



ONE of the many reasons why the 1921 non-cooperation movement led by Mahatma Gandhi is hailed as a breakthrough in

the history of the Indian struggle for independence, is its success in bringing the masses into the national movement. People, including such neglected groups as poor peasants and tribals, responded to the Mahatma's call with enormous enthusiasm. Women, another oppressed group, did not lag behind. Along with the well known cases of middle class women offering their jewellery to the movement funds, there were also cases of peasant and labouring women taking part in noncooperation and contributing to the Tilak Swarajya Fund that was set up in May 1921 to finance the movement.

In Bengal, noncooperation, initiated by Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das, received a widespread response from women, who freely attended street corner meetings and courted arrest as *satyagrahis*. But that Calcutta's prostitutes, known as *patitas* or "fallen women", also took part in the movement as volunteers and took to the streets to join the fund raising campaign for the Tilak Swarajya Fund has more or less escaped the notice of historians.

Interestingly enough, this has been documented in a book *Sikshita Patitar Atmacharit* (Autobiography of an Educated Fallen Woman) first published in 1929. The book purports to be written by Manada Devi Mukhopadhyay, a prostitute.¹ It contains a series of interesting reflections on Bengali society of the times, and seeks to document the Calcutta prostitutes' role in various sociopolitical movements in the early twentieth century.

Manada Devi was born into an aristocratic Brahman family in north Calcutta and had her schooling at the reputed Bethune school. She was lured away from home by a distant cousin who abandoned her a few months later at Mathura. Manada, who was pregnant, found temporary refuge in a *mahant's*

ashram and there gave birth to a stillborn child. The *mahant* ultimately sent her to a women's home in Calcutta. For understandable reasons, Manada, still in her teens, fell prey to a vicious circle in Calcutta and finally had to take to prostitution, aided by an aged woman

who used to keep a brothel.

An immediate factor that impelled Manada to take to prostitution was the Brahmo Samaj's refusal to provide her with shelter, on the ground that she had already taken up "a sinful path" and "had such girls been admitted that would impair the

The "Fallen" and Noncooperation

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sanctity of the Samaj.” (p.66). Ironically, one of the Brahmo leaders Manada approached was Krishnakumar

Mitra who is known as a fighter for the women’s cause. Mitra would, in 1924, form the Women’s Protection League to provide shelter to “hapless” women who had either been “inhumanly oppressed by their husbands and in-laws or seduced by miscreants.”

A considerable part of the book is devoted to description of the prostitutes’ participation in social activities. Before joining the noncooperation movement, they made their debut in public work by raising funds for the east Bengal cyclone victims in 1919. They made over this fund to Chittaranjan Das who blessed them by laying his hand on their heads.” (p.77)

The book indicates that some of the prostitutes’ clients (*babus*) encouraged them to participate in cyclone relief work and noncooperation. With tremendous enthusiasm they worked as Congress volunteers. The feeling that they were working in league with educated youths filled them with a sense of self respect and opened up the prospect of a new life:

“We, some of the *patita* women, formed a small group. Our customers would help us with suggestions and encouragement. Formerly, while collecting funds for the east Bengal cyclone victims, we had chanced to mix with the *bhadralok* people. This had added to our courage, smartness and ability. We had got acquainted with many leaders of the country. This time, when we again joined public work, Deshbandhu Chittaranjan’s associates were very happy and they would help us in many ways.

“The enthusiasm over noncooperation was such that while working together (with educated youths) we could hardly feel that we were despicable prostitutes and they young men of the educated gentry.

Those young workers also did not mind working along with fallen women (*barbanitas*).” (pp.88-89)

The following year, 1922, the prostitutes joined the fund raising drive for the floodstricken people of north Bengal and in 1924 took part in the Chittaranjan led movement against the corrupt *mahant* of the Siva temple at Tarakeswar Hugli. The book describes their participation in the flood relief campaign thus: “It was an unprecedented sight. It stunned the Calcutta people. About 50 to 60 saffron clad prostitutes taking out a procession, singing songs, hoisting banners indicating names of

organisations (*samitis*).” (p.94) They handed over their collection for flood relief to the renowned scientist, Acharya Prafullachandra Roy, who had been the president of the relief committee. Acharya Ray, the book says, received them very warmly; their role in the anti *mahanta* agitation was also praised by Chittaranjan Das. (pp.96, 105).

In 1923, Calcutta’s prostitutes donated Rs 30,000 to Chittaranjan Das during the council elections. They also took out a procession in his support, since he happened to contest the election from that part of the Chitpur area which is traditionally known as Calcutta’s redlight





area. Santosh Kumari Devi and Sarala Devi, two followers of Chittaranjan, had a meeting with prostitutes in the Chitpur area, after which the women called on him and donated the money they had collected.³

Thus, Calcutta's prostitutes formed a number of local organisations and did not hesitate to come out on the streets, making no secret of their profession. But how did the Bengali intelligentsia at large react to these events?

