

Ambujammal - an unassuming Heroic personality for nation and women's Emancipation

Dr. S. SAHAYAMARY,
Assistant Professor of History,
Jayaraj Annpackiam College for Women, Periyakulam
Theni District
E.Mail Id: saha.ranjith@gmail.com

Abstract

Ambujammal made distinct contribution in the cause of Indian freedom. She dedicated her life to the cause of India's freedom and inspired several women to do the same. Women's welfare was at the top of her agenda. She was a habitual Khadi-weaver. She donated all her jewellery for the national movement. She led privileged life, but she gave up all material comforts because of one man – Gandhi. Although coming from an orthodox family she held liberal views on caste system, untouchability, status of women etc. In the economic sphere she believed in Vinobha Bhave's village programme based on self-sufficiency as the ideal method which would make India economically self-sufficient and independent. Ambujammal was not only a freedom fighter, who worked for emancipation of women and inspiration to many women.

Keywords: Ambujammal, Gandhi, Freedom Movement, social worker.

Introduction

Ambujammal was a selfless worker for the cause of the empowerment of deprived women and helpless children. She was a social and political reformer. She made distinct contribution in the cause of India's freedom. She dedicated her life to the cause of India's freedom and inspired several women to do the same. Women's welfare was at the top of her agenda. She was the only daughter of Smt. Ranganayakiammal and Srinivasa Iyengar. She was born on 8th January 1899 an orthodox family in Mylapore. The family originally came from the Ramnad district. Her father was a prominent lawyer, freedom fighter, a reputed Congress leader of Madras. In those days women were not allowed to go for study outside. She was educated by Anglo-Indian teacher at home and well versed in Tamil, English, Sanskrit and Hindi.

She was married at a very young age to S. Desikachari, He was an advocate of Kumbakonam from a middle-class farming family. After four years of married life, her husband suffered from mental depression. He received appropriate medical treatment. Ambujammal obtained teacher's training qualified as a teacher and taught at Sarada Vidyalaya Girls School part time. Later, she resigned her teaching post and became involved in nationalist activities. Her father was very interested in the freedom movement. Like her father, she was also involved in the nationalist activities.

Participation in the National Movement

Women, in the freedom struggle of India, have played a vital role with immense courage confidence and patriotism. The seed of National Movement for India's independence started with the early 19th Century social reformers. All the reformers, including Mahatma Gandhi, welcomed women's participation, both as an opportunity for their growth as individuals and as a force for the National Movement.

Gandhi believed that women could do much to transform India at all levels. The advent of Gandhi gave a boost to the life of women, which was awakened by foreign administration and socio political situations. He encouraged women to take part in the national, political and social movements of the nation. According to him, "freedom struggle was a struggle for the country's freedom as well as freedom of women" and he worked for both. From the beginning of his political activities, he associated himself with women's cause and sought their help when necessary. Women participation in the freedom struggle brought political awakening to women. He believed women to be stronger their hearts contained as mothers, qualities of love and peace.

Very early in life, Ambujammal was very much influenced by Gandhiji besides her parents and her aunt. smt. Janammal, She was greatly attracted by his constructive economic and social programme. She led privileged life, but she gave up all material comforts because of one man – Gandhi.

The adopted daughter of Gandhi

When Gandhi came to Madras, Srinivassha Iyandgar invited Gandhi to his house. Gandhi and Kasturba stayed at Srinivasa Iyengar's house in the 1920's. Ambujammal greatly inspired by their simplicity became the devotee of Gandhi. The words of Gandhi went straight to her heart and she became his disciple. She actively participated in the non-co-operation movement in 1920, began to wear Khaddar and spin, but rarely left the house. Ambujammal's dedication to the freedom movement was fueled more by personal issues than political interest. She joined in the Sabarmathi Ashram for few days with her mother.

