



Madam Cama: An Unobtrusive Yet Indispensable Contributor To Indian Freedom Movement

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ABSTRACT

Indian Freedom Struggle is a phenomenon wherein so many patriots sacrificed their lives to get the Motherland free from the chains of the British Rule. So many names came to foray in the list of the warriors whereas some names always remained unsung and unnoticed, especially of those who laid the foundation for the movement both-in India and abroad. One such less known but prominent figure was Madam Cama, who not only devoted her time and energy but also sacrificed her personal and family life. Her contribution to Indian Freedom movement is unique and worthy of salute as during the last decade and the early decades of the 19th Century, women could not think of having so much courage, liberty and volition to determine the course of their lives.

Keywords: Madam Cama, Contribution, Freedom Struggle, British Rule, Indian Tri-Colour Flag

Indian Freedom fight began with armed insurrection. However, it actually had already begun before 1857. Parallel to the Gandhian Non-violence movement, there existed sustained armed insurrection. What was the secret or mystery behind this most prolonged and sustained activities of armed revolution? How effective and necessary was its continuity? Truly speaking, in terms of the inspiration, thousands of common laymen of India received their philosophy and thinking of social change from these devotees of Motherland.

The history of Indian Freedom struggle would be incomplete without mentioning the contributions of women. The sacrifice made by women of India will occupy the foremost place. They fought with true spirit and undaunted courage and faced various tortures, exploitations and hardships to earn us freedom. The list of great women whose names have gone down in history for their dedication and undying devotion to the service of India is a long one. From each and every regional corner, women-power had started to come forward to drive away the Britishers. Among them Durgabhabhi, Raniba Gaidinliu, Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba, Vijayalaxmi Pandit, Annie Besant, Hansaben Mehta etc were the chief names. One of such prominent personalities of the Indian Nationalist Movement was Madam Bhikhaji Rustom Cama, born on 24th September, 1861 in a rich Parsi family of Bombay. The atmosphere in which she was brought up could by no means be called placid. She always admired the personalities of the National Movement and from the beginning, she was a rebel. She had good flair to learn languages and became expert in arguing her country's cause in different circles at a young age. Madam Bhikhaji always believed that the Britishers had looted India and practiced the worst form of Imperialism. On the 3rd August, 1885, she tied her wedding knots with Rustom Cama, an affluent Pro-British Lawyer. Because of the ideological rift between the husband and wife, there started cropping up of certain conjugal feuds. So, she spent most of her time performing altruistic and philanthropic activities. During this period, there broke out the deadly epidemic of plague in Bombay; and Madam Cama, putting her own life at stake, set off for the service of the people. While serving the plague-trapped people, she herself contracted the disease. Considering the seriousness of the disease, she was referred to London for the further medical treatment and care. Cama survived and viewed it as the second life accorded by the Almighty to serve the Nation and her people. At that time, Dadabhai Naoroji lived in London. Madam Cama became his personal assistant and this way she came into the contact of so many freedom-fighters. During this time, Shyamji Krishna Varma, originally hailing from Mandvi, Kachchh, Gujarat, had been running a pamphlet titled 'Indian Sociologist' for a decade and he was also the supporter and advocate of armed revolution. Madam Cama found an appropriate hinge to thrive on. Madam Cama wrote articles in this pamphlet to promote the Indian Freedom Movement activities. She regularly addressed meetings at the Hyde Park, explaining her patriotic mission of freeing India from the hand cuffs of British domination. These speeches which attracted large crowds were characterized with deep sincerity and intense patriotism.

During this stage, she got a message that her return to India can take place subject to the promise that she would not participate in the Nationalist Movement. She refused to make such a promise and remained in exile in Europe. In London, she was constantly making people realize the importance of freedom from British Rule. Britishers, displeased with her popularity, concocted an assassination but fortunately Cama came to know about the contrivance and escaped to France. Now, Paris was the hub of freedom movement activities of that time led by Sardarsinh Rana and Veer Savarkar. From here also, she published passionate appeals in 'Vande Mataram' to her countrymen to wake up and rebel against the foreign rule. She was convinced that revolutionary methods alone could achieve the end. In her speeches, she pointed out that Indians were and had always been peace-loving people, not habituated to violence, but she said the condition of her people left in her mind no doubt as to the method she should adopt to achieve freedom. Her passion for freedom was so intense that violent revolutionary methods seemed natural to her. But whatever Madam Cama tried to do, she did it with both thoroughness and courage. When Savarkar was arrested on the French soil, she moved heaven and earth to get him released and the result was that socialist papers wrote editorials on this issue. Thus, she always helped revolutionaries fighting for freedom struggle. She travelled in Europe and America to appraise the condition of the people in India and thereby gain their support.

