

Renuka Ray: A Pioneering Woman in Indian Women's Movement

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Abstract--*Renuka Ray was a pioneering woman in Indian Women's movement. Belonging to an affluent and educated family in undivided Bengal, she opted for an unconventional life of social service. Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi she left college and donated her jewellery to the cause of non-cooperation movement. She was one of the two women to enter the Legislative Assembly where she voiced her opinion on the reform of Hindu marriage bills and the decision to withdraw the ban on women working in underground mines. Women's movement in India, she felt, was fundamentally different from the women's movement in the West in the sense that here the movement was not for the establishment of women's rights but rather for the restoration of rights which women had enjoyed in the past when Indian civilization was at its height. She observed that women in every sphere were lagging far behind. They were completely under patriarchal control. Even after independence majority of women had limited opportunities with regard to education and employment. Constant child-birth without proper medical facilities had made women prematurely old. She urged society to give economic value to the labour put down by women in domestic front. She was also one of the founder members of the Women Co-ordinating Council under which several women's organisations came together to work especially during the time of emergencies. She was feminist in the sense that she believed that women should get all the opportunities to develop themselves fully, but she did not believe in creating a division between men and women. Rather, she felt, they were complementary to each other. She also believed that women's organisations should not confine themselves only with the welfare of women, but should also concentrate on the uplift and welfare of the entire society.*

Keywords: women, rights, opportunities, equality, restoration.

Renuka Ray: A Pioneering Woman in Indian Women's Movement

Renuka Ray (1904-1997) was born in an affluent, educated and nationalistic minded family. But, instead of living a life of comfort and luxury, she opted for an unconventional path- that of social service. This provided her with the opportunity of witnessing the life of ordinary Indian women. Throughout her whole life she strove hard to bring about significant reforms in the life of ordinary women. 'Her achievements were many, but were taken lightly.'¹ (Sen, 2002:368).

She was born to Satish Chandra and Charulata Mukherjee on 4th January, 1904. Her father, starting off as a brilliant academic had later on joined the Indian Civil Service. But his career suffered because he preferred to promote the welfare of the people rather than the British empire. Renuka's father's influence notwithstanding, her

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maternal grandmother and mother remained role models for her. Renuka's grandmother Sarala Ray championed the cause of female education in Bengal. She started the Gokhale Memorial School in Calcutta which remains a well-known school even in present times. Renuka considered her mother Charulata Mukherjee to be an early feminist. She was one of the first two girls to enter the portals of the prestigious Presidency College, Calcutta. She established the All Bengal Women's Union, dedicated to the welfare of women. Under her guidance Renuka and her brothers pursued similar hobbies and extra-curricular activities and all of them were taught basic domestic work. Thinking beyond her times, Renuka's mother encouraged her daughters to select their own careers.

Renuka was a student of the first year class at the Diocesan College for Women when Gandhiji gave his clarion call for non-cooperation with everything British. Responding to his call she along with Lalita Ray were the first two girls to leave the college and join the non-cooperation movement. She even donated her bangles to Tilak Swaraj Fund, created to help victims of social disabilities. On her father's insistence in 1921 she went to England and enrolled herself in London School of Economics. She enjoyed her days there as 'It opened many doors for me because it fostered every school of thought.'² She realized the necessity of land reforms in India in eradicating poverty and also understood the importance of village reconstruction and revival of handicrafts. She also worked as a volunteer in the 1922 general election in Britain campaigning for the Labour party. Her task was to encourage the women to vote. It was in England that she was engaged with Satyen Ray, an ICS officer. They were married on 26th October, 1925. Accompanying her husband to his rural postings in different districts Renuka got the opportunity of knowing a great deal about the ground realities of rural Bengal. In Burdwan and Hoogly district of undivided Bengal she started a women's group with the help of non-resident women to provide welfare services like maternity and child welfare, schooling for children and girls, crèches for children of working women etc.³ With the help of Maharani of Burdwan, local women were also inducted into the task. She also observed the destruction of rural handicraft industry and strongly believed that Gandhi's ideas on village reconstruction could play a vital role in revitalizing the economy in an effective way. On Gandhiji's advice she began her work for rural reconstruction in a couple of small villages with Sandeshkhali as the centre, near Mainamati, Comilla where women in joint families after finishing their household chores, came to work with her.

