



SMT. SAROJINI NAIDU

A PROFILE

LOK SABHA SECRETARIAT
NEW DELHI

PREFACE

This booklet containing the profile of Smt. Sarojini Naidu has been brought out on the occasion of her birth anniversary function in the Central Hall, Parliament House on 13 February 2005. It is our humble tribute to Smt. Sarojini Naidu, 'The Nightingale of India' and one of the outstanding leaders of our freedom movement.

NEW DELHI;
February, 2005

G.C. MALHOTRA,
Secretary-General.

Early Life and Education

A woman of extraordinary courage, an exceedingly lovable human being, a tower of strength, an inspired orator and endearingly called the 'Nightingale of India', Sarojini Naidu was born on 13 February 1879 in a Bengali middle class family settled in Hyderabad. She was the eldest of the eight children of Aghornath Chattopadhyaya and Barada Sundari Devi. Sarojini's mother, Barada Sundari was a pious lady who instilled spiritual values in the hearts of her children. In her youth, she composed some beautiful Bengali lyrics which she used to recite in her sweet and melodious voice. Sarojini's father, Aghornath was a philosopher, scientist, poet and teacher, all rolled into one. Sarojini was really fortunate to have such gifted parents. In the words of Harindra Nath Chattopadhyaya, both her father and mother had excellent compatibility and shared striking qualities of generosity, wisdom and an unflinching love for humanity.

Sarojini was sent to school early and proved to be a brilliant student, always standing first in her class. The parents were her first teachers. She inherited her poetic temperament and love for beauty from her mother and learnt the lessons of tolerance, communal harmony and appreciation of our composite culture from her father.

Sarojini was educated at Hyderabad and Madras. In spite of poor health, she passed her Matriculation examination from Madras in 1891 at the age of twelve securing first position in the entire Presidency.

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 had started writing poetry at a fairly early age. By the time she celebrated her fourteenth birthday, her outlook of life had already become much more serious and mature than that of any other child of her age. In her own words:

"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."

Poetic Career

With the inspiration of Edmond Gosse and Arthur Symons, the two English critics who were charmed by this young girl's poetry, Sarojini launched her poetic career. It was in 1905 that she surprised the literary world with her poetic talent by publishing the first volume of her poetry, "*The Golden Threshold*" which carried an introductory essay by Arthur Symons.

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. Warm tributes were showered on her for her magnificent achievement. In the opinion of a critic, in these two volumes 'the poetess of the Deccan has given her readers the feast of song' for their enjoyment. The third volume—"*The Broken Wings*" followed in 1917 whereafter her poetic career came almost to a halt as her attention was diverted towards politics. She no doubt staged a comeback to poetry nearly after a decade when she wrote '*The Feather of the Dawn*'. The four volumes of Sarojini's 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 the 'Nightingale of India' (*Bharat Kokila*) for sheer variety of theme, range of feelings, colour and rhythm, fancy and conceit, metaphor and similes. Even today, Sarojini remains unsurpassed among Indo-Anglian poets. She shows an acute awakesness of the time and the inevitability of death in several of her poems. As a poetess, she was sensitive to human problems not only in the national context but in the context of the whole world. She had a vision of humanity. In '*Wandering Singers*', she wrote "All men are our

kindred, the world is our home." Sarojini was a poetess with a cosmopolitan and secular outlook.

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. Thus, Gokhale was her first political Guru. Later she adopted Mahatma Gandhi as her mentor. This "heroic heart" as Sarojini called him, "influenced her most". Among other national leaders who influenced Sarojini, special mention may be made of Lokmanya Tilak. In one of her poems, she called Tilak as a "Victorious heart and dauntless scholar". However, Sarojini's greatest political teacher was Mahatma Gandhi whose Champaran Satyagraha cast a magic spell on her and the "little man", since then, 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. She wrote memorial verses on Tilak, Gokhale and Gandhiji who symbolised India's struggle for freedom. Sarojini met Gandhiji for the first time in 1914 and was impressed by his simplicity and moral grandeur and singleness of purpose. She became his follower. 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 where she spoke.

At the Session of the Indian National Congress at Bombay* in December 1915, she recited the following verse:

Waken, O mother! thy children implore thee,
Who kneel in thy presence to serve and adore thee!
The night is aflush with a dream of the morrow,
why still dost thou sleep in thy bondage of sorrow?
Awaken and sever the woes that enthrall us,
And hallow our hands for the triumphs that call us!
Are we not thine, O Belov'd, to inherit,
The manifold pride and power of thy spirit?
Ne'er shall we fail thee, forsake thee or falter,
whose hearts are thy home and they shield and thine alter,
Lo, we would thrill the high stars with thy story,
And set thee again in the forefront of glory.

