

# **Role of Women in The Indian Freedom Movement**

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## **Abstract**

*The history of struggle movement of India and fight against imperialism would be incomplete without accounting the contribution of women and their sacrifices. Women fought with true spirit, selflessness and undismayed courage during the freedom movement. Many females have played the most imperative part in making India free from the Colonial Rule. Their conscientious and admirable involvement in the freedom struggle is evident. The participation of women in the freedom struggle and in national consciousness is praiseworthy and remarkable. Women tried to change the ideology and perception of orthodox and stereotype person who thought women were meant to do only household works. India got Freedom after a long and difficult struggle. To ignore the contributions and dedication of women to the Indian independence struggle would be injustice to the history. To raise awareness of the many women who participated in struggle for Indian independence. This paper examines their contributions to the cause. It attempts to highlight the contribution that women have had in the Indian National Movement.*

## **Keywords:**

*Freedom movement, Society, British rule, Gandhian Movements, Exploitation, Religion and Region.*

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The Indian Freedom Movement (1857–1947) was a monumental struggle against the British colonial rule, marked by diverse participation across gender, class, and region. While male leaders often dominated historical narratives, women played pivotal roles as activists, organizers, and symbols of resistance. From the early uprisings to the mass movements led by Mahatma Gandhi, women's contributions were integral to the movement's success. This paper explores the multifaceted contribution of women in India's fight for independence, focusing their leadership, struggle and impact on shaping national consciousness. Drawing on the historical accounts, it examines key figures, movements, and the socio-cultural barriers; women overcame to contribute to India's liberation. Women are not a weaker section; they are much stronger than men.<sup>1</sup>

Begum Hazrat Mahal was a brave lady, She was second wife of Wajid Ali Shah. She fought bravely against the injustice of British East India Company during the mutiny of 1857. Rani Lakshmi Bai was the ruler of Jhansi during the uprising of 1857. She played a huge part within the revolt of India in 1857. The colonial rule wanted to occupy the Princely State of Jhansi under the cover of 'Doctrine of lapse' coined by Lord Dalhousie. Sir Hugh Rose came to capture the city of Jhansi in 1858 but the queen of Jhansi was not ready to surrender, she faced the imperialist power with full of courage.<sup>2</sup> However due to lack of resources she couldn't save her state and died while fighting. Hugh Henri Rose, a British army officer, commented that 'she is the most dangerous of all Indian leaders' during the uprising of 1857.<sup>3</sup>

Annie Besant was one of the staunch supporters of Indian autonomy and played a vital role within the Theosophical Society. She had taken an interest within the political exercises in India. Annie Besant joined political and also the religious movement based on the ideology of 'Karma' and 'Re-birth.' In 1916, she founded All India Home Rule League with the help of great Indian leader Bal Gangadhar Tilak.<sup>4</sup> Many branches throughout India were opened to organized agitations and demonstrations for the demand of Home Rule.<sup>5</sup> It was his contribution that the British declared that they are working towards the betterment of the Indians and for the Indian Self Government i.e. Home Rule also. She became the first women President of the prestigious Congress party in 1917 session held at Kolkata. Her active and dedicated participation in politics gave new direction and hope to Indians to work more harder for the Independence.<sup>6</sup>

Sarojini Naidu was also one of the pioneer female freedom fighters who fought against the cruelty and injustice of British Government. She worked tirelessly to advance equality for women and played a pivotal role in establishing women's groups. Women's empowerment and social welfare were common themes in the speeches delivered by her. She led the Indian National Congress and was named the country's first female senator after India won its independence. Her commitment in battle for freedom will always be remembered.<sup>7</sup> In 1917, she was in the guiding lamp to launch Women's Indian Association. She was the first Indian women to become the President of Indian Congress at Kanpur session in December 1925.<sup>8</sup> In 1930 during the Dharasana Salt Satyagraha, she was one of the leading women protesters, who faced the cruelty of the British. She acted as Governor of the Uttar Pradesh from 1947-49.<sup>9</sup>