In the 1940s she became a member of the Central Assembly where she got an opportunity to fight for women's rights. Women at that time had no legal protections. The agitation demanding the appointment of a Hindu Law Committee was unleashed on a full swing throughout the country. At the same time different women's organisations led by the AIWC pressurized the government to nominate a representative of the women's organisations in the Central Assembly to argue the case in favour of women. The government at last agreed and as an apolitical organisation the AIWC decided that it would support the government only on social and educational reform measures and not on any political issue. Renuka was selected to represent the women's organisations in the Central Assembly. She became a member during the Budget session in February, 1943. She has described the atmosphere of the Central Assembly as 'masculine.' Apart from her, the only other woman member was Radhabai

Subbarayan. The Hindu Law Bills on Marriage and Intestate Succession was introduced by the Law Member on 23rd March, 1943 which recognized daughter's claim to the father's property on equal level with that of the son. In her speech she referred to the bill as conservative as the bill, though intended to remove sex-disqualification, did not in any way bring equality.⁴ After the general discussion on the bill on intestate succession, it was referred to a select committee. But by that time the government had come to realise that those who actually opposed the bill were British loyalists, though their numbers were few. The government faced a crisis over the budget in 1944 when it was short of only one vote to pass the budget. Renuka was approached to support the government as it was thought that she would be an easy target as her husband was a government official. But despite threats to her husband's career and other temptations she remained firm on her stand and as a result the government lost the budget by one vote. She wrote: 'Thereafter, I was completely cold shouldered by the government benches and the estrangement deepened.'⁵ The government's loss of face had serious repercussions on the fate of the women's bill. The government declared that with regard to the daughter's right of inheritance, as the matter was still very controversial, therefore it had to withdraw support from it. Eventually the Hindu law bill was dropped.

During her stint in the Assembly she questioned the government's decision to withdraw the ban on the employment of women in underground mines. As underground work by women in mines was reprehensible and contrary to all human considerations, the Geneva Convention no.45 of 1935 prohibited women from employment in underground mines. India signed the convention and in 1937 the Government of India imposed the ban on employing women in underground mines. But in 1943 the government by a mere notification in the Gazette withdrew the ban on the ground that it had led to shortage of labour, it had reduced the family wage, family life had broken up and husbands were zealous of their wives who did not accompany them underground.⁶ Renuka refuted all these reasons and accused the government of violating the convention as according to one of the provisions of the convention a signatory country in order to withdraw, had to give one year's notice. The AIWC sent an Investigation Committee comprising Renuka, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Kamala Chatterjee, to the coal mines of Raniganj and Jharia to investigate the matter. After weighing all sides of arguments they suggested: (1) a minimum living wage and hours of work should be fixed, (2) tasks like loading wagons, sorting, basket making, weaving and spinning could be the alternate sources of livelihood for women on the surface.⁷ But Renuka felt that not enough had been done to provide employment for women on the surface. The Government of India pointed out that after the withdrawal of the ban 10,000 women went underground in mines although there no such compulsions. But Renuka pointed out that a woman used to earn three to five annas a day for surface labour while for underground labour they earned eight to eleven annas.⁸ When faced with such a situation women had no choice. She also revealed that pregnant women were not prohibited to work underground and the numbers of such cases were not few. Even where the Maternity Benefits Act existed, the women enjoyed its benefits only for a month. In a fair number of cases under-aged boys and girls were employed to meet the problem of labour shortage. On 8th February, 1944 Renuka introduced an adjournment motion in the Assembly asking for a re-imposition of the ban by the government. The Congress, the Muslim League and others fully supported her motion, but the government won by a majority of

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official votes. The government, however, facing strong opposition on the issue of withdrawal of the ban gradually softened its stand and after a couple of months, re-imposed the ban.

