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in *Indian Writing in English*, by K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, Asia Publishing House, 1962, p. 6.

lish is exemplary, may not be able to fathom the under currents of English thought." These are some arguments against Indians writing in English. But why must a writer reflect only English thought if he or she writes in English? Man Mohan Ghose, for instance, was as good a writer in English as any Englishman, and Laurence Binyon has admitted that his is "a voice among the great company of English singers," but that he was handicapped because he was not able to keep up with English thought on his return to India. But did he not write admirably in English of India? A critic once suggested this objection of being out of touch with English thought to Sarojini Naidu. She asked: "Can you quote a single line from my poetry?" He quoted: "The moon, the caste mark on the brow of heaven." Sarojini knew this was among her most beautiful lines so she replied that she was sorry about the lack of appreciation of her literary efforts. Modestly she said she realised that people very seldom read her poetry; she was agreeably surprised to hear her critic quote one of her lines. But she also had faith in her own ability as a poetess and felt she was entitled to a corner of her own in the history of English poetry. She, however, left unanswered the question of whether or not Indian writers in English should feel the pulse of true English thought. It must be remembered that Sarojini started with poems of an English character but that it was on the advice of an English critic, Sir Edmund Gosse, that she began to write of things Indian. It was then that she succeeded as a poet. The question is, should one then, write of the affairs and descriptions and feelings of one's own country in English? Why, after all, should one's own mother tongue be forced on a writer, and why should not one write in English if that language is one's most facile medium?

James Cousins has said in his chapter on The Poetry Of Sarojini Naidu in *The Renaissance of India*, that Sarojini was simultaneously received "within the pale of English literature" together with Tagore, and adds, "This is an event that offers a fascinating challenge to the student of literature." Cousins felt that Sarojini's language and thought were of the English ballad and the middle and late Victorian era of antagonism relieved by sentimentality. Some of Sarojini's expressions also, Cousins commented, were so Indian that an English reader could scarcely grasp them. Such phrases as "Like camphor and like curds" "to the untravelled

Western reader," says Cousins, "will carry queer shades of meaning built up out of clothing and moths; and 'curds' will be flavoured only of dining rooms or convalescence." Some of her poems are nothing but a "rumity timity" measure, says Mr. Cousins and some have "those flows of structure and expression which suggest a not quite authentic inspiration, a mood worked up till it becomes hectic and unbalanced; but when she touches the great impersonalities of phrase, a clear energy of thought, a luminosity and reserve that reach the level of master" emerge as in such poems like *Buddha*. Some phrases are very Shelleian, such as, "inaccessible desire," or "heavenward hunger," and at times she reflects the whole philosophy of the Vedanta in two lines. Her parallelisms of nature suggest Francis Thomson's *Orient Ode* with its sunrise and catholic worship. Sarojini's poems are a combination of truth, imagination and art with a "mantric repetition." Her metrical skill is capable of great variety and she tries at times to transcribe the metre of Bengali songs into English:

"Where the golden glowing  
Champak buds are blowing."

"Each line," says Mr. Cousins, "save the last, has two alliteratives and these with the repeated O in the first line, and the inter-linear rhyme of 'rowing' in the third line, produce a haunting chime of bells and voices." Right through her poetry there is a touch of sorrow and struggle and feminine imagery. "All things are possible to one who can sing thus of solitude," says Mr. Cousins and "she had succeeded in becoming a far more vital and compelling entity than a reflection"; she has become Sarojini "with her own exquisite qualities."

One cannot but agree with Sri Aurobindo when he said that Sarojini Naidu's poetry has "qualities which make her best work exquisite, unique, and unchallengeable in its kind."

Her latest posthumous publication *The Feather of the Dawn* has called forth many criticisms. All praise her lyric worth, but some consider her a minor poet of the old-fashioned school. Nissim Ezekiel remarks: "Sarojini knew nothing of the literary revolution taking place in English poetry in the twenties and earlier."<sup>28</sup> But

<sup>28</sup> *The Sunday Standard*, February 11, 1962.

perhaps she did, and knowing she could not fit into this new school, she wisely refrained from writing poetry of any consequence after 1917. A critic, perhaps a little too patronising, has said: the lyrics are "saturated with the saccharine-sweetness we have come to associate with the hand of Sarojini Naidu. The rhythms are tick-tock and precise." . . . "And yet, when all is said and done, when all the twittings over her tweetings are over, this song-bird sang very well indeed."<sup>29</sup> Sarojini wrote so well that three of her poems, *The Soul's Prayer*, *In Salutation to the Eternal Peace*, and *To a Buddha Seated on a Lotus* have been included in *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse*.<sup>30</sup> Despite all the criticism levelled against her, therefore, Sarojini has in patches reached the depths of mystical poetic expression. She will always be remembered as the Indian Nightingale and *Bharat Kokila*, a name given her by Mahatma Gandhi.

