

THE NIGHTANGLE OF INDIA - SAROJINI NAIDU

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The way we see it, this is a woman worth emulating for that virtue alone.

It is another matter that Naidu possessed a whole lot of other equally sterling virtues. The original nightangle of India, an evocative poet, brought glory to both womankind and politics. [SN1]

Indeed it is no exaggeration to crown an Indian poetess with such a great and symbolic sobriquet as “the nightangle of India”. Her brilliance is deeply observed in the sublime and lofty songs that she sang. Unparalleled as she stands even today, for the variegated versatility and rapturousness of her lyrics; she is the unsurpassing great woman- the woman of substance – the firebrand feminist -India’s gateway to the west –the staunch patriot-the national singer – Shrimati Sarojini Devi Naidu.

Born on 13th February 1879, in an illustrious brahmin Bengali family of the “Chattopadhyayas”, she was brought up in a liberal atmosphere, where she learnt to honour both-the ethnic Eastern as well as the modern Western culture. Her parents who were well educated themselves- {her mother Varada Sundri was a poetess, and father Agorenath Chattopadhyaya was an alchemist and D.Sc.[Edinburgh University] of those times, took care that their children learnt science, mathematics and imbibed all knowledge. He inspired and motivated his children to read literature of all sorts, Hindi, English, Bangali besides Persian, Urdu and Sanskrit. This liberal upbringing also attributed the rebellious spirit in Sarojini. It is told that once on her unwillingness to learn English, she was locked up in a room, for a whole day, which happened to be a turning point in her life, for now she came out an enlightened linguist, who very soon mastered the new language {English} and made it the medium of expressing her emotions in form of poetry. Although she wrote in English but she wrote with an Indian soul.

It is commendable that Sarojini wrote her first poem *The Lady Of The Lake* {1300 lines} when she was barely twelve years old. She herself wrote “the training under my father’s eye was sternly 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 proved stronger. It was sighing over a sum of 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.” [G 8] The intellectual parents too realized that day, that their incredible daughter was destined to be a poetess, and hence they never tried to curb/extinguish this torch of creativity in Sarojini.

The passionate, fanciful young poetess, thus composed a number of beautiful lyrics. The poetic urge, poetic refinement all further developed with her love marriage to Mr. Govinda Rajalu Naidu. She fell in love with Naidu who was a non-brahmin Andhraite and married him at the age of nineteen. It was the time when inter-caste marriages were supposed to be not only forbidden in the Indian society but were also considered to be an act of rebelliousness. Thus the years 1898-1914, mark the most fruitful years of poetry that Sarojini Naidu created.

One can easily observe the shifting trend of carefree, inquisitive young mind’s poetry to a completely experienced, matured women’s poetry. Sarojini’s poetry is a beautiful kaleidoscopic view of the image of Indian life, culture and Indianess. R.R Bhatnagar has rightly called her poetry as “the poetry of nationhood or poetry of national life”. [B23] She has skillfully weaved a beautiful picture using various strands of emotions- love, separation, ecstasy, mellowness; seasons especially spring, folklore, festivals, history, and mythology to present the vivid images of India and Indian womanhood. Whether it is Radha, Zubeidaa, a parda-nashein coy lady, a married woman, or a mother, Damyanti or a rajput princess, - all poems have a bird like rapturous, melodious, haunting, resonating and perpetual quality about them. They all sound like a sweet tintinnabulation to the readers ear. All her major themes are variegated and depict not only her love for her motherland but also her complete amalgamation in its culture. So deeply rooted are her lyrics in India that Edmund Gosse once called “Sarojini Naidu was autochthonous” [G6] Sarojini and the world definitely owe to Gosse for guiding young Sarojini to be a singer of the Indian tunes. Her early, virgin poetry was deeply influenced by the Western romantics and wrote only about English soil and climate. But after the advice of Edmund she turned her afflictions to India –and the end result was a bouquet of marvellous Indian songs all echoing Indian themes. *Palanquin Bearers*,

‘lightly, O lightly we bear her alone.....’ [1]

Bangle Sellers “who will buy these delicate bright/Rainbow-tinted circles of light?” [2] or *Indian Weavers*.

Or Radha cry “Govinda! Govinda! Govinda!” [3] in *Radha The Milk Maid* all are rays emitting from the India halo which S.N has woven around Mother India.

..Even her love poetry epitomizes pure, sacramental love on one side as of Radha-Krishna to exotic, erotic and sensuous feelings of normal lovers on the other

side. Her love poetry could not remain untouched with the pain of love, for pain is inevitable, a part and parcel of love which lovers have to endure. The Rajput Love Song, A Persian Love, The Festival of Memory all best portray this feeling.

Her works have been compiled into four major categories regarding their publications. Her first work "The Golden Threshold" was published in 1905 by William Heinemann, London. It consists of a large number of 40 melodious poems. This anthology was dedicated to her guru, her path finder, her transformer Sir Edmund Gosse. It consists of some brilliant poems on the theme of folk, music and love. The poems in this collection were varied and have a quality of a song connected to them. This volume was an instantaneous success not only in England but India too, and which was responsible for relegating Mrs. Sarojini Naidu to the threshold of the "Nightangle of India."

Her second publication "The Bird of Time" was once again published by Heinemann, London in 1912, and was dedicated to her parents, it carries an important, emotional introduction. It has 46 poems, each eloquent, admirable applauded by both Eastern and Western readers. This anthology has poems on Love, Death, Life, Indian Folk, and of Spring. When it comes to Spring, the king of the festivals, Sarojini's magical lure it seems had chanted and played the greatest of melodies, transcending, surpassing all.

