

From silk To Salt & Satyagraha

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It was an irony the British took a while to digest—how such a small community known for its loyalty to the Crown had managed to stir up so much ferment for an independent India. Interestingly, not only did Parsis figure at the forefront of the freedom struggle, the most radical anti-Raj voices were women from the community, led by Bhikaiji Cama, Perin and Goshasp Captain (Dadabhai Naoroji's grand-daughters) and Mithuben Petit.

Parsi women were among the country's first to be educated, a reform they used to advantage. Expectedly, their learning did not go unopposed. Many protested the "impudence" of the newly educated girls, an attitude criticised in the lines of a song: "*Sikhi bhani hushiar bani/Mai baap ni sambhe thai/Aay ghutan jelli duttio/Bas itrai itrai jai* (These newly educated girls are so rude to their parents, and are suddenly too proud).

At the helm of the tumult rose Bhikaiji (Madam) Cama, whose uncommon patriotism and firebrand courage are now legendary. Outstanding among revolutionaries abroad, the "sentinel of liberty" as Nawaz Mody dubs her in the book *The Parsis in Western India, 1818-1920*, Madam Cama touched innumerable lives with the courage of her convictions. She was deeply stirred by the formation of the Indian National Congress in 1885 and believed that if women joined the political arena it would lead to their emancipation. A hundred years ago, on August 22, 1907, she made a striking sight at the second International Socialist Congress in Stuttgart. Sari pallav over head, she strode on to the stage to unfurl a green-yellow-red striped flag emblazoned with the words 'Bande Mataram' before the global gathering there. And declared with typically passionate oratory, "This flag is of India's independence...I appeal to lovers of freedom over the world to cooperate with this flag in freeing one-fifth of the human race." From delivering lectures at London's Hyde Park and being invited by Lenin to settle in Russia to having her portrait alongside Joan of Arc in French newspapers and spiritedly travelling to the United States and Africa with her flag, Bhikaiji raised radical awareness of Indian rights on foreign soil during her long exile.

Madam Cama's contemporaries, the sisters Perin and Goshasp Captain honoured their grandfather's political aspirations for the country. When Perin studied at the Sorbonne in 1905 she came in contact with Madam Cama. The liaison emboldened Perin to act audaciously—she burst into nationalist songs at a conference in Brussels and defiantly visited Veer Savarkar in jail under the name of Miss Ardeshir.

On Pateti day 1906 Perin drew her Oxford-educated sister Goshasp's attention to "that very nice man with very nice eyes" at a boat party on the Thames hosted by Jamshedji Tata, where Gandhi was also present. In her book *Women in India's Freedom Struggle*, Mody describes the charged encounter. Though clad in morning coat, striped trousers and a diamond tiepin,



FREEDOM CRY: Madam Cama and the flag she hoisted at Stuttgart

A century ago,
Madam Cama
unfurled the first
Indian flag
before the world.
She inspired a
generation of
Parsi women
patriots

Gandhi enlisted the sisters' support for his rights struggle in South Africa.

A decade later, in 1915, Gandhi returned from South Africa to plant the seeds of revolt that would energise an entire nation into fighting for freedom. At a public meeting held at the Petit ancestral home, he explained his ideas of swadeshi and satyagraha. Inspired, Perin and Goshasp traded their luxurious silks for coarse white khadi saris and spearheaded campaigns

to propagate swadeshi through the popular women's organisations Rashtriya Stree Sabha and Desh Sevika Sangh. All this aimed at "breaking the Empire" as Goshasp termed it. The feisty sisters revelled in what was regarded as aggressively working against the state while their solicitor husbands (the Captain brothers) held jobs upholding the law.

They were not the only ones to eschew great wealth and status for the country. Born into an affluent Petit family, Mithuben Petit grew to espouse non-violence and rural activism, influ-

enced by Gandhi's view that real India lives in her villages. She played a pivotal role in events in Gujarat like the Bardoli anti-tax campaign and flood relief in Kheda district, besides her participation in events related to the Dandi March and civil disobedience.

Mithuben also established Stree Swarajya Sanghs in and around Surat where over 1,500 women were instigated to peacefully picket shops selling foreign cloth. Her family was aghast. Not minding her social work as much as Mithuben sparking opposition to the British, they exhorted her to renounce such "ridiculous" activities or risk disinheritance. The lady's cool but simple retort must have been echoed by several bravehearts like her then. "It is your business to sit with the government and mine to remain with the nation."