

Semester III

Sarojini Naidu as a Freedom Fighter

Sarojini Naidu was an Indian political activist and poet who served as the first Governor of United Provinces, after India's independence. She played an important role in the Indian independence movement against the British Raj. She was the first Indian woman to be president of the Indian National Congress and appointed governor of a state.

Born in a Bengali family in Hyderabad, Naidu was educated in Madras, London and Cambridge. Following her time in Britain, where she worked as a suffragist, she was drawn to the Congress party's struggle for India's independence. She became a part of the national movement and became a follower of Mahatma Gandhi and the idea of swaraj (self-rule). She was appointed Congress president in 1925 and, when India achieved its independence, became the Governor of the United Provinces in 1947.

Naidu's literary work as a poet earned her the nickname the "Nightingale of India" by Gandhi because of the colour, imagery, and lyrical quality of her poetry. Her oeuvre includes both children's poems and others written on more serious themes including patriotism and tragedy. Published in 1912, "In the Bazaars of Hyderabad" remains one of her most popular poems.

Sarojini Naidu was an acclaimed poet and major figure in India's struggle for independence. She advocated for civil rights, women's emancipation and anti-imperialism.

Sarojini was born in a Bengali family on 13 February 1879 in Hyderabad State, India. Her father was principal of Hyderabad college and her mother a poet. Her parents had eight children, who were encouraged to pursue their creative fields.

At 12 years old, she took a university entrance exam and received the highest rank. Her play 'Maher Muneer' which was written in Persian impressed the ruler of the Kingdom of Hyderabad who allowed her to receive a scholarship to study abroad. She went on to study in England from 1895 to 1898 and travelled briefly around Europe.

When she returned to Hyderabad in 1898, she married physician Govindarajulu Naidu in an inter-caste marriage which was considered groundbreaking at the time due to inter-caste marriages being frowned upon. Despite it being seen as scandalous at the time, both families approved of their marriage.

Poetry

Sarojini is well known for her poetry that was considered beautiful enough to be sung.

Her first book of poems 'The Golden Threshold' was published in 1905 and included a sketch of a young Sarojini by Irish artist John Butler Yeats. 'The Bird of Time' was her second and most strongly nationalist book of poems, published in 1912 in both London and New York. It includes 'In the Bazaars of Hyderabad' in which she describes the common scenes in the bazaars of Hyderabad, set in the form of conversations between vendors and customers.

The last book of poems published in her lifetime 'The Broken Wing' (1917) includes the poem 'The Gift of India' which critiques the British empire's exploitation of Indian mothers. After her death in 1949, her poems and unpublished works were edited by her daughter Padmaja Naidu and collected in 'The Feather of the Dawn' published in 1961.

Activism

Sarojini became a popular public speaker in 1904, using her platform to promote women's education, women's rights and India's independence. She met social reformer and women's rights activist Muthulakshmi Reddy in 1909 and anti-colonial nationalist Mahatma Gandhi in 1914.

In 1917, Sarojini and Muthulakshmi established the Women's Indian Association. That same year she went to London to advocate universal suffrage in front of the Joint Select Committee.

Back in India, she joined Gandhi's movement of non violence resistance against British rule and travelled to London in 1919 as part of the All India Home Rule League in order to further her efforts for India's freedom.

Sarojini gave lectures in India on social welfare and women's empowerment and campaigned for more women to be represented in India's independence movement. She became president of the Indian National Congress political party in 1925 - the first woman to lead the party.

In 1930, Sarojini among other women activists including Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay persuaded Gandhi to allow women to join the Salt March, a non violent march protesting the British salt monopoly. It lasted twenty-four days and on April 6 1930, when Gandhi was arrested, he appointed Sarojini as the new leader of the campaign.

Sarojini was arrested several times due to her nationalist activities. After India's independence from British rule in 1947, she was appointed as governor of the United Provinces in present day Uttar Pradesh. This made her India's first woman governor. She remained in office until her death in 1949.

Her birthday 13 February, is celebrated in India as National Women's Day to honour women's voices in India's history. Her work along with those of other Indian women prove

that the battle for suffrage was not just fought by western women, a side of the women's suffrage movement which has been often overlooked.