## II "My Master"

In her broadcast speech on February 1, 1948, on the death of Mahatma Gandhi, Sarojini called the Mahatma "My master, my leader, my father." There are few friendships in Indian history so beautiful as that which existed between Sarojini Naidu and her master, Mahatma Gandhi. The strange part of this devoted friendship was that though Sarojini worked for Gandhiji as his disciple, she was always able to command a partnership of warm friendship which even allowed her to go to the extent of twitting him and joking with him. From the first meeting in London which began "with a jest," she became his friend. From that day, she knew that "small, droll man" was to charge her with inspiration. It was his spirit which mattered, not his frail body.

After Mahatma Gandhi's assassination, Sarojini was asked to write a foreword to a book entitled *Mahatma Gandhi*<sup>31</sup> which she wrote during Dipavali in October 1948, beginning with the words:

<sup>29</sup> *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, May 13, 1962. Review by "P.L."

<sup>30</sup> *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse, XIII-XX Centuries*, chosen by D. H. S. Nicholson and A. H. E. Lee, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1917.

<sup>31</sup> By H. S. L. Polak, H. N. Brailsford and Lord Pethick Lawrence.

"The festival of lights is at hand, but this year neither the clay lamps of our village nor the silver lamps of our cities will be kindled in honour of Dipavali, because the heart of the nation still deeply mourns the death of Mahatma Gandhi, who redeemed it from centuries of bondage and gave to India her freedom and her flag." Indeed, something died in Sarojini when with the words "Hé Ram," her master expired on January 30, 1948, thirteen months before her own death. The world went dark, and the beacon light which had guided Sarojini for three and a half decades shone no more. As she herself expressed in her foreword she had been intimately associated with her master for many years, in "his great campaigns of liberation for India," in his marches "to prison under his banner," in his vigils kept during his epic fasts for the sins of those whom he loved or those who hated him. And having been so closely connected, so deeply devoted, Sarojini felt that it was "almost an act of vivisection to attempt to analyse or interpret the unique personality, the mind and the spirit of this rare, this unrivalled, being, who was not only our leader, our friend, our father, but literally and integrally, part of life itself."

To Sarojini, Mahatma Gandhi was a part of her life, and yet she never demanded anything from him. She never even pretended to follow his external way of life. Her affection and deep regard for him was based purely on spiritual concepts and ideals. She was no vegetarian, no wearer of handspun, no austere ascetic. Speaking on this subject Vincent Sheean remarks that Sarojini Naidu was one of those independent characters who were associated with Gandhi, but with the perfect freedom of their own individuality. He says Sarojini was "one of the most remarkable women of the Indian national movement, a poet and orator, courageous far beyond ordinary definitions of courage, who gave Gandhi and the Congress Party more than twenty-five years of devotion. Mrs. Naidu learnt much from Gandhi and said so; he was her master, as she declared in the memorable broadcast she made after his death; in the realm of ideas she was humble before him." . . . But she "rejected a huge part of the Gandhian discipline, first and last. When I asked her if she ever tried to follow Gandhi's rules in diet, she laughed at me 'Good heavens,' she said, 'All that grass and goat's milk? Never, never, never'."<sup>32</sup> They were, however, two pilgrims who approach-

<sup>32</sup> *Nehru, the Years of Power*, Victor Gollancz, London, pp. 8 and 9.