About her stint in the Assembly, she felt that the objectives with which she had entered the Assembly could not be achieved. The legislation for the betterment of the condition of the women could not be passed. But her experience in the Assembly made it easier for her to operate herself in future. She also felt that though women did not succeed in changing the social laws, they had won a psychological victory by convincing a section of the public opinion of the necessity of a social change.

With regard to Indian women she wrote that women throughout their lives were under patriarchal control. But Women's movement in India, she felt, was fundamentally different from the women's movement in the West in the sense that here the movement was not for the establishment of women's rights but rather for the restoration of rights which women had enjoyed in the past when Indian civilization was at its height.⁹ When the political movement for India's independence started the question of women's emancipation became an integrated part of it. During Gandhian mass movements women from different walks of life came forward and joined the mass movement. During emergencies like riot and famine women had played a notable part. In independent India women had equal rights of enfranchisement on the basis of adult suffrage along with men. Legally there were no restrictions against women in politics or in public life or in matters of employment. As a result, women of the middle and upper middle classes had benefitted. She found the position of women in India paradoxical. She wrote:

We have highly educated women who hold responsible jobs and lead independent lives and have blazed a trail in politics and public life. But by their very success they have increased the gulf between themselves and the less privileged women.¹⁰

She observed that amongst the women who had opportunities that were denied to others, it was the few and not many who had come forward in the task of nation-building.

A great majority of women work with meagre wages which did not allow them to have minimum living standards. She noted that progressive laws, passed by the Parliament, had often worsened the condition of women, instead of improving their conditions. 'Employers . . . preferred to get rid of their women workers rather than comply with the law.'¹¹ In spite of women taking up different professions and vocations, the greatest impediment to the women's progress was the lack of educational opportunities for women. The disabilities in social laws often acted as a great deterrent to women and often caused great injustice to them. Health wise too, she found the picture not very encouraging for women. Early marriage, high fertility, idealization of the roles of mother and housewife affected women's physical and mental health.¹² Malnutrition was high among women especially among the poor. Mortality rate was also high among women. In the absence of family planning, women were never free from repeated child-births. She also observed that due to lack of education the Indian mother was unaware of the most elementary rules of hygiene and health, of child welfare and of diets. Therefore, it was extremely urgent to establish

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a sufficient number of maternity and child welfare centres, clinics for family planning and adult education centres throughout the country and in every village, thereby enabling every woman not only to cope with her household chores but also to allow her to become conscious citizens of the country.¹³

Renuka felt that a woman's economic dependence went against her. She considered a housewife to be as much a working woman as men and women earning their livelihood outside. But the society did not recognise the economic values of the essential services performed by the women and in consequence their prestige suffered.¹⁴ Notwithstanding the fact that a large number of women were seeking employment, she argued, the vast majority of women would contribute their services as economic units in the domestic sphere. Therefore, she strongly believed that it was the duty of the women's movement to change the attitude of the society and to give full recognition of the economic value of the housewife.¹⁵ At the same time, she urged the women to come out of their homes. She wrote:

The nation is but the larger home. The experience gained in managing the affairs of the home can rightly guide women to take part in municipal or civic work or in the nation's affairs.¹⁶

Therefore, ways and means had to be found out, whereby women could contribute as citizens, without neglecting their household duties. She also did not hesitate to suggest that the women's organisations should not confine its activities only for women. She wrote:

Women's organisations can no longer afford to circumscribe their activities to subjects relating to the progress of women only. They can only justify their existence if they can put forward the effort in an integrated manner to lay the pattern of the society of the future and work for the all-round development of the country.¹⁷

Renuka also suggested ways and means through which women could become self-sufficient and contribute towards nation-building. Renuka suggested if women could put their ornaments and jewellery in National Savings, it would enrich the country as well as improve their personal finance. The money so raised could then be spent on the training of womenfolk.¹⁸ Secondly, for women belonging to the poor and the middle class families, new means of generating income would have to be explored, so that their family wages could be augmented; thereby setting a minimum living standard.¹⁹ Thirdly, new ways and means had to be devised through which the quality of goods produced in the industrial centres could be improved and an adequate machinery established, facilitating the sale of such products and fourthly, in the villages and in smaller district towns co-operative centres for women had to be started with the goal of all round development.²⁰ With a view to augmenting the spirit of social service, personnel implementing different projects would have to be trained from the village level. Women could also play a leading role in encouraging the purchase of cottage industries and handicrafts.