Contemporary Bengali periodicals which used regularly to publish the list of contributors to the Tilak Fund made no mention of the prostitutes' contribution. Aparna Devi, Chittaranjan's daughter, in a biography of her father, only recollects in passing that their campaign for the Tilak Fund appealed to all sections of people, including the prostitutes. "An article on the north Bengal floods in *Masik Basumati* of October-November 1922, refers to the prostitutes' role in raising funds for relief work, and Ratanmoni Chattopadhyay, a close associate of Prafullachandra Ray, clearly recollects that 'one day, some women, visibly prostitutes, entered Acharya Ray's room at Science College and laid before him their collection. Their faces beamed with joy when the Acharya addressed them as 'mother' and received them warmly.'"

But these few reactions excepted, the general reaction of the intelligentsia was, to say the least, furious. According to the *Atmacharit*, Chittaranjan had to face strong criticism from his associates who observed with discontent that he was allowing "fallen women" to take part in public work. Prafullachandra was also criticised for having accepted the prostitutes' collection for the relief funds; and the same fate befell Jyotirmoyee Gangopadhyay, a well known woman leader who presided over a meeting convened by prostitutes (pp. 89-90, 96-99).

The strongest reaction in print came from *Pravasi*, a reputed Bengali monthly

edited by Ramananda Chattopadhyay, a leading member of the Brahmo Samaj. *Pravasi*, otherwise known for its liberal views, took strong exception to the "bidi smoking *patitas*" attending Congress rallies and meetings, and stated that "unless they give up their sinful trade they are not entitled to take part in public work." It also deemed it "a great shame that the role played by women belonging to enlightened families in states like Maharashtra is being taken over by *patitas* in Bengal." *Sanjivani*, edited by Krishnakumar Mitra, also joined the hullabaloo, condemning those who had allowed prostitutes to join the non-cooperation and *mahant* movements.⁷ In the *Atmacharit*, Manada remorsefully confesses that prostitutes' participation in the movement sometimes led to excesses which could be condemned in view of conventional tenets of morality. But the intelligentsia's reaction went beyond this. The self styled custodians of social morality felt worried that *bhadralok* youths were freely mixing with women of immoral identity. They also sermonised that the freedom movement meant invoking the motherland (*matripuja* or mother worship) and fallen women could not join in this. Concern was also expressed over the rising awareness among the prostitutes and their move to form *samitis* in Calcutta and Barisal (now in Bangladesh). In Barisal, some Gandhian leaders helped organise the prostitutes and were severely criticised for this by another section of the leadership.⁸ Ironically, Gandhiji, when he once visited Barisal, not only refused to address a meeting organised by prostitutes but remarked: "If prostitutes can form *samitis*, why shouldn't burglars and dacoits?" (p.99) This was how the father of the nation looked at his "sinning" daughters, quite forgetting that it was in response to his call that prostitutes in Calcutta and Barisal had started spinning and wearing *khadi*, and raising funds in aid of non-cooperation.

Recent studies have indicated a pattern discernible during both the non-

cooperation and civil disobedience (1930) movements.⁹ People belonging to the lowest rungs of society interpreted Gandhi's message in their own ways in accordance with their own mores, and responded to his call to join the freedom movement. But the leadership, which was always afraid of popular excesses, either ignored these uprisings or made attempts to soft pedal them. It is in this perspective that the rising awareness among the Calcutta prostitutes and the leadership's reaction to it may be viewed. Seized with enthusiasm, the prostitutes joined the movement with the feeling that they were contributing to the cause of freedom. But the elite, barring a few exceptions, simply looked upon them with contempt, holding that prostitutes had no moral right to participate in social work or even to form organisations. Some well known leaders, according to the *Atmacharit*, actively tried to thwart the prostitutes' efforts, and the same Krishnakumar Mitra once again proved most vocal in this (pp. 97-99).

That the stirrings amongst prostitutes really worried the intelligentsia is also indicated by the fact that a bill against prostitutes (not prostitution) was sought to be placed before the legislative assembly.¹⁰ It is, therefore, also natural that the *Atmacharit*, which won tremendous popularity, going into four editions in five months, and being translated into Hindi and English, raised many eyebrows. The book was condemned as 'vulgar and based on unfounded facts.' Nationalist newspapers claimed that the book was immoral and also that it defamed well known Congress leaders. On the latter count, they demanded a case of libel. *Bangabani* of December 8, 1929, alleged that "It is said that one Kailash Acharyya of Mymensingh is the real author of the book and that he was aided and abetted in this nefarious act by a certain Chakravarti holding the title of 'Pandit', who is now trying to set on foot an all-India agitation against the Sharda Act, and a well known "Bannerji" who is a professor in a Calcutta College..."