Gandhiji, whom she addressed as "mystic lotus" in her famous sonnet, transformed her life from that of a romantic singer to a determined and impassioned fighter for the country's freedom. Ten years younger to Gandhi and ten years elder to Nehru, Sarojini entered into the vortex of the freedom struggle immediately after the publication of the last collection of her poems in 1917. During the next 32 years of

*Now known as Mumbai.

her life, Sarojini did not write any substantial poetry. The poet in her gave place to the fiery patriot.

Role in the Women's Movement

Since 1906, Sarojini had become actively involved in the women's movement for emancipation. In 1906, she had addressed the Indian Social Conference in Calcutta on 'The Education of Indian Women'. This speech aroused a widespread interest in women's activities. In December 1908, Sarojini attended the Session of the Indian National Social Conference held at Madras. She moved a resolution regarding the amelioration of the conditions of the Hindu widows and their remarriage. Sarojini continued to work enthusiastically for the betterment of the lot of Indian women alongwith Margaret E. Cousins, a great Irish women worker, and guided by Annie Besant and the Home Rule League. Sarojini sponsored the Women's Indian Association to work for the freedom of mankind and the country. The Association offered a common platform for women to air the grievances and demand their rights.

In 1918, Sarojini moved a resolution on women's franchise at the eighth session of the Bombay Provincial Council of Bijapur. In her speech in support of this resolution, she remarked that the word 'man'

should politically include 'women' in all discussions on the rights for the citizens. The Montford Reforms of 1919 granted the right of franchise to about one million women, and in 1931, while attending the Second Round Table Conference, Sarojini vigorously pleaded for women's rights. Two years later, she helped open Lady Irwin College for Women in Delhi. In 1934, she presided over the Women's Indian Association in Madras and later attended the All India Women's Conference at Karachi.

The Government of India Act of 1935 opened a new opportunity for women to participate in the general elections. The common women now became enthusiastic in electioneering. The women's movement for emancipation and for their electoral rights thus grew parallel to the freedom movement in India.

Sarojini Naidu's political stature grew with the freedom movement and very soon she became a prominent leader of the Congress. In 1916, both the Congress and the Muslim League held their annual sessions at Lucknow. Sarojini addressed the two organisations. At the Congress Session, she moved the resolution 'on behalf of future mothers of India' to demand that the birth right of their sons be given back to them. At the Muslim League Session, she spoke on the resolution of Self-Government. She

praised Mohammad Ali Jinnah for rousing the spirit of nationalism among Indian Muslims. The famous Lucknow Pact was concluded between the Congress and the League with the former agreeing to a separate electorate for Muslims' and the two organisations jointly framed a constitutional programme on the basis of dominion Status.

It was at Lucknow that Sarojini first came in contact with Jawaharlal Nehru and saw in him the "rising star of Indian nationalism". That was the beginning of the warm friendship between Sarojini and Pandit Nehru.

In the post-Lucknow Congress era, while Gandhiji was travelling the length and breadth of India to have a first-hand knowledge of the plight of its teeming millions, Sarojini took up alongwith Gandhiji the cause of India's workers who were cruelly exploited by the landlords. Gandhiji's meeting with a peasant from Champaran, a district in Bihar, where the exploitation was at its worst, ultimately resulted in the Champaran Satyagraha—the first movement led by Mahatma Gandhi in India.

A Champion of Hindu-Muslim Unity

Sarojini had an intense desire for Hindu-Muslim unity, a desire she shared with both her teachers: Gokhale and Gandhi. Her work for this cause was

also seen at the Lucknow Congress. 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 reminded her audience that "in the sacred water of the Ganga the soldiers of Islam had tempered and cooled their swords". Sarojini 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. Sarojini and Mahatma Gandhi went to a Mosque together and exhorted a gathering of Muslims to remember the traditions of early Islam in its fight for freedom.

Role in Public Life

The years 1917 and 1918 were busy years for Sarojini. The extent of her involvement in various aspects of the national life can be gauged by glancing at some of her speaking engagements. In 1917, she went to Allahabad for a lecture on "The Vision of Patriotism" at the Leader Building there. Later, she addressed the Madras Students Convention at a meeting in Gokhale Hall under the Presidentship of Mrs. Annie Besant. This was followed by a lecture on the "The Ideals of Islam" arranged by the Young

Men's Muslim Association of Madras and a talk on education at Teachers College.

