

# SMT. SAROJINI NAIDU



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A woman of extraordinary courage, an exceedingly lovable human being, a tower of strength, an inspired orator, a distinguished poet and a renowned freedom fighter, Sarojini Naidu was born on 13 February, 1879 in a Bengali middle class family settled in Hyderabad. She inherited her poetic temperament and love for beauty from her mother Barada Sundari Devi and learnt the lessons of tolerance, communal harmony and appreciation of our composite culture from her father Aghornath Chattopadhyaya. She was a brilliant student and was well versed in Urdu, Telugu, Bengali, English and Persian. She passed her Matriculation examination in 1891 at the age of twelve. After a break of three years, she resumed her studies at King's College, London. Her ill health, however, compelled her to discontinue studies and in 1895, she returned to Hyderabad.

Sarojini Naidu's first highly acclaimed poetic collection "*The Golden Threshold*" was published in 1905. For the next twelve years, she continued to write poetry of great charm. In 1912, the second volume of her verse, '*The Bird of Time*' appeared. The third volume—'*The Broken Wings*' followed in 1917 whereafter her poetic career came almost to a halt as her attention was diverted towards national freedom movement. She staged a comeback to poetry nearly after a decade when she wrote '*The Feather of the Dawn*'. The four volumes of her poetry, epitomising the very culture of India taken together, are enough to establish her in the tradition of great women writers.

It was Mahatma Gandhi who called Sarojini Naidu the 'Nightingale of India' (*Bharat Kokila*) for sheer variety of theme, range of feelings, colour

and rhythm, fancy and conceit, metaphor and similes. Sarojini Naidu joined the Indian National Movement and came in contact with Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Rabindranath Tagore, Annie Besant, C.P. Rama Swami Iyer, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. It was Gopal Krishna Gokhale, who in 1902, persuaded Sarojini Naidu to step out of the ivory tower and dedicate herself to the service of her motherland. However, her greatest political teacher was Mahatma Gandhi whose *Champaran Satyagraha* cast a magic spell on her and since then, Gandhiji became her object of worship. Sarojini's interest in national affairs began as early as in 1903 when she attended the Bombay Session of the Indian National Congress and read out a patriotic poem entitled "*To India*". Some of her poems like "*Gift of India*" and "*Anthem of Love*" are replete with patriotic fervour. Under Gandhiji's influence, Sarojini emerged as a great orator. Her flawless English, immaculate grasp of the subject, rhetorical process interlinked with flashes of wit and humour besides human approach, won her applause and admiration wherever she spoke.

Sarojini Naidu was actively involved in the women's movement for their emancipation. In 1906, she addressed the Indian Social Conference in Calcutta* on 'The Education of Indian Women'. In December 1908, She moved a resolution regarding the amelioration of the conditions of the Hindu widows and their remarriage at the Session of the Indian National Social Conference held at Madras**. In 1918, she moved a resolution on women's franchise at the eighth session of the Bombay Provincial Council at Bijapur. In her speech, she remarked that the word 'man' should politically include 'woman' also in all discussions on the rights for the citizens. In 1931, while attending the Second Round Table Conference, she vigorously pleaded for women's rights. Two years later, she helped open Lady Irwin College for Women in Delhi.

*Now known as Kolkata.
**Now known as Chennai.

Sarojini Naidu had an intense desire for Hindu-Muslim unity. In one of her most forceful speeches on this subject made at a students meeting in 1917, she pointed out that Islam and Hinduism agreed on essentials, *viz.* truth, purity, service and the worship of the same transcendent spirit, no matter whether we call it 'Allah' or 'Parameshwara'. She cited examples from the history of Islam outside India to show the heroism and self-sacrifice which Muslims had displayed in the cause of freedom.

During the freedom movement, she became a prominent leader of the Congress. When Mahatma Gandhi formally started the Non-Cooperation Movement, on the first of August 1920, Sarojini Naidu plunged into it and addressed hundreds of meetings. She exhorted people to boycott foreign goods, buy Gandhiji's books and to court arrest by defying prohibitory orders. On 4 October 1921, she signed a manifesto issued by Mahatma Gandhi giving an outline of the objectives and methods of the non-violent movement. Sarojini Naidu stood firmly behind Gandhian principles during the turbulence in the Congress Party. In 1924, as a member of the AICC delegation, she toured East and South Africa to preside over the convention of the Indian Congress at East Africa and to convey a message of solidarity and support to the Indians in Durban, who were then groaning under the impact of the segregation laws of General Hartog, from their Indian brethren.

In December 1925, as the President of the Indian National Congress, Sarojini Naidu had to devote much of her time to party work. In 1928, She sailed for the U.S. and had a triumphant tour as Gandhiji's representative. In 1929, she presided over the East African Indian Congress in Mombassa and also addressed the gatherings of Indians all over South Africa. On her return to India, she participated in the first Round Table Conference to discuss the demand for full dominion status. In

1930, when the freedom struggle entered its final phase, Sarojini Naidu described this period as "the last and the most difficult stage of the journey, the back-breaking, exhausting, precipitous climb before reaching the top of the mountain". She took an active part in the demonstration against the Cripps Mission to India and was jailed in 1942 for her participation in the Quit India Movement. On the whole, Sarojini Naidu, as a member of the Congress High Command and as one of the closest friends of Mahatma Gandhi played an important part in the saga of India's struggle for freedom.

In March 1947, Sarojini Naidu presided over the Asian Relations Conference held in Delhi. She welcomed the delegates from various countries of Asia and hoped for the emergence of a strong and peace-loving Asia. She observed, "Asia shall not be a country of enemies—Asia shall be a country of fellowship of the world". Sarojini Naidu's Presidential address was, "one of the most brilliant pieces of flaming rhetoric she had uttered during her life".

After independence Sarojini Naidu, as the first woman Governor of United Province (presently Uttar Pradesh), left the stamp of her personality on the style of administration in which efficiency was combined with a certain degree of informality and played a pivotal role in bringing together people belonging to rival factions and conflicting ideologies.

Sarojini Naidu passed away on 2 March 1949. The news of her death stunned the entire nation. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, in his broadcast to the nation, said:

> "The captains and kings of my generation depart, old friends and dear comrades pass away, and now the dearest and brightest of them is gone. I feel desolate of heart and willowed in spirit. Though Sarojini Devi's strength ebbed out, her indomitable spirit held

aloft. Men and women of this country, have you the spirit to carry the torch and hold it aloft? May it be given to us to give India what she gave."

This is how C. Rajagopalachari mourned her passing away:

"My great and beloved sister, our incomparable playmate and fellow toiler, one who carried peace and compassion and goodwill wherever she went, who knew everybody in this country and abroad, who could plead and play with anybody in the world, has left us forever. We are tried severely, but God will help us to bear these blows if we keep our hearts pure and our minds straight. I know how many leaned on Sarojini Devi in those days of trouble and what great blow it is to them to be deprived forever of her noble help."