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The Role of Women in the Indian Freedom Struggle: Contributions, Challenges and Historical Significance

[*1]Sumayya Thesneem KH

[*1]Department of History, Fathima Arts and Science College, Calicut, Kerala, India.

Abstract

The Indian freedom struggle was a broad-based movement in which women played a significant role in challenging British colonial rule. Although women's participation was initially restricted by social customs, patriarchal attitudes and limited educational opportunities, the growth of nationalism encouraged women to enter public and political life. Women participated in revolutionary activities, mass protests, boycotts, political organisations and non-violent movements. Leaders such as Rani Lakshmibai, Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, Aruna Asaf Ali, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Captain Lakshmi Sahgal made notable contributions to the independence movement. This paper examines women's participation in different phases of the Indian freedom struggle, their contributions to nationalist politics, the challenges they encountered and the historical significance of their involvement. It argues that women's participation was not merely supportive but also helped transform the freedom struggle into a wider movement for political independence and social change.

Keywords: Indian Freedom Struggle, Women Freedom Fighters, Nationalism, Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment.

1. Introduction

India's struggle for independence was one of the most significant anti-colonial movements of the twentieth century. The movement developed through several phases of political resistance, social reform, revolutionary activities and mass mobilisation against British colonial rule. Although prominent male leaders have received considerable attention in historical narratives, women also made important contributions to the national movement.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Indian women faced several social restrictions, including limited access to education, child marriage, purdah and exclusion from many public institutions. However, social reform movements, the spread of education and the growth of nationalism gradually created opportunities for women to participate in public life.

Women entered the freedom struggle in different capacities. Some organised demonstrations and boycotts, while others led protests, supported revolutionary organisations, faced imprisonment and participated in political negotiations. Their involvement challenged both British colonial authority and traditional assumptions about women's roles in society.

Therefore, the role of women in the Indian freedom struggle must be understood not only in terms of their contribution to independence but also in terms of their efforts to expand women's political participation and social rights.

2. Early Women Freedom Fighters

Women's resistance to colonial rule began before the emergence of mass nationalist movements. The Revolt of 1857 provided important examples of women's participation in armed resistance.

Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi became one of the most prominent figures of the Revolt of 1857. She resisted British expansion and fought against British forces to defend Jhansi. Her courage and leadership made her an enduring symbol of resistance to colonial rule.

Begum Hazrat Mahal of Awadh also played an important role in the revolt. She opposed British annexation and helped organise resistance in Awadh. Her leadership demonstrated that women could participate directly in military and political struggles.

Similarly, Kittur Rani Chennamma had resisted the East India Company's expansion in 1824. Her resistance preceded the Revolt of 1857 and became an important example of early anti-colonial opposition.

These women demonstrated that resistance to colonial rule was not exclusively a male activity. Their contributions also established a legacy of women's courage and political involvement that influenced later generations.

3. Women in the Swadeshi and Home Rule Movements

The early twentieth century witnessed the expansion of

***Corresponding Author:** Sumayya Thesneem KH

organised nationalism. The Swadeshi Movement, which developed following the partition of Bengal in 1905, encouraged the boycott of British goods and the promotion of Indian-made products.

Women participated by organising meetings, promoting indigenous goods, encouraging the use of khadi and supporting the boycott of foreign cloth. Their participation helped bring nationalist ideas into homes and local communities.

The Home Rule Movement, associated with Annie Besant and Bal Gangadhar Tilak, further strengthened political awareness. Annie Besant, an important political activist, campaigned for self-government and encouraged greater political participation.

In 1917, Sarojini Naidu led a delegation of women to present demands for women's political rights to British officials Montagu and Chelmsford. This initiative connected the nationalist struggle with the demand for women's suffrage and equal citizenship.

Women's organisations, including the Women's Indian Association established in 1917, also created platforms for discussing education, political representation and social reform. These developments helped prepare women for more extensive participation in subsequent nationalist movements.

4. Women in Gandhian Movements

Mahatma Gandhi's emphasis on non-violent resistance and mass participation opened new opportunities for women's involvement in the freedom struggle. Women could participate in satyagraha, public demonstrations, picketing and constructive programmes without necessarily joining armed organisations.

During the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1920–22, women supported the boycott of foreign goods, promoted khadi and participated in public meetings. Kasturba Gandhi played an important role in nationalist mobilisation and constructive activities. Her participation demonstrated how women contributed to the movement through both public activism and community organisation.

The Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930–34 marked another important phase. The Salt Satyagraha challenged the British monopoly over salt production and taxation. Women participated in salt-making, demonstrations, the boycott of foreign cloth and the picketing of liquor shops.

Sarojini Naidu became particularly prominent during this period. Following Gandhi's arrest, she helped lead the protest at the Dharasana Salt Works in May 1930. Her leadership demonstrated women's capacity to direct major campaigns of civil disobedience.

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay also made important contributions to the Civil Disobedience Movement. She encouraged women's participation in political protest and challenged social restrictions that limited their public roles.

These movements expanded women's political experience and helped transform the nationalist struggle into a more inclusive mass movement. Nevertheless, women's participation did not automatically eliminate gender inequalities within nationalist organisations.