Renuka was the President of the AIWC from 1952 to 54. It was under her tenure that the AIWC celebrated its silver jubilee. Under her guidance the AIWC decided that their activities should be conducted in an integrated manner for an all-round development of the society. During the 1952 elections a pledge to support the Hindu Code Bill was drafted by the Conference and members went to candidates to obtain their signatures on it.²¹ Under her tenure the branches actively arranged meetings to mobilise public opinion for the Hindu Marriage and Succession bills and other government bills of social importance. Under her encouragement *An All India Day* for the removal of

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legal disabilities was held on 9th April, 1954. *Roshni*, the journal of the AIWC also published a special issue on Women's legal disabilities. During her time, the Madras branch established a cancer institute on 18th June, 1954.

Renuka was also instrumental in establishing the Women's Coordinating Council (WCC) in 1959. Under its banner, a large number of women's organisations combined to work together, particularly during emergencies like floods, cyclone etc. At the outset fifty organisations worked together successfully during the floods of 1959. While working together, the WCC was careful that the entity of each individual organisation was kept intact and no attempt was made to encroach upon their normal functions. During emergencies distribution work was undertaken through its members and local workers with centres set up in affected areas under its own supervision.²²In 1968 the WCC had established rehabilitation centres in Jalpaiguri district of North Bengal. The WCC also came forward during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. By June of that year, over seven million evacuees had arrived in India to escape the atrocities committed by the Military Junta of Pakistan. The WCC ran a number of relief centres in different border districts of West Bengal.²³ In Chandpara, the WCC instituted a fully equipped medical unit from the month of May. WCC emphasized on children's feeding programme, medical care, schooling and handicraft training for women. A residential training centre for Bangladeshi girls had also been started to train women in nursing and handicrafts. Apart from emergency relief, the WCC also pioneered new ventures like home for the aged and the Consumers' Action Forum in 1973. It also started providing legal aid to poor women in semi-urban and rural areas.

Renuka felt that one of the most commonplace difficulties that nearly all voluntary associations offering social welfare work confronted was organisation of funds - this took away much of their time and energy. The government and semi government sources did provide grants but too many delays hampered welfare work. Besides, it was necessary that the voluntary sector retain its independence and therefore too much reliance on government grants was not considered desirable. To solve this problem, she suggested the creation of a 'Community Chest' with the combined understanding and good will of all which she hoped, would provide available funds that would help the individual organisations to work unhindered.²⁴

On the position of women in independent India her argument was that women acquired equality under the law and the constitution. But for a majority of women, this remained only on paper. In fact, she commented, the question of equal rights were a '... a mockery for those who are ignorant, victims of social prejudices, which hamper the development of women in society.'²⁵But what she found shocking was the fact that the dowry system, trafficking in women and children and other decadent and degrading customs which were the outcomes of double standards of morality for men and women had become more widespread.²⁶ Laws that were enacted to penalise these practices were not enough to stop them. Only a change in social conscience could produce effective results. She felt that the change had to come first at home which constituted the basic unit of society. For women, education was of utmost importance, because in order to inculcate right approach among the children, the mother had to be educated. A daughter from the childhood was taught domestic work, while the son was exempted. Men were singled out to play their part in national and international affairs.²⁷ During the first seven months of the year 1975(International

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Women's Year), women organisations met women on door to door contacts, public and mahalla meetings, in training camps, over the radio and in the press to create awareness of their rights. While stressing equality of men and women in all spheres, she reminded that equality did not mean mere duplication of men's endeavour.

