

Critical Study of Political, Social and Educational Concerns of Smt. Shakuntala Shastri

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Introduction

Change is an eternal law. Be it in society, politics, family, or individual. Every moment goes through a period of change. In the context of history, change is a very important event, which affects both the present and the future. Indian society has witnessed extensive social and political changes in the modern period. The entire struggle for independence has been an exercise of change. In this struggle, not only did men take the front for reform and change, but a commendable contribution was also made by women. Many women have played a leading role in the attainment of independence and in the development of society and education in independent India. One of them is Mrs. Shakuntala Shastri. The early half of the 20th century witnessed the most effective and drastic transformation of Indian society. A distinctive change was in the perception of personal life both in lifestyle and philosophic approach. The medieval stringent social ethos and superstitions transformed into practical material and worldly life. For sure this change was owing to the industrial and market economy coupled with contemporary education of science and social sciences. Europe witnessed these changes in the 19th century.

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Shakuntla Ji in Public Life

As dealt with in an earlier chapter Smt. Shakuntla Shastri's role in public life started with her contribution to developing Mahila Vidhyalaya a center of women's education in Kankhal (Haridwar) with her husband Mool Chand Shastri. However, it is interesting to note that not her husband's home. They could gather a clue from Swami Dayanands beginning of the social reform movement of 'Khandan- Mandan' from 'Kumbh fair' of Haridwar (Mid 60's of 19th century).

Haridwar accorded a rare opportunity for initiating a social movement like women's education as almost all the sects of Hindus visit Haridwar. Hence Shastri couples efforts of women's education shall give a positive signal to the then Hindus Pilgrims at Haridwar to shun superstitions of keeping their daughter's illiterate and subtend. This was the sense in early 20th century India.¹ Besides this point Shastri couple was strengthened to start the institution of women education at Haridwar as a few leading institutions of Arya samaj for men's education were in existence in that township. They were 'Gurukul Kangri' (now a University) and Mahavidyalaya Jwalapur.²

Besides educational mission at Mahila Vidhyalaya, Kankhal, Smt. Shakuntla Shastri actively participated in the socio-political activities of the national movement, the Indian National Congress. In 1939 she was nominated to the educational committee of the Saharanpur district board as a member under section 57 to 'The Uttar Pradesh District Board Act 1922.'³ It was a new role for Smt. Shakuntla Ji because as she has written a letter of her husband Mool Chand Ji at Behsuma that primary and middle school education in rural areas of District Saharanpur was in a very challenging situation. Govind Vallabh Pant Government's basic education program has a great potential but difficult to implement professional courses like Carpentry and Jute weaving is difficult to rope at a primary level.⁴ However, Smt. Shakuntla Ji willingly resigned in early 1940 after congress at the National level protested against British Raj's is stand of fighting of 'Freedom and Liberty at Europe and keeping India a colonial slave.' Smt. Shakuntla Ji also resigned

along with other congressmen and women holding any position at elected institutions.”⁵ Again in 1946 Smt. Shakuntla Ji was denominated to the District Board Saharanpur. But owing to fast-developing events she has to resign again in December 1946 in line with the directive of the congress organization.⁶

The dawn of Independence witnessed see change in socio-political activities in India. Mahila Vidyalaya at Sati Kund was recognized up to High School in 1945, It was cleared for intermediate level classes in 1948. Mool Chand Ji was eventually formed by circumstances to shift to Meerut from Haridwar in 1948. Hence an Smt. Shakuntla Ji also had naturally roped into socio-political activities of the Divisional headquarter of Meerut which was also a very powerful district of U.P. with having Ghaziabad, Noida, Baghpat forming part of Meerut district.⁷ Another major spin in the public life of Smt. Shakuntla Shastri took place in 1959. In the summers of 1959 Smt. Shastri was nominated chairperson of the social welfare board (Samaj Kalyan Board) in 1959.⁸ At the National level this organization was first created in August 1953. Durga Bhai Deshmukh was the first national chairperson Uttar Pradesh organization of Samaj Kalyan Board was first came into being in 1954 having Smt. Prakashwati Sud as its chairperson. She had an uphill task to create norms, as well as proposed activities through an advisory board at the state level.⁹

Smt. Shakuntla Shastri was nominated the District president of the Samaj Kalyan Board for Meerut. Begum Ali Zaheer personally requested Smt. Shastri to accept the job as Meerut was targeted to be one of the lead districts of Uttar Pradesh for organized women upliftment program.¹⁰ For over two and a half years Smt. Shakuntla Shastri relentlessly worked and created so odd centers board at various villages with vast districts of Meerut comprising of modern districts of Ghaziabad, Noida, Baghpat besides Meerut.