In 1905, Cama along with her movement-mates-Sardarsinh Rana and Virendra Chandrapadhyay, designed India's first Tri-Color Flag bearing the immortal words – Vande Mataram. In the second International Socialist Conference in Stuttgart, Germany, on August 22, 1907, hundreds of representatives from several countries were present. An Indian lady in a colourful Sari was a rare phenomenon in those days and her magical appearance, brave and clear words made everybody think that she was a Maharani or at least a princess- belonging to a royal clan of a native state. The Tri-Color flag, Madam Cama unfurled, had green, saffron and red stripes. Red represented strength, saffron victory and the green stood for boldness and enthusiasm. There were eight lotuses representing the eight provinces and the flowers represented princely states. The sun and the moon indicated Hindu and Muslim faiths. Thus, from the design of the first flag of Independent India, the thing that becomes evident is the dream of Madam Cama and other freedom-fighters i.e. Swaraj and Hindu-Muslim Unity. After hoisting the flag, she delivered the speech, in which she proposed before the delegates of the world,

'To let the Britishers continue the power in Hindustan, from the viewpoint of Indian welfare, is indisputably dangerous and inhuman. Fifth part or 20% of the whole world, bearing the pangs of slavery, dwells in India alone. Need is there of co-operation from the peaceniks and freedom-lovers of the world to unbound these victims. If we want to establish a healthy social condition, we can not afford to live in the situation of slavery of the cruel and uncontrolled government. "

In her scorching speech, there was a description of the poor Indian condition. Giving the details of millions of pound that used to go to England from India every year, she asked the delegates present, "You are discussing colonies all the time, but what about dependencies? Take up the cause of Justice and make it a point to bring India to the front at every Socialist Congress." In that congress, each nation's flag was there, except of India. So, hoisting the Indian flag, as if taking up the charge of upholding the honour of India across the world, she said,

"This flag is of Indian Independence! Behold, it is born ! it has been sanctified by the blood of young Indians who sacrificed their lives. I call upon you, gentlemen, to rise and salute this flag of Indian Independence. In the name of this flag, I appeal to lovers of freedom all over the world to support this flag."

Such courage and elocution borne out of patriotism brought her respect, love and admiration in India and abroad. Apart from freedom movement activities, Bhikhaji Cama was vehement in her support for gender equality. Speaking in Cairo, Egypt in 1910, she asked, " I see here the representatives of only half the population of Egypt. May I ask where is the other half? Sons of Egypt, where are the daughters of Egypt? Where are your mothers and sisters? Your wives and daughters?" Cama's stance with respect to the vote of women was however secondary to her position on Indian Independence; in 1920, upon meeting Herabai and Mithan Tata, two Parsi women outspoken on the issue of the right to vote, Cama is said to have sadly shaken her head and observed: "Work for India's freedom and independence. When India is independent, women will not only have the vote, but all other rights." Her activities for the freedom of the Motherland continued unabated till World War-I, when England and France joined hands and pressure was brought to bear on the French Government to arrest and intern her which resulted into the deterioration of her health. Financial problems also started to crop up and situation reached the level where she had to pass the days in a small cottage. Now there was no way out but to return to India. In 1935, at the age of 74, she returned to India and after the span of approximately a year, this bed-ridden great patriot and pioneer revolutionary breathed her last – unwept, unsung and unnoticed on 13th August, 1937. It shows how indifferent we are in honouring those who anchored the Indian Freedom Movement. Yet in the minds and hearts of those who love India the Freedom-Fighters, she has definitely left an indelible mark of true sacrifice.

At the time, when women did not participate in public life at all, Madam Cama dedicated herself to freedom-movement activities without fear and with utmost sense of gratitude; with only one thought and one aim of

Independent India. Indeed, she was rightly called the Lioness of India. To commemorate her sacrifices, of late, on 26th January, 1962, on her birth centenary, the Indian Post and Telegraphs Department issued a stamp to acknowledge her contribution and give her due honour. The Indian Coast Guard consists of a ship that has been named after her. Thus, Madam Cama was a pioneer amongst those who martyred their lives for India's freedom and is considered the Mother of Indian Revolution.

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