Sucheta Kripalani was a solid promoter of women's rights and education. She took part in the Indian autonomy movement during the decade of 1940 and worked towards elevating the status of women in India. Sucheta Kirplani was native of Haryana, born in Ambala on June 1908,<sup>10</sup> Like Aruna Asaf Ali she was also the key figure of the Quit India movement (1942-45). During the communal riots, her work was praised by Mahatama Gandhiji with a special reference. She worked with Gandhiji in Noakhali during the communal riots 1946. She was elected to the Constituent Assembly and was the part of the sub-committee that drafted the Indian Constitution. Thus we can say that she contributed

in many ways during the freedom movement,<sup>11</sup> from 1963 to 1967; she served as Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh. She continued working for downtrodden, the backward classes and weaker sections in her last days too.<sup>12</sup>

Aruna Asif Ali was a pioneer and political ideologue who played an important role in the Quit India Movement (1942-45), which pressurized the British government to give freedom to India. She was the head of the Delhi Branch of the Indian National Congress and a well-known and impressive person in the organization. She was one of the main activists in the Salt Satyagraha movement and inspired many others to participate in this Gandhian Movements.<sup>13</sup> She was put into jail two times in 1931 and in 1932.<sup>14</sup> It is matter of pride that she created history by becoming the first elected Mayor of Delhi in the year of 1958. She was honored with the 'Bharat Ratna' posthumously in 1997.<sup>15</sup> Madam Bhikaiji Cama (1861-1936) was also among the brave freedom fighters of India who played a crucial role for Indian freedom movement outside India. She was the first person who unfurled India's flag at an International Assembly. She was associated with revolutionaries also and helped them with resources like money and material. She bought books and journals from France and Germany for Indian revolutionaries. Kamla Nehru (1899-1936) was very popular during the Non Co-operation Movement. During the movement her area of actions was Allahabad. She formed groups of females and protested in front of the shops of liquor and foreign clothes.<sup>16</sup>

Vijay Lakshmi Pandit (1900-1990) was a notable freedom fighter, diplomat and politician. She took part in the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930 and 1931-32.<sup>17</sup> Local Self Government and Public Health department was successfully worked under her ministership.<sup>18</sup> She is famous for her political and diplomatic role during the independence struggle and even after that.<sup>19</sup> Indira Gandhi (1917-1984) is also known as a great politician and famous Prime Minister of India. Her grandfather, father and mother were among the great freedom fighters who fought against the British Imperialism and their contribution is commendable.<sup>20</sup> She became the prominent Prime Minister of India for continuous three terms since 1966 to 1977 and again from 1980 to 1984.<sup>21</sup> Kamla Devi Chattopadhyaya is also known for her contribution in the Salt Satyagraha during the Civil Disobedience Movement.<sup>22</sup> She visited the United State of America with a view to familiarize and convince the people of U.S.A. about the actual and authentic situation of India and to gain sympathy and help from them. After departure of the British from India, Kamla Devi's interest shifted from politics to Co-operative Organizations and towards the betterment of the poor and needy people. She was awarded with the second highest civilian award 'Padma Bhushan' in 1955.<sup>23</sup>

In Punjab the participation of women was also large in number. Brave ladies like Radha Devi, Lado Rani Zutshi, Atma Devi, Kartar Kaur, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur etc. participated in the boycott of the Simon Commission and gave new life and energy to the movement. In Uttar Pradesh, Swarup Rani Nehru, Begum Abdul Qadir, Suniti Devi and in the Central Provinces Anusuya Bai were the leading faces and contributed a lot. Kusum Ben, Ganga Ben, Mani Ben, Madhumati etc. contributed a lot in the non-payment of taxes movement in Gujrat and in the other Provinces. The efforts of women played important role in the success of Gandhian Movement.

### **Contribution of Women and Gandhian Movements:**

From the outset of Indian National Congress (1885), its membership was open to all and women were also given membership offer.<sup>24</sup> During this phase of the non-violent *Satyagraha*, a few women were given the opportunity to participate in anti-British activities. In this regard, Smt. Bhag Devi wife of Lala Duni Chand of Ambala, was the first woman in the Punjab province to perform anti-war *Satyagraha*. She gave notice of her intention to break the law on 5 December 1940, by shouting anti-war slogans in Lahore city. Before she could perform *Satyagraha*, Smt. Bhag Devi was arrested

on 5 December from her son's residence at Begum Road, Lahore. She was arrested under D.I.R. 129 and was taken to Female Jail in Lahore.<sup>25</sup> Meera Behn was a close disciple and associate of Gandhiji. She went London to accompany Gandhiji to Second Round Table Conference in 1931. She contributed in social reforms also.

