

SAROJINI NAIDU: VOICE OF FREEDOM, EQUALITY, AND EMPOWERMENT IN INDIAN POLITICS

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Abstract

This paper examines the multifaceted political career of Sarojini Naidu (1879–1949)—a pioneering freedom fighter, poet, and stateswoman—whose life symbolizes the fusion of art, activism, and leadership in modern Indian history. As a leading figure in India's struggle for independence, Naidu's political journey reflected a dynamic blend of intellectual brilliance, oratorical power, and unwavering patriotism. The study traces her evolution from an eloquent advocate of women's education and suffrage to a central figure in the nonviolent nationalist movement under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership. Her contributions to the Women's Indian Association (1917), participation in the Non-Cooperation and Quit India Movements, and leadership during the Salt Satyagraha underscore her integral role in mobilizing both women and men toward the cause of freedom. The paper also highlights her appointment as the first woman Governor of the United Provinces (Uttar Pradesh) after independence—an achievement marking the culmination of her public service and a significant milestone in Indian political history. Through an analysis of her speeches, activism, and administrative tenure, this study underscores Naidu's enduring legacy as a visionary leader who redefined the role of women in Indian politics and national life.

Keywords: Sarojini Naidu; Women's Rights; Indian Independence Movement; Non-violence; Nationalism; Social Reform.

Introduction

Sarojini Naidu (née Chattopadhyay) (13 February 1879 – 2 March 1949) was a distinguished Indian political leader, freedom fighter, and poet, who became the first woman Governor of the United Provinces (present-day Uttar Pradesh) after India's independence. Renowned for her active participation in the Indian independence movement against British colonial rule, she was also the first Indian woman to serve as President of the Indian National Congress and later as the first woman governor of an Indian state.

Born into a Bengali family in Hyderabad, Naidu received her early education in Madras and pursued higher studies in London and Cambridge. During her stay in Britain, she became involved in the suffragist movement, which deepened her commitment to social and political reform. On her return to India, she joined the Indian National Congress and became a close associate and follower of Mahatma Gandhi, embracing his ideals of *swaraj* (self-rule) and non-violence. In 1925, she was elected President of the Indian National Congress, and following India's independence in 1947, she was appointed Governor of the United Provinces, marking a milestone in the participation of women in Indian politics.

In addition to her political career, Naidu was an accomplished poet, earning the epithet "Nightingale of India" from Mahatma Gandhi for the vivid imagery, lyrical grace, and emotional depth of her verses. Her literary works encompass a range of themes—from the innocence of childhood to patriotism and personal sorrow. Among her notable compositions, "In the Bazaars of Hyderabad"

(1912) remains one of her most celebrated poems, reflecting her deep appreciation for Indian culture and life.

Considering the foregoing discussion, the present paper attempts to examine the political career and contributions of Sarojini Naidu to India's national movement.

The Rise of a Voice: Sarojini Naidu's Early Oratory

From 1904 onwards, Sarojini Naidu emerged as a powerful orator advocating for Indian independence and women's rights, particularly emphasizing women's education. Her speeches often reflected the structured logic of Nyaya reasoning, blending intellectual precision with emotional appeal. In 1906, she addressed both the Indian National Congress and the Indian Social Conference in Calcutta, marking her growing prominence in public life. Her humanitarian work during flood relief earned her the Kaisar-i-Hind Medal in 1911, which she later returned in protest the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919.

Naidu met Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy in 1909 and Mahatma Gandhi in 1914, whose ideals profoundly influenced her political vision. In 1917, alongside Reddy, she co-founded the Women's Indian Association (WIA) to promote social reform and women's empowerment. That same year, she accompanied Annie Besant to London to present the case for universal suffrage before the Joint Select Committee. A supporter of the Lucknow Pact, which fostered Hindu-Muslim unity in the demand for political reform, Naidu's eloquence combined poetic imagery with persuasive rhetoric.

Her oratory, marked by sincerity and lyricism, earned her widespread admiration and established her as one of India's foremost public speakers.

Women's Rights and Nationalism: The Political Vision of Sarojini Naidu

Sarojini Naidu skilfully combined her poetic talent and oratorical brilliance to advance the cause of women's rights alongside the broader nationalist movement. Encouraged by nationalist leader Om Shanti, she entered active politics in 1902. By 1906, she was addressing the Social Council of Calcutta, passionately advocating for women's education and emphasizing that the success of India's freedom struggle was inseparable from the emancipation of women. She asserted that women, not men, were the true "*nation-builders*," and that national liberation could not be achieved without gender equality.

In 1917, Naidu co-founded the Women's Indian Association (WIA), providing a vital platform for Indian women to voice their concerns and demand their rights. That same year, she represented a delegation—along with Annie Besant and other leaders—that met Edwin Montagu and Lord Chelmsford to advocate for women's suffrage and self-government. The delegation's demands were followed by public meetings and conferences, reflecting a growing unity among Indian women in the political sphere.

In 1918, Naidu moved a resolution on women's franchise at both the Bombay Provincial Conference and the Special Session of the Indian National Congress, urging Indian men to support women's enfranchisement as a mark of national progress. She reminded audiences that women had historically played vital roles in India's political and spiritual life, arguing that granting suffrage would simply restore their rightful place. In her speech at the Bombay Special Congress, she proclaimed that the "*right of franchise is a human right and not the monopoly of one sex*."