Renuka was happy to observe that in independent India women were gradually coming forward to take up different professions. She was particularly impressed by those women who had joined the IAS, medical and legal professions. However, she pointed out that in the field of journalism, there was still prejudices operating against women.²⁸ Similarly, in the field of education women had achieved excellence, but '... their chances of reaching the highest rank in their services in many states have yet to come.'²⁹

One of the aims of the women's movement in India was to ensure equal pay for equal work for women. But she observed that there was a steady decline in the number of women employed in certain professions like mining, agriculture, plantations and industries largely due to the fact that maternity benefits and other amenities had to be provided to women workers as per law. She felt that the denial of the precautionary measures associated with motherhood appeared to be one of the most common injustices meted out to women workers, despite the fact that they were prepared to do their duties.³⁰ The position of the educated women was relatively better, but they had to be more efficient than their male counterparts to improve their grades and secure promotions.³¹

These issues notwithstanding, Renuka also laid stress on the issue of lack of family planning and its possible impact upon the lives of women. It was the women who had to pay the price for the lack of family planning. They became emaciated and prematurely old due to the birth of so many children and that too without the provision for adequate maternity or child welfare amenities.³² She suggested that integrated health centres covering maternity, child welfare and family planning should be introduced.

When the Hindu Code Bill was enacted she strongly supported the Divorce Laws, which were a part of the bill. Marriage, to her, was an institution ensuring the protection and safeguard of the family and more importantly the children. A normal, peaceful environment was the basis for the welfare of a child. But when such conditions were not possible, then under such circumstances, dissolution of marriage was a better option, as it could prevent the child from the stress and strife that prevailed at such a home (Ray Private Papers: E). Her advanced way of thinking regarding marriage was manifested when she suggested that marriage should never take place between people suffering from incurable diseases, which were likely to be transferred to their child. To prevent such a happening, a test should be carried out. If such a marriage did happen, there should be a provision for divorce.³³ On 9th December, 1959 during the discussion on the Dowry Prohibition Bill, she sharply retorted that though such a Bill was no doubt welcome, but the members should not be complacent, as it could hardly be effective unless there was a simultaneous change in the social psyche.³⁴

She was particularly impressed with the way the Indian women, especially the rural women participated in the general elections in India. She pointed out that in the first general elections held in 1952 almost 60% of the rural

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women exercised their voting right.³⁵ She recalled that when she contested the Lok Sabha elections in 1957 women overwhelmingly supported her and she won with a comfortable majority. But what was disappointing was the fact that in the following years, the number of women going to parliament or state assemblies was not that high. This was partly because educated women were unwilling to contest elections on behalf of political parties. Most parties were male-dominated and therefore reluctant to give nomination to women. Even if the party was led by women, she too preferred candidates without a strong personality or determination.³⁶

Renuka was quick to point out that some sort of complacency had crept into the women's movement during the 1950s. This was because women wrongly believed that after independence a new constitution and some progressive laws would bring about a better environment for women. Even the AIWC which always highlighted the need to change the attitude of society towards women started concentrating only on constructive social work.³⁷ As a result of this complacency, women could achieve little by the year 1975, which happened to be the International Women's Year as well. Most of the women, she observed, were unaware of their basic rights. Legal aid was not available to most of the women. Age old prejudices weakened the progressive laws intended for the welfare of the women. 'A great deal of effort was required to sweep aside the old prejudices and remove the disabilities that women still suffered.'³⁸ She also pointed out that men were not the only enemy of women. Women were often their worst enemies. Therefore, she believed in creating a society where men and women would not be divided into hostile camps. 'Men and women have much to learn from each other.'³⁹ Progress could not be achieved by merely emulating men, but women should be provided with opportunity to develop themselves fully and freely so that they could contribute their best to society.⁴⁰

She was feminist in the sense that she believed that women should get all the opportunities to develop themselves fully, but she did not believe in creating a division between men and women. Rather, she felt, they were complementary to each other. She also believed that women's organisations should not confine themselves only with the welfare of women, but should also concentrate on the uplift and welfare of the entire society. She was also flexible in her ideas. During the Constituent Assembly days, she opposed any reservation for women. But with time she dropped her opposition to it. She lost many of her near and dear ones prematurely, but the zeal to serve the society, which she inherited from her grandmother and mother was never failing, till her death in 1997.

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