ed the same goal of setting free human beings and building up a world of justice and liberty and love. Sarojini asked, "How and in what lexicons of the world's tongues, shall I find words of adequate beauty and power that might serve, even approximately, to portray the rare and exquisite courtesy and compassion, courage, wisdom, humour and humanity of this unique man who was assuredly a lineal descendant of all the great teachers who taught the gospel of Love, Truth and Peace for the Salvation of humanity, and who was essentially akin to all the saints and prophets, religious reformers and spiritual revolutionaries of all times and lands?"<sup>33</sup> She compared him to Gautama Buddha as lord of infinite compassion and "he exemplified in his daily life Christ's Sermon from the Mount of Olives; both by precept and practice." He realised the Prophet Mohamed's "beautiful messages of democratic brotherhood and equality of all mankind." He was, Sarojini cried, a "man of God" with "all the depths, fullness and richness of its implications." He was regarded as a living symbol of Godhead. Though he inspired awe, he endeared himself and woke among his followers the "warmest love by the very faults and follies which he shared with frail humanity."

Sarojini wrote: "I love to remember him as the playmate of children, as the giver of solace to the sorrowful, the oppressed and the fallen. I love to recall the picture of him at his evening prayers facing a multitude of worshippers, with the full moon slowly rising over a silver sea, the very spirit of immemorial India." She loved to remember his counsel to statesmen and his demand for India's place among the comity of world nations. "But perhaps the most poignant and memorable of all is the last picture of him walking to his prayers at the sunset hour on January 30, 1948, translated in a tragic instant of martyrdom from mortality to immortality."

What a long partnership had been shared between the Mahatma and Sarojini—their first meeting in 1914, their return to India, the common stirring of national interests, the turbulent scenes in Bombay on the arrival of the Prince of Wales in 1921, the speaking in a mosque together—a unique incident for two Hindus, the selling of contraband literature side by side, the sharing of danger in the face of firing, the great trial and Sarojini laughingly calling her master "Mickey-Mouse," have become almost legendary. With

<sup>33</sup> *Mahatma Gandhi, op. cit.*, Foreword.

what trust the Mahatma handed over the Congress command to the first Indian woman President and how ably she preached his precepts in America and Canada, never breaking faith with him during the Salt March and the tragedies and imprisonment that followed! What a picturesque pair they made during the journey to England together for the Round Table Conference, and what a sight they were in London when Sarojini stood beside her master, one in splendid silks and the other in peasant's garb! The return to India together with the disappointment and disillusionment of imprisonment again were also shared as were the "Quit India" Resolution and prison in palace. The taking over of Congress affairs when released, the Asian Relations Conference with Gandhiji present and Sarojini presiding, the freedom of India and at last the funeral and cremation and immersion of ashes of the master, to be followed so soon after by the disciple, have become unforgettable in our memory.

What fun and laughter there was between Sarojini and her master! He was "the meek but oh! how mighty Mahatma!" Once when Sarojini went to visit Gandhiji in Yeravada jail from the opposite women's prison, he was about to start spinning, an occupation which did not inspire Sarojini though she had often advised others to spin. Gandhiji asked her to spin and she immediately replied that her thumb was aching. He laughed uproariously and cried out that she was following the tactics of the weavers of Bengal during the time of the East India Company, when they cut their thumbs to defy the Company's authority. Here was Sarojini now offering a painful thumb as an excuse against spinning!

And so the smiling poetess and the "little brown man" walked hand in hand; but all things must perish except the indomitable will, and India may well look back with nostalgia to the days of her beloved Bapu and his *Kokila*, for it was these two great souls, a man and a woman, who have done so much to enrich India. They suffered toil and tribulation in the struggle, they fought for all things pure, simple and truthful, and they bequeathed a legacy of untold wealth of the spirit, for India to cherish and follow. When Sarojini sang her song, *At Dawn*, she meant to dedicate to us her invaluable services. The sun must never set on India's freedom, for Sarojini draws aside the veil of darkness to let us live in an eternal sunrise:

“Children, my children, the daylight is breaking,  
The cymbals of morn sound the hour of your waking,  
The long night is o’er, and our labour is ended,  
Fair blow the fields that we tilled and we tended,  
Swiftly the harvest grows mellow for reaping  
The harvest we sowed in the time of your sleeping.

“Weak were our hands but our service was tender,  
In darkness we dreamed of the dawn of your splendour,  
In silence we strove for the joy of the morrow,  
And watered your seeds from the wells of our sorrow,  
We toiled to enrich the glad hour of your waking,  
Our vigil is done, lo! The daylight is breaking.”



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