5. Women in the Quit India Movement

The Quit India Movement, launched in August 1942, represented a decisive phase of the struggle against British rule. Following the arrest of many senior nationalist leaders, women played important roles in sustaining protests and organising resistance.

Aruna Asaf Ali became a prominent symbol of the movement when she hoisted the Indian National Congress flag at Gowalia Tank Maidan in Bombay on 9 August 1942. She subsequently remained active in underground resistance and nationalist communication.

Usha Mehta contributed through the establishment of the underground Congress Radio, which broadcast nationalist messages and information during the movement. Her work demonstrated the importance of communication in sustaining political resistance under colonial repression.

Matangini Hazra, an elderly freedom fighter from Bengal, participated in anti-British demonstrations. She was shot by British police during a protest in Tamluk in September 1942 while carrying the national flag.

Sucheta Kripalani also participated in the nationalist movement and contributed to underground activities during the Quit India period.

Women organised meetings, distributed information, supported protesters and continued resistance despite arrests and repression. Their activities showed that the movement could survive even when many established male leaders were imprisoned.

6. Revolutionary Women and the Indian National Army

Not all women freedom fighters followed the methods of non-violent resistance. Some participated in revolutionary organisations and armed struggles against colonial rule.

Kalpana Datta was associated with the Chittagong revolutionary movement led by Surya Sen. She participated in revolutionary activities against British authority and was subsequently imprisoned. Pritilata Waddedar also became known for her involvement in revolutionary resistance in Bengal.

Their activities illustrate the diversity of strategies adopted during the Indian freedom struggle. While some nationalists emphasised non-violence and civil disobedience, others considered revolutionary action necessary to challenge colonial rule.

Another important contribution came from Captain Lakshmi Sahgal, who served in the Indian National Army under Subhas Chandra Bose. She led the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, a women's military unit established to participate in the struggle for India's independence.

The regiment challenged prevailing assumptions about women's suitability for military service. Although its members did not achieve independence through a decisive military victory, their participation represented an important development in the history of women's political and military mobilisation.

7. Contributions of Women Beyond Political Protest

Women's contribution to the freedom struggle extended beyond demonstrations and revolutionary activities. They worked in education, social reform, public communication, political organisation and community mobilisation.

Many women encouraged national education, promoted indigenous industries and supported the use of khadi. Others organised public meetings, raised funds for nationalist activities and helped spread political awareness among ordinary people.

Women also linked the demand for independence with questions of education, suffrage, social equality and citizenship. Their participation strengthened arguments that political freedom should be accompanied by opportunities for women to exercise their rights.

However, women did not constitute a uniform social group. Their experiences differed according to class, caste, religion, region and access to education. Educated women from urban and politically active families often had greater opportunities to assume leadership roles, while rural and working-class women frequently contributed through local networks and community-based action.

Recognising these differences is essential for developing a comprehensive understanding of women's participation in the freedom struggle.

8. Challenges Faced by Women

Despite their contributions, women faced numerous obstacles. Patriarchal social structures restricted their mobility and public participation. Many women encountered opposition from family members and communities when they entered political activities.

Participation in nationalist movements also exposed women to arrest, imprisonment, police violence and social criticism. Revolutionary activists faced additional risks associated with underground political activities and armed resistance.

Gender inequality continued within the nationalist movement itself. Although women were encouraged to participate in mass campaigns, leadership positions were not always equally accessible to them. Women's political demands could also be overshadowed by the immediate objective of achieving national independence.

Furthermore, the contributions of many women, particularly those from rural and marginalised communities, received less attention in mainstream historical accounts than those of prominent leaders.

These limitations demonstrate the importance of examining women's participation critically rather than assuming that the freedom struggle automatically produced gender equality.

9. Historical Significance and Legacy

India achieved independence on 15 August 1947. Women's contributions to the freedom struggle formed an important part of the political and social history that preceded independence.

The participation of women helped broaden the social base of nationalism, challenged traditional gender roles and demonstrated their capacity for political leadership. Their activities also strengthened demands for equal citizenship and political representation.

Independent India adopted universal adult suffrage, granting women and men equal voting rights under the constitutional framework. Although the achievement of these rights cannot be attributed to a single movement or group, women's activism during the nationalist period formed an important part of the wider struggle for political equality.

The legacy of women freedom fighters remains relevant today. Their experiences encourage historical reflection on gender equality, political participation, social justice and the relationship between national freedom and individual rights.

10. Conclusion

Women played a multifaceted role in the Indian freedom struggle. From the armed resistance of Rani Lakshmibai and Begum Hazrat Mahal to the mass campaigns led by Sarojini Naidu and the underground activities of Aruna Asaf Ali and Usha Mehta, women contributed through different methods and across different historical periods. Captain Lakshmi Sahgal and the Rani of Jhansi Regiment further demonstrated women's participation in organised military resistance.

Their contribution was not limited to supporting male nationalist leaders. Women emerged as political organisers, protest leaders, revolutionaries and advocates of social reform. At the same time, they confronted patriarchal restrictions, unequal access to leadership and the risks associated with political resistance.

A complete understanding of India's independence therefore requires the recognition of women's experiences and contributions alongside those of other participants in the national movement. Their history reminds us that political freedom becomes more meaningful when it is accompanied by equality, dignity and opportunities for all citizens.

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