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WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE INDIAN NATIONAL FREEDOM MOVEMENT

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Abstract

The freedom movement provided a splendid opportunity for women to show their interest and capability in public affairs and brought to prominence some women political leaders. Women's Association with public activity passed through four phases such as Swadeshi Movement (1905-1911), Non-Cooperation (1918-1920), Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-1934) and Quit India Movement (1942). The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal marked the beginning of women's participation in nationalist activities. The agitation against the partition of Bengal and the Swadeshi Movement attracted the attention of women in different parts of India. During this period (1905-11) revivalist consciousness, mass mobilization and propaganda contributed to increased involvement of women in public affairs. The Swadeshi Movement emphasized boycott of foreign goods, increase in education and emphasized cultural heritage. This period marked the formation of several women's organizations. This research paper to be discussed "Women's Participation in the Indian National Freedom Movement.

Keywords: Women Movement, Women Sacrifice, Home Rule Movement, Patriotism, New India, Women Liberation, Political Right, Historical Event, Women Organizations.

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

"I raise up my voice – not so that I care shout, but so that those without a voice can be heard ... we cannot all succeed when half of us is held back"

Malala Yousufjai

A familiar women activist and Nobel Laureate

'Swaraj and Swadeshi' became the slogans of the nationalists. Women who had begun to participate in the deliberations of the Indian National Congress now further took up the responsibility to share the national efforts through the press. Kumudini Mitter, daughter of Kristo Mitter a renowned nationalist, was very active during this period. She preached the cause of the extremists through Suprabhat; a Bengali Magazine. Sarala Devi was the niece of the great poet, Rabindranath Tagore. She formed the link between Punjab and Bengal revolutionaries. At the seventeenth session of the Indian National Congress a song composed by Sarla Devi invoking the people of different provinces of the country to join hands in the national struggle was sung in chorus. Madam Cama was the daughter of Sorabji Francina Patel. Bhikaji Cama in contract with Shyamji Krishna Verma who inspired her to join the revolutionary movement whole heartedly. She took immediate steps to establish contracts with nationalists of Ireland, Russia, Egypt and Germany. When it was announced that the International Socialists.

Congress was to meet in Stuttgart (Germany) in August 1907, Madam Cama was quick enough to grab this opportunity to acquaint with the cosmopolitan gathering with the conditions prevailing in India. Her speech on that memorable occasion dealt with the lives of the dumb millions of Hindustan 'who are undergoing terrible tyrannies under the English Capitalism and British Government' at the end of speech she unfolded the Indian National Flag, a tricolor in green, yellow and red, with the words 'Bande Mataram' on the middle band. Thus, Bhikaji Cama was the first Indian who unfolded the Indian National Flag in a foreign country before an international gathering.

The entry of Annine Besant into Indian politics in 1914 accelerated the process of women's association with the freedom struggle. Annine Besant organized movement for the emancipation of women and to put forward the demand for political rights for women came to be established. Her leadership gave strength, encouragement and inspired the women of the land to participate in the national life of the country and to join the national movement in increased numbers. Annine Besant came under the influence of Charles Bradlaugh in 1847 and joined his national reformer; Besant made her first speech at the Cooperative Institute in Castle Street, London, and demanded political status for women and equality in all spheres. She joined the Theosophical Society under the influence of Madam Blavatsky. In 1892 Madam Blavatsky died and Annine Besant along with W.O. Judge became the Joint head of the Esoteric Section of the society. The women who came from abroad and treated this country as their motherland were Annine Besant, Margaret Cousins and Margaret Noble Bhagini Nivedita. Annine Besant played very important role in Home Rule Movement 1916.



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She was editing a daily newspaper called ‘New India’ and a weekly called ‘Common Will’. She was arrested and sent to jail. Margaret Cousins and Annine Besant tried their utmost to obtain franchise for Indian women. She was the first President of the Indian Women’s Association and was largely responsible for putting forward the demand for political rights of women. The membership of her Home Rule League was open to men and women above eighteen years of age. In 1917 Annine Besant became the first woman to be elected as the president of Indian National Congress.