Gandhi visited her home again in 1925 and stayed for three days. It was period of Vaikam Satyagraha for the cause of depressed class temple entry and Gandhi stayed at the break of journey at Ambujammal's residence. During the visit Gandhi gave Ambujammal the book Mother India by Miss Mayo an American authoress and asked her to read it and express her opinion. The book portrayed Indian women as an illiterate mass locked up in the kitchen without knowledge of the outside world. Ambujammal told that it was absurd, but Gandhi said that since there is no one to lead women on the right path, the power of Indian women lay dormant and he told Ambujammal that she should work for the cause of the upliftment of women. Ambujammal's instinct was excited and from that movement on she decided to devote her entire life to social service especially for the upliftment of oppressed women.

Social Service

Gandhi trained her as his trustworthy successor, not only in the field of political area but also in the social service sphere where she carried an immortal name as a selfless worker for the cause of the empowerment of women of the deprived women and helpless children. She was considered the adopted daughter of Gandhi. In her later life she was influenced by her sister Subulakshmi, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi, Annie Besant and Mrs. Margret Cousins who were mainly responsible in getting her interested in social service prior to her entry into national service. She attended Anni Besant meetings and she was attracted to the movement and became an ardent follower of Annie Besant. The seed of nationalism was shown in her mind, after attending the meeting. But her father was against Annie Besant and her ideals and so far the first

time both father and daughter, differed in their political ideals. From 1929 to 1936 as a committee member of Saradas Ladies Union, she worked under sister Subbulakshmi

Civil Disobedience Movement

In 1930 she joined the Civil Disobedience Movement. When Ambujammal was leading the boycott of foreign cloth at Rattan Bazar in Madras, she was arrested by the police, but with the interference of her father she was not sent to the jail. Later she along with K. Bashyam Iyengar, a trusted disciple of her father, formed the Madras Swadeshi League. They carried on the work of the boycott of foreign cloth, in which she was assisted both by paid unemployed youths and by women from respectable families like Rukmani Lakshmipathi and Jannamal. Ambujammal continued the foreign cloth boycott movement in front of shops. She bravely continued the boycott for nearly ten days: even then she was not arrested by the police. In 1932, nominated by the Congress as the third dictator, she led the Satyagrahis in the foreign cloth boycott and was arrested and sentenced to 6 months imprisonment at the Vellore prison.

Ambujammal was also involved in all of the national movement's programmes based on the principle of non – violence. She organized various meetings, processions, etc. and also sold khadi and picked foreign cloth and liquor shops. Her political participation was in the foreground in these years because later she concentrated more in social welfare systems and in addition to working in the various positions that had come her way, also worked in women's association. After a period of hectic political activity, Ambujammal acted at her father's wish and decided to enter into social service, do useful work for the community.

Women Swadeshi League

Krishnabai and Kameswari set up a separate National Association for women, and they wanted Ambujammal and her aunt to join. Based on this, the association worked on Gandhi's principles of Khadi propaganda, spinning Chakra and conducting Hindi lessons. This was named as "Women Swadeshi League. In 1929 she was nominated to be a treasure of the Women Swadeshi League, Madras and continued in this office till the abolition of the League. This league served as the non-political wing of the Congress implementing Gandhi's social and economic programmes. League Members took the swadeshi vows, spun, and talked about the

value of wearing home spun cloth. Ambujammal was the president of the organization and her aunt Janammal was its treasure.

The work of the association expanded and “Swayam Sevika – a land of women volunteers was formed to help to organize meetings in an orderly way and to sell Swadeshi goods and also to promote the use of Khadi. The work of the Women Swadeshi League also stopped after some time in 1934 as all the women concerned with it left. Ambujammal then decided to spend some time at the Wardha Ashram with Gandhi. Initially her father was not willing to send her, but after she personally underwent a fast, he consented and Ambujammal along with her aunt Janammal went to Wardha Ashrm and stayed there for three months. The Ashram’s strict discipline, simple life, simple food and hardwork were entirely a new experience for them. Implicit obedience was the motto followed in the Ashram. This strict discipline was later infused in her social service life.