Civil Disobedience Movement under the ideology of Gandhiji was to be initially carried out without participation of women in it. However it was due to the vision of Gandhi that women like Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu, Kamla Devi Chattopadhyaya, Basanti Devi, Urmila Devi, Hemprabha Majumdar and many others emerged as political figure. Gandhiji made the Indian National Congress a people's congress and the national movement a mass movement with a large participation of women in it. The role of Mahatma Gandhi in Indian freedom struggle is considered the most significant as he single-handedly spearheaded the movement for Indian independence.<sup>26</sup> The Satyagraha, truth and non-violent techniques of Gandhi formed and strengthen the freedom struggle movement against Britishers and these techniques attracted the youth and females to participate in the movement.<sup>27</sup>

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, in her autobiography 'Inner Recesses, Outer Spaces', Explained, how her mother Girijabai set up a Mahila Sabha to awaken and bring women together on one platform to discuss and solve their problems. Rameshwari Nehru's women's journal 'The Stree Darpan', was also popular among the masses.<sup>28</sup> A women's organization named Jyoti Sangh, in Gujrat was established in 1927,<sup>29</sup> this organization propagate the ideas and ideology of Gandhian Movement and spread awareness among women.

The second phase of the Civil Disobedience Movement began with the arrest of Gandhi in January 1932, Congress was declared unlawful. To continue with non-violent Satyagraha Dictators were appointed and war councils were formed. A total of 19 women were appointed Dictators in the Punjab province of which two were from the eastern region Sohni Devi from Hissar and Mohini Devi from Bhiwani. Similar programs of picketing foreign cloth shops and liquor shops were carried out by the women volunteers. As a result, female leaders were arrested and imprisoned.<sup>30</sup> While Gandhian movements emphasized non-violence, revolutionary groups pursued armed resistance, and women were active participants. The Anushilan Samiti and Jugantar groups included women like Pritilata Waddedar and Bina Das, who carried out daring attacks against British officials. In 1932, Pritilata led an armed raid on a European Club in Chittagong, sacrificing her life in the process. These women defied societal expectations, proving that revolutionary zeal was not confined to men. Their actions inspired others to join secret societies, contributing to the radical wing of the freedom struggle.

The last phase of the National Movement was the Quit India Movement, which began with the arrests of Gandhi and other prominent leaders on 9 August 1942 in Bombay. In this phase, the women again became very active and put their hearts and souls into the movement. Again, it was a mass movement, and Gandhi asked every man and woman to carry a badge on his or her person bearing the motto 'Do or Die'. Gandhi declared, "This is the last struggle of my life," he gave the slogan of Quit India.<sup>31</sup> Besides active participation in the National Movement, many women whole heartedly made their contribution to the Gandhian constructive programs that were best suited to them. To promote khadi, women organized Charkha Sangh and competitions at various places. The participation of women gave moral strength to the National Movement. Their involvement inspired others in the locality to come forward, as well as their own children, for the successive stages of the National Movement. The National Movement made simple housewives the leaders and dictators of the movement. Their participation produced a set of capable, creative, and dedicated women leaders who contributed to the making of an independent nation. Their participation, experience in jails, and hardships made the veiled women bold enough and fearless even after independence.

The participation and contribution of females in the National Movement is a saga of their sacrifice, sufferance, and, above all, fortitude, and courage in their conviction. The women, despite their delicate health, spent months together in dark, dingy prison cell without proper diet, but nothing could deter them. Rather in the hour of need, they unveiled themselves and assumed new roles to shoulder the responsibility with their men folk. From Rani Lakshmibai's battlefield heroics to Aruna Asaf Ali's defiance in 1942, women shaped the trajectory of India's struggle for independence. Their participation in Gandhian movements, revolutionary activities, and socio-political reforms challenged colonial and patriarchal structures, paving the way for a more inclusive national identity. Recognizing their contributions not only enriches our understanding of the freedom movement but also underscores the importance of gender equity in historical narratives. Future research should focus on amplifying the voices of marginalized women to ensure a more comprehensive account of their legacy.

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