শিক্ষিতা পতিতার আত্মচরিত

বাংলার সাহিত্য ও সমাজে বিপুল আলোড়নের সৃষ্টি করিয়াছে। সমাজে গল্প
কোথায় বুদ্ধিতে হইলে সভ্যতার সৃষ্টি সভ্যতার বলি

পতিতা শ্রীমানদা সুন্দরী দেবীর

নিজ জীবনী পাঠ করুন।

পতিতাদের ঘৃণ্য ব্যবসায়ের পরিপোষক বাহারা তাহাদের মধ্যে বাংলার অনেক
দেশকর্মী, হাইকোর্টের জজ উকীল ব্যারিষ্টার অধ্যাপক এক কথায় সমাজের
দীর্ঘস্থায়ী ব্যক্তিগণকে দেখিয়া আপনার জাতীয় জীবনের পরিণতির গতি
বুদ্ধিতে পারিবেন।

পাপের নয়মূর্তি আপনার চোখের সামনে ফুটিয়া উঠিয়া আপনাকে জীবনপথে
সতর্ক করিয়া দিবে।

তিন মাসের মধ্যে তিনটি সংস্করণ নিঃশেষিত হইল।

মূল্য ১।।০ ইংরেজী সংস্করণ ২ টাকা হিন্দী সংস্করণ ১।।০

প্রতিদিন প্রকাশ পাইবে, গল্প

True copy of the advertisement published in “SHANTIP”, a periodical published from Dhaka (now in Bangladesh), Dec-Jan 1929. (Paus, 1336b). The advertisement says: “The book has created a great flutter in Bengali society. It offers you an insight into the root of the social malady and exposes the hypocrisy of the custodians of society — leaders, lawyers, professors — Who all patronise this loathsome profession. The book has run into 3 editions in 3 months.”

An investigation into this charge was conducted by the public prosecutor who concluded that the book was “not written by a woman of the Town as it purports to be ... but it must have been written by a man with very good groundwork of education.” The public prosecutor also noted that the book was “likely to do good to the society by exposing the vagaries of many so-called public men.”¹² In other words, there was no evidence to show that the allegations made about these men were not true.

In fact, the book’s critique of the so-called guardians of society seems to have raised the middle class ire. The *Atmacharita* is written in a modest and sober style, and is nowhere vulgar. But in the preface it states that its purpose is to “expose the hypocrisy of the sham moralists who occupy a high rank in society.” The book attacks the double standards applicable to men and women in society:

“A woman, when she becomes fallen, seems to have lost all her value. Even if one insults her, one cannot be

held on charges of defamation by law. But the same law allows (defamation charges) in the case of a ‘fallen’ man. Why? Because the law has been framed by men.... Why don’t those in the Congress council who demand equal rights for men and women press for a solution (to this) at the legislative council? ... In the event of none putting up this demand at the coming council session, we would be forced to conclude that all those who clamour for equal rights are sheer liars. Either fulfil our demand or expel the fallen men from the council and such other bodies.” (preface to the second edition).

The book is also seriously concerned with women’s cause. Although it takes a rather conservative stance on certain issues, advocating early marriage and opposing free mixing of boys and girls, yet it also stands against the torture of housewives. In reaction to the suicide of a housewife, Aparajita, whom she had known, Manada says: “Are the

custodians of the society aware that such tragic things are now taking place in almost every family? The society is going astray. The miscreants who can buy prestige for money go about scot free.” (p. 110)

Notes and References

1. Though the book’s authorship is questionable, even if the book is written by someone else, seeking to pass it off as an autobiography, the book nevertheless shows familiarity with the prostitutes’ world and the historical events detailed in it are authentic, hence it remains a valuable historical document. It was originally published by R. Chakravarty and Co., Calcutta, in September-October 1929. In this article, I have relied mainly on the recent edition published by SAMGA, Calcutta, 1985, and page numbers in parentheses throughout refer to this edition. I have also consulted the second edition (November 1929) at the National Library, Calcutta. Thanks to Indrani Chatterjee for information on the dispute as to the book’s authenticity and for the quotations from the public prosecutor’s letter and from *Bangabani*.
2. See the appendix section of Krishnakumar Mitra’s autobiography *Atmacharitra*, ed. Kanailal Chattopadhyay.
3. Manju Chattopadhyay, *Shramikneti Santoshaimari*, p. 49.
4. Aparna Devi, *Manush Chittaranjan*, p. 223.
5. Acharya Prafullachandra birth centenary commemoration volume, ed. Debipada Bhattacharya et al (in Bengali).
6. *Provost*, August 1921; December 1922. 1. Quoted in *Pravasi*, August 1924.
8. Manmathamohan Das’ letter published in *Pravasi*, January 1923.
9. See, for example, Sumit Sarkar, *4 Critique of Colonial India*.
10. *Bharatvarsa* (a Bengali monthly), March-April 1922.
11. Preface to the second edition. Some favourable reviews also appeared, as, for example, the one published in *Shanti*, Nov.-Dec. 1929, ed., Yogeshchandra Das. *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (November 24, 1929) also praised the book.
12. Public Prosecutor to the Legal Remembrance, December 11, 1929, File No. 666/ 1929, Govt. of Bengal, Home (Political). □