Women Participation in Freedom Struggle

Women’s participation in the Indian freedom struggle is a significant area of contemporary historical inquiry. Pre 1970’s, their roles, opinions, motivations, specificity, and extent in shaping the freedom movement was rarely acknowledged.¹ This essay highlights this and the multiple modes through which women contributed towards such valuable historical legacy of independent India.

Post Plassey (1757), John Company steadily established its political paramountcy over the subcontinent, an exercise scarred by numerous rebellions, insurrections, revolts including agrarian, military mutinies, beginning Buxur (1864). But John Company usually prevailed pensioning the mughal monarch and later also the Peshwa (Bithoor, 1818); the mighty Nawabs Haider Ali, Tipu Sultan of Mysore (1799) were crushed, the Awadh nawabi reduced to vassalage; but Col Malcolm was defeated by Bimabai Holkar in guerrilla warfare, and Queen Chenamma, successfully defended her small kingdom of Kittoor (in Karnataka) from being annexed, demonstrating female prowess.

The 1857 Uprising was unique in that several women led the anti-imperial struggle, thus figured in administrative, military despatches, becoming visible as warriors, leaders, decision makers. Powerful feminine perspectives emerged, but Rankeian based imperial, nationalist narratives focused on an exclusive few - Rani Laxmibai (Jhansi), Begum Hazrat Mahal’s valiant, unsuccessful attempts in securing Lucknow, Shahjehanpur, spurning Queen Victoria’s offer of pardon, preferring refuge in Nepal; thus obscuring the extra ordinary contributions of not only the socially economically marginalised, but even eclipsing the patriotism, sacrifices of Tai Bai (Jaluan), Baizabai, Rani Tejaswani, and Rani Chauhan of Anupshahr.

Post-world war II, the frameworks, methodologies, approaches for writing comprehensive histories deploying the ‘bottoms up,’ approach and a range of conventional/ unconventional- sources matured, enabling Social Scientists including the Subaltern School to instil popular awareness of ‘Ghadar,’ and valour, sacrifices, patriotism of the subalterns including women, as UdaDevi, Jhalkaribai, Mahaviridevi, Panndhai- new nationalist Viranganas, reaffirmed through folklore, poems, songs, dramas, nautankis, are of particular pride to the dalit samaj, invoked by the Bahujan Samaj party for mobilising political support.

Even female servants deploying the ‘weapons of the weak,’ worked on ‘hidden transcripts,’ furthering the nationalist cause in subtle, daring ways. Thus, an incensed Rooth Coopland at the Agra fort complained that those who bobbed, salamed them, delighted in the progress of sedition, discomfiture of their masters, adding to their insults, agonies.⁴ Most maids deserted, abstained from work, those remaining, charged inflated salaries and particularly insolent; spending their extra money in gay attires, gold, silver ornaments which they flaunted, and with mocking innocence questioned ‘where are your ornaments.’

...The manners of the servants were most insolent and contemptuous; they often said our “raj” was over, and considered us doomed; fully expecting that when brethren had defeated us at Delhi, ... they would march to Agra and cut us to pieces with little trouble. Formerly they used to address us as “your excellency, protector of the poor” and say “will it please your highness to let your slave do such a thing? and use such hyperbolic expressions, but now they dropped even the customary “sahib” and “memsahib,” and often addressed us as ‘tum’ instead of, as formerly “Aap”. they would also often lie down in our rooms, when we spoke to them, they did not get up’.

Further The “badmashes” used to sing scurrilious songs under the walls and draw picture feringhis” being blown up with their legs and heads flying in the air and preached the extermination of the feringhis

History of Freedom Struggle in India

Post 1857, a period of pacification, ‘constructive imperialism