In 1936, Gandhi was diligent with his campaign for untouchability and Harijan welfare works and at that time he once again visited Madras. This time Ambujammal with the ladies wing, organized a meeting for Gandhi, where he vigorously upbraided the craziness of women for jewels. As a result, many women donated their jewels to Gandhi for the Harijan cause even without consulting their husbands and other elders. His appeal to the women to give up ornaments and to lead a simple life and give the ornaments for the utilization of the palliation of the downtrodden also had its effect on Ambujammal, who after her father’s death donated all her precious jewels for the nationalist cause of Gandhi, who used it for the development of the Mahilashram at Sevagram-near Wardha in Bombay.

Her enthusiasm in Hindi

. From 1934 to 1938 she was a member of the managing committee, Hindi Prachar Sabha. She showed much interest and enthusiasm in Hindi, passed Visharad examination and went on an all India tour on behalf of the Hindi Prachar Sabha, attended the All India Congress Session held in Bombay and stayed with Gandhiji at the Wardha Ashram form November 1934 to January 1935. In 1936 she became the Secretary of the Mylapore Ladies Club, where she conducted Hindi classes. From 1939 to 1942 she was the Secretary and from 1939 to 1947 the Treasure of Women’s Indian Association. During this time she actively worked for the abolition

of the child marriage, polygamy, devadasi system and for bringing about legislation for protecting women's property rights. In 1947, she was the Chairman of the Reception Committee of All India Women's Conference held at Madras. Later on after independence Ambujammal was also associated with Bhoodan Movement, Tamil Nadu Congress Committee and State Social Welfare Board.

Ambujammal was an eloquent speaker both in Tamil and Hindi, She contributed articles in Tamil magazines on women's upliftment and education, Gandhi and national movement. She had also several Tamil Publications to her credit, "Tulsi Ramayanam" "Gandhi Ninaivu Malai", (Reminiscences of Gandhi) "M.K.Gandhi" and Reminiscences of my father". Among the books that influenced her were Valmiki and Tulasi Ramayana, Vivekananda's lectures, especially on "Bhakti Yoga", and Tailak's "Karma Yoga"

A loyal and true devotee of Gandhiji her greatest tribute to his memory was expressed in her founding of Sriniva Gandhi Nilayam in 1948 at Tenampet. This school is a branch of Women's Indian Association. It provides free coaching to poor girls and runs a free dispensary. It has also a printing press, an envelope making unit and a co-operative society which provide training and employment to poor women.

Conclusion

Ambujammal was a quiet unassuming and heroic personality. A staunch Congress woman, she was a habitual Khadi-weaver. She donated all her jewellery for the national movement and that was utilized by Gandhiji. Although coming from an orthodox family she held liberal views on caste system, untouchability, status of women etc. In the economic sphere she believed in Vinobha Bhave's village programme based on self- sufficiency as the ideal method which would make India economically self – sufficient and independent. She did not favour too much of industrialization. She was not only a freedom fighter, who worked for emancipation of women and inspiration to many women.

Reference Books

1. Chandrababu, B.S., & L. Thilagawathi, *Woman: Her History and her struggle for Emancipation*, Chennai, 2009

2. Navaz B.Modi, *Women in India's Freedom Struggle*, Allied Publishers, Mumbai, 2000
3. Roots, the International Journal of Multidisciplinary Researchers, Vol.4, March 2018
4. Raj Kumar & Rameshwari Devi, Romila Pruthi, *Women and the Indian Freedom Struggle*, Jaipur, 1998
5. Ambujammal, S. *Naan Kanda Bharatham*, (Tamil), Madras, 1973
6. Vasumathy Ramaswamy, *Illustrious Women of India, with special reference to Tamilnadu*, Madras 1973
7. Premalatha, P.N, *Nationalism and Women's Movement, 1917-1947*, New Delhi, 2003
8. Kumar S., *History of Freedom struggle*, Delhi, 2017.
9. Premalatha., P.N., Mariammal., P., Jaibunnisha. R. (ed), *Unsung Heroines of Indian National Movement*, Kodaikanal, 2012
10. Pushpa Joshi, *Gandhi on Women*, New Delhi, 1998.