Despite widespread support from the Indian National Congress, the Muslim League, and other reformist groups, the Southborough Franchise Committee rejected women's suffrage. The Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms (1919) ignored women's demands entirely, a setback that prompted Naidu—representing the WIA—to travel to London, where she presented a memorandum before the Joint Select Committee of Parliament, arguing that Indian women were ready to exercise the right to vote. The Government of India Act (1919), however, left the issue to provincial councils, which introduced limited franchise rights between 1921 and 1930.

During the 1920s, Naidu increasingly integrated women's emancipation with the nationalist struggle, believing that political independence and gender equality were inseparable. In 1925, she became the first Indian woman President of the Indian National Congress, symbolizing women's growing influence in national politics. Throughout the decade, she inspired and organized women to participate in nonviolent resistance, strikes, and political demonstrations. Her 1930 pamphlet urged women to move beyond passive observation and take active roles in the freedom movement, declaring it their "*duty to join the fight against British rule*."

Through her leadership and rhetoric, Sarojini Naidu positioned women as central agents of political change, effectively linking the women's movement with the struggle for India's independence.

A Voice of Peace: Naidu's Contribution to India's Nonviolent Struggle

Sarojini Naidu developed close associations with prominent national leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Rabindranath Tagore, and Sarala Devi Chaudhurani. Deeply inspired by Gandhi's philosophy of *ahimsa* (non-violence), she joined the Satyagraha movement after 1917, dedicating herself to the struggle for India's independence through peaceful means.

In 1919, Naidu traveled to London as part of the All India Home Rule League, continuing her advocacy for self-governance and India's political freedom. She actively participated in the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1920, encouraging Indians to reject British institutions and embrace national unity.

Naidu's influence extended beyond India's borders. She represented the Indian National Congress at the East African Indian National Congress in 1924 and became the first Indian woman to preside over the Indian National Congress in 1925. A strong advocate for women's participation in public life, she co-founded the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) in 1927. The following year, she toured the United States, promoting the ideals of nonviolent resistance and India's right to self-determination. In 1929, she presided over a session of the East African and Indian Congress in South Africa, reinforcing solidarity among Indian diasporic communities.

Naidu played a historic role during the Salt Satyagraha (1930). Although Gandhi initially hesitated to include women in the march due to its physical hardships and the likelihood of arrests, Naidu, along with Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Khurshed Naoroji, successfully persuaded him. Following Gandhi's arrest on 6 April 1930, Naidu assumed leadership of the campaign, symbolizing

women's courage and resilience in the face of colonial repression.

While the Indian National Congress boycotted the First Round Table Conference in London, Naidu participated in the Second Round Table Conference in 1931, held after the Gandhi–Irwin Pact, representing India's demand for constitutional reforms. For her active participation in the freedom struggle, Naidu was imprisoned several times, including in 1932 and again during the Quit India Movement of 1942, when she was detained for 21 months.

Through her commitment to nonviolent resistance, Sarojini Naidu emerged as a symbol of moral strength, blending political activism with Gandhian ideals to inspire generations of Indians—especially women—to join the struggle for freedom.

From Freedom Fighter to Governor: Sarojini Naidu's Final Chapter of Service

Following India's attainment of independence in 1947, Sarojini Naidu achieved yet another historic milestone when she was appointed as the Governor of the United Provinces (present-day Uttar Pradesh), thereby becoming the first woman governor in independent India. Her appointment symbolized the nation's commitment to gender equality and the recognition of women's contributions to the freedom struggle.

As governor, Naidu brought to the position her characteristic warmth, eloquence, and humanitarian spirit. Known for her inclusive approach, she worked to bridge the gap between the people and the newly formed government during the critical early years of India's nation-building. Her residence, the Raj Bhavan in Lucknow, became not just an administrative center but also a hub of cultural and intellectual exchange, reflecting her lifelong devotion to art, literature, and social harmony.

Naidu's governance style was deeply influenced by her Gandhian ideals of simplicity, nonviolence, and service. She maintained a close relationship with leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, contributing to the consolidation of democratic institutions in the post-independence period. Despite the ceremonial nature of her role, she used her position to encourage education, communal harmony, and women's participation in public life, continuing her lifelong mission of social reform.

Sarojini Naidu served as Governor until her death on 2 March 1949, at the age of seventy. Her tenure marked the culmination of a lifetime dedicated to the causes of freedom, equality, and national unity, leaving behind a legacy that combined poetic sensibility with political vision.

Conclusion

Sarojini Naidu's political career embodies the spirit of India's freedom movement—deeply rooted in courage, compassion, and conviction. Rising from a gifted poet to one of the foremost voices of political and social reform, she successfully merged artistic expression with patriotic purpose. Her early oratory established her as a persuasive public speaker who linked nationalism with gender equality. As a tireless campaigner for women's rights, she transformed the women's movement into a force parallel to the struggle for independence, asserting that the liberation of India and the emancipation of its women were inseparable. Her steadfast commitment to Gandhian nonviolence and active participation in movements such as the Salt Satyagraha and Quit India Movement positioned her among the most respected leaders of her time.

In her final years as the Governor of the United Provinces, Naidu continued to embody the ideals of unity, service, and equality that had guided her throughout her life. Her tenure symbolized not only the triumph of Indian democracy but also the recognition of women's vital role in shaping the new nation. Sarojini Naidu's legacy endures as that of a trailblazer who bridged poetry and politics, leaving behind an indelible mark on India's history as the Nightingale of India and a pioneer of women's leadership in public life.

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