In December 1917, Sarojini joined a deputation which called on the Secretary of State, Edwin Montague, to demand equal rights for women. In March 1918, she was at Jullunder opening a women's school and teaching and lecturing on the emancipation of Indian women. In April that year, she lectured at Lahore on National Education. In May, she was back at Madras* and played an important part at the Provincial Conference held at Kanchipuram. In July, she again visited Madras for the opening ceremony of a National School for Girls. In September, she attended the Congress Session at Bombay and moved the resolution demanding equal qualifications for men and women. In December that year, she addressed the Provincial Conference at Bijapur and spoke on women's franchise.

In March 1919, the British Government passed a set of coercive measures known as the Rowlatt Act. The special powers given to the Administration during the war were perpetuated by the Rowlatt Act. Even the possession of 'seditious' documents was declared illegal. There was spontaneous indignation all over India against these measures which came to be known as 'Black Act' or the 'Black Bill'. Mahatma Gandhi organised a passive resistance movement to

*Now known as Chennai.

protest against these repressive laws. Sarojini was one of the first to join him. She delivered speeches at Madras and Ahmedabad calling upon her compatriots to resist "this hideous nightmare". The Government suppressed the movement sternly. At Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar, an unarmed crowd was brutally fired upon, leaving four hundred people dead.

The whole of India felt humiliated by Punjab atrocities. Rabindra Nath Tagore wrote an angry letter to the Viceroy renouncing his *Knighthood*. Sarojini returned the *Kaisar-e-Hind* Medal which the Government had awarded to her in recognition of her work in the Ambulance Corps during the war.

In the aftermath of the dismemberment of the Turkish empire and abolition of the Khilafat, the Ali Brothers—Mohammed Ali and Shoukat Ali—and Maulana Azad organised a mass movement of the Muslims against the British to which Gandhiji lent his wholehearted support. He saw in it as an opportunity to bring Hindus and the Muslims on a common platform towards achieving his motherland's freedom. In furtherance of the objective of promoting Hindu-Muslim unity, Sarojini Naidu went to London in 1919 and during her stay, appealed to the Indians living in England to create a favourable image of their motherland. In a speech on 22 April 1920 at Kingsway Hall, she underscored the importance of Hindu-Muslim

unity with reference to Khilafat issue. In yet another speech a few weeks later on 'The agony and shame of the Punjab', Sarojini made a blistering attack on the hypocrisy of British justice. Referring to atrocities committed by General Dyer's men on the women of Amritsar, she said, "You deserve no empire. You have today lost your soul."

The Year of Struggle

Events moved quickly after Sarojini's return to India in July 1920. On the first of August, Mahatma Gandhi formally started the Non-Cooperation Movement. Plunging into it, Sarojini addressed hundreds of meetings and 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. In an address to the students, she said, "It is a battle of self-purification, self-sacrifice and self-devotion. Come, march with me to the Temple of Liberty."

In the Bombay strike of 17 November 1921, on the occasion of the arrival of Prince of Wales during Mahatma Gandhi's *Satyagraha Movement*, Sarojini Naidu worked tirelessly to keep the people away from indulging in violent activities and to remove

the injured to the hospitals. Following her example, many other women joined the movement. In the same year she had the opportunity to read the Presidential Address from Shri C.R. Das at the AICC Session as he was indisposed. Later in 1922, when Mahatma Gandhi was being tried by the Ahmedabad Court for sedition, she termed the trial as a war between the laws of God and the laws of Caesar regarding Mahatma Gandhi as the upholder of *Dharma*. Sarojini stood firmly behind Gandhian principles during the turbulence in the Congress Party and resultant formation of Swarajya Party by Pandit Motilal Nehru and C.R. Das. And in the aftermath of developing a communal outlook by the Muslim League due to the guiles of the British regime dividing Muslims in Nationalist and Muslim League camps, Sarojini played a positive role supporting the nationalist cause. Then 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. She was given a warm send-off on her departure to India in May 1924 because she could win the hearts of Indians and formed many warm friendships.

Sarojini saw in Gandhiji not only the upholder of *Dharma* in the ancient tradition but also the first leader in modern India who really spoke for the common man, a leader who "approached the poor with the mind of the poor". This was the theme of many of her speeches during the months that followed Mahatma Gandhiji's trial and imprisonment.

Congress Presidentship

In December 1925, Mahatma Gandhi, the outgoing President, handed over the charge of the Presidentship of the Indian National Congress to Sarojini Naidu which she described as "the consolation of a nation in agony, the promise of a nation determined to win freedom at the utmost sacrifice". Sarojini's elevation to this office was welcomed as "an honour to Indian womanhood".

In her Presidential address at the Congress Session held in Kanpur in December 1925, she observed:

In the battle of liberty, fear is the one unforgivable treachery and despair the one unforgivable sin. With palms uplifted in ardent supplication, I pray that to us in our coming hour of travail may be granted in sufficient measure an invincible faith and an inflexible courage, and that he in whose name

we begin our labours today will in the hour of our triumph keep us humble and in the beautiful words of our ancient invocation:

Lead us out of the Unreal into the Real,
Out of Darkness into the Light,
Out of Death into immortality.

As Congress President, Sarojini had to devote much of her time to party work. She also travelled extensively, especially in northern India. In 1926 she spent a good deal of time in Bengal and Uttar Pradesh.

In 1928, Sarojini Naidu 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, Sarojini Naidu participated in the first Round Table Conference convened by Lord Irwin alongwith Motilal Nehru, Jinnah, Gandhiji and Sardar Patel to discuss the demand for full dominion status. At the Lahore Congress Session in December 1929 it was a beginning of the revolutionary phase of the nationalist movement marked by withdrawal from legislatures, the demand for complete independence and non-payment of taxes. In 1930 the freedom struggle entered its final phase. Sarojini described this period as "the last and most difficult

stage of the journey, the back-breaking, exhausting, precipitous climb before reaching the top of the mountain."

The Salt Satyagraha in which Sarojini took a leading part, and her vigorous campaign for the full participation of women and youth in the public life were her outstanding achievements of this era. During this period too, Sarojini was the great peacemaker. She organised a National Week in 1940, virtually managed the whole Congress campaign at this stage, 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. In the Agha Khan Palace, Sarojini cared for and cheered the inmates with her indomitable courage and humanity, during the period of Gandhiji's fast and deaths of Kasturba and Mahadev Desai. On the whole Sarojini Naidu, as a member of the Congress High Command and as one of Mahatma Gandhi's closest friends, played an important part in this final chapter in the saga of India's struggle for freedom.

In spite of her ever-increasing involvement in politics she retained her interest in literacy and social activities, found time to travel for pleasure or to visit friends, and continued to be an efficient housewife and a charming hostess.

Asian Relations Conference

As the years rolled by, Sarojini moved from scene to scene. She was at the peak of her career when she was asked to preside over the Asian Relations Conference held in Delhi in March 1947, just six months before India attained independence. She was now the chosen leader of Asia, not of India only. Sarojini Naidu 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's Presidential address was "one of the most brilliant pieces of flaming rhetoric she had uttered during her life."

First Woman Governor

On the eve of independence, when Pandit Nehru requested Sarojini Naidu to accept the Governorship of Uttar Pradesh, she was at first unwilling to accept the responsibility but later accepted it on Mahatma Gandhi's advice to place, at the service of the nation, her lifelong experience in working for Hindu-Muslim unity. Sarojini, with her rich cultural background, political maturity and immense popularity among all sections of the Indian society was ideally qualified

to become the first Governor of Uttar Pradesh in independent India.

The people of Uttar Pradesh welcomed Sarojini warmly and soon came to look upon her with great affection. She left the stamp of her personality on the style of administration in which efficiency was combined with a certain degree of informality. In a surprisingly short time, Sarojini familiarised herself with the peculiar and complex problems of the State. She handled these problems tactfully and played a pivotal role in bringing together people belonging to rival factions and conflicting ideologies.

The Last Days

The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948 was a great blow to Sarojini. Although she remained calm outwardly, she was shaken inwardly to the depth of her being. Her health started declining. Her strength was slowly ebbing. On 10 February 1949, she fell ill and her health started deteriorating. But she travelled to Delhi to fulfil her engagements there. After four days, she returned to Lucknow, suffering from severe headache and high blood pressure and was advised complete rest. Breathing trouble now started and she was put on oxygen on 18 February. Even that also did not help arrest the deterioration.

On the night of 1 March 1949, she asked her nurse to sing to her, and uttered her last words: "I don't want anyone to talk to me." She fell asleep while listening to the song and passed away on 2 March 1949 at 3.30 a.m.

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 Shri 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 for ever. 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 a great blow it is to them to be deprived forever of her noble help.

Mourning the demise of Smt. Sarojini Naidu, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel said:

I am deeply grieved to hear of Mrs. Naidu's death.... It is difficult to reconcile oneself to the loss of that familiar figure always bubbling with good spirits and full of life and laughter. Her presence in any room or gathering was as though several candles had been suddenly lit; wherever she went she shed a light and lustre which could penetrate through the darkest gloom. The charm of her personality and the magic of her words endeared her to millions to whom she was aptly known as 'The Nightingale of India'. Alas, we shall miss that silvery voice, those expressive eyes and those meaningful gestures which added such emotional appeal to her words. During our long struggle for freedom, she represented in her person the grim determination and the heavy sacrifices of Indian womanhood.

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