The record reveals some prominent centers at villages Chitmana, Poothi in Tehsil Mawana works in fostering and rebuilding confidence in women in rural areas. She also commended Smt. Shastri for creating more than 100 centers in the district Meerut. Where 80 such centers are very active.¹¹

Much strained and difficult accessibility to villages, Smt. Shastri had fallen sick in the winters of 1961-62. Hence on medical advice Smt. Shastri had to resign in January 1962.¹² However although she had resigned but by that time the functional 80 odd rural centers were in firm existence. In the last two years, several hundred workers were ready to continue their work in Samaj Kalyan boards center or independently.¹³ Smt. Shastri's personal cherish was such that she was invited by some such centers of the board even after her resignation.¹⁴ Twice she consented and eventually visited the (Kalina) village center in 1962 and 1963.

Ironically, today television channels, multimedia has opened the flood gates of information as well as market economy has eventually changed the perception and priority interest of individuals of society as such masses are more individualistic cinema stars and cricketers have become national celebrities and politics as well as parliamentary system has become a mere mechanical exercise of polity. Mid 20th century also witnessed new socio-cultural imitations one such evolution was the exercise of family planning.¹⁵ Ministry of health vide their letter No. F14-13/65-FP III sanctioned an amount of Rs. 3.4 lacs to the institute to carry out a service or diagnostic studies to test methodology and operational procedures necessary to carry on informational programs at the national state and local levels. In September 1965 A.C.F.P.I. team began to work out the first project under this grant. It was decided to assist a district to plan and implement a family planning mass information program which might serve as a model for other districts.¹⁶

After careful thought and discussions with the state and district authorities, Meerut district in the state of U.P. was selected to conduct the study because although close to Delhi the northern two-thirds position is typically rural in character. The southern part of the district with adjoins Delhi state, is a rapidly growing industrial area from with important data and methodologies might emerge. District family planning staff had been sanctioned state and district authorities welcomed CFPI assistance in their family planning programme.¹⁷ Smt. Shakuntala Shastri was appointed the leader (Chairperson) of the extension educators group which had to spearhead the program in different parts of Meerut district (Comparing of modern Baghpat, Ghaziabad, and Noida district).¹⁸ In March 1966, there were three centers in the district that were inserting IUCD's the family planning center in Ghaziabad, and the women's hospital in Baraut.¹⁹ It was also pointed out of the CFPI team that Meerut district had been the leading district in the state in performing vasectomy operations.²⁰ This performance was due to the massive effort of the extension educators led by the district community development personal (extension educators) of which Smt. Shakuntala Shastri Ji successfully led as leader of the district program.

Besides, these public assignments, Smt. Shastri acted on several other fronts also. In February 1964, the secretary Nauchandi committee had intimated Smt. Shastri vide letter dated 22 February 1964 that the Nauchandi committee has elected you (Smt. Shastri) as president flower show 29 committee'.²¹ Different was the ways and parameters of the public life in mid 20th century India. Prominent citizens with having an educational background absolutely different types of the assignment were attributed at different time spans. In 1972, Smt. Shakuntala Shastri was nominated to

the telephone advisory committee for Meerut Division. In those days there was only one agency of telephones in India. All the public (grievances) of various individuals and groups regarding telephones and telegraphs were thrashed out and solutions sorted out at the Divisional committee meetings. Unlike today when we have a number of cell phone companies, the communications were confined to the government department of telegraphs and telephones. As such the monopoly factor and demand and supply mismatch was a major factor that people aspiring to have telephone connection had a genuine crisis. It was for this reason, recollected Shri Raj Bal Sharma freedom fighter that Smt. ShakuntalaShastri accepted this assignment.²¹

The objective of reviewing various activities of late Smt. ShakuntalaShastri for the sole purpose that social order in mid 20th century had not only accepted the leadership role of the personalities connected with the national movement, but was also inspired by their leadership role. Smt. ShakuntalaJi actively played her dominating role in her advisory capacity in the telephone and telegraph committee.²²

Smt. ShakuntalaShastri image recalls former principal of MahilaVidialya Inter College, 'was during her lifetime and later, was one of a highly committed and lovable person whose presence in any post, could 32 elevate the status of that post. His demise in June 1979 has closed an era of grand leadership at Kankhal center of women's education which she had established along with her husband.

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