In 1917 she published "The Broken Wing" which has 61 poems detailing love, death and spring once again. Although the dedication reads "To the Dream of Today" and the Hope of Tomorrow. Here she not only offers her determination to conquer her ill-health, but also pays a glowing tribute to the martyrs of the war. The Peacock Lute, The Flute player of Brindavan, The Temple, June Sunset, etc. are some exquisite poems of Sarojini. This anthology also has some sexually explicit and erotic poems, which she wrote when she was thirty-eight.

Another short volume entitled The Sceptered Flute. Songs of India were published in {1928} after which The Feather of Dawn {1961} and The Gift of India were published posthumously. Her daughter Padamja, who later became the Governor of Bengal compiled, edited them. This volume contains 37 short-poems which were written during the period of 1927 – an era of great political activity. Lokmanya Tilak, Renunciation, The Night of Myrtyrdom were some wonderful lyrics composed by Sarojini Naidu.

Hardly has it ever been observed in the life of any poet/poetess worldwide as in Sarojini Naidu's case, where the feeling of nationhood, Patriotism was so dominating that she almost gave up writing poetry and jumped in the life of national freedom. She herself felt that it was her duty to fight for the cause of freedom, in her own way. She clarifies it in one of her songs: "Anthem of Love". "Two hands are we to serve thee, O our mother/ To strive and succor, chemish and

unite/ Two feet are we to clear the waning darkness/ And gain the pathways of the dawning light". [SN32]

Patriotism had always been an integral part of Sarojini's life for nationalism flowed in her veins in form of blood, so it was very natural for Sarojini to fight for the freedom. In fact she believed that at that time it was her foremost moral duty towards her motherland, when everybody was also involved in the freedom struggle. She herself says . "When brave hearts carry the sword of battle, this mine to carry the banner of song." [SN12]

She got the real impetus when she met Shri Gopal K. Gokhale, who not only inspired but urged her to use her beautiful words to awaken and rejuvenate the spirit of Independence in the heart and soul of the Indian People. Then the glorious moment came when she met Mahatma Gandhi in August 1914, that under the great influence of this little man, she religiously directed all her energy, whole heartedly towards this great effort.

As a President of All India Congress Committee in 1920, she had said "I think it is inevitable that one should become interested in politics if one is a true Indian". [Kumar,56]

If she was influenced by other leaders it was not surprising that her dynamic personality and oratorship too attracted others. Jawaharlal Nehru too could not escape the contagion when he heard her recite "Awake". Similarly she once wrote a poem entitled "The Lotus". to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi where Gandhiji symbolically stands for this pious, king of flowers.

**"O mystic Lotus, sacred and sublime
In Myriad-petalled grace inviolate.
Supreme ov'r transient storms of tragic Fate
Thine ageless beauty born of Brahma's
breath. [SN45]**

She not only awakened the rural people of India, but as a woman she felt that it was her duty to bring into light the woman of India lying dormant and in dark labyrinth .She thus became a strong, thunderous feminist leader who actively worked for the liberation and emancipation of women. In 1917 she led a deligation to Mrs. Montagu for the cause of women's suffrage. Mrs. Montagu said "We had an intresting deputation from the women asking for education for girls, more medical colleges etc. led by Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, the poet, a very attractive and clever woman but I believe a revolutionary by heart." [P.Thomas,334].

It was for her revolutionary spirit that she went to jail a number of times and every time she came out with more zeal and determination to fight for the country. Her enormous efforts to work for women's upliftment continued with full swing. In 1918, she was instrumental in getting a resolution passed, supporting women's franchise at the special session in Bombay which demanded "the immediate acceptance of adult franchise with out any sex distinction". [P.Thomas,337].

This memorandum was accepted and women were granted equal rights as with men. With this political victory, India was way ahead of other countries who were still fighting for equality between the sexes.

In her famous book "Indian Women" Devaki has written "The entry of a woman of such an eminence into active politics was not only a great asset to the congress but a real inspiration to the hesitant womanhood of India. The fact that she left home, husband and children to identify herself with the movement of freedom had tremendous impact on women in determining their future participation the national movement." [67]

She indeed was responsible for awakening and giving a right perception to the women of India by not only re-establishing their self-esteem but also by helping them to get their justified rights and equality. She not only helped the Indian women in India but also helped to change the image of timid, subservient, submissive Indian women to a strong, assertive, dominating woman for the west. She showed that Indian women were second to none.

In 1919, she campaigned for women's Satyagraha, travelling all over India in adverse climatic conditions to awaken the women, especially to agitate them against the Rowlatt Act. In 1934 she paid a visit to South Africa on a Government delegation to represent Indian women's struggle for emancipation. In 1930, when Gandhiji launched his famous Civil Disobedience movement, and was subsequently arrested, she took the reins of the movement in her hands with strong determination and dauntingly carried forward the movement. The entire world appreciated her courage, strength and above all her organizational powers.

Sarojini Naidu was thus a lady with oriental magic. Clad in a simple sari, with high ideas and strong will powers she became an embodiment of duty, exemplum of a strong Indian woman. Greater than her poems, this great woman with different and more colours of her personality than her Bangles, remains still unfathomable. Her orations were more mesmerizing than any magic, we bow to her, the harbinger of emancipation and liberation, the Kokila of Bharat, voted as one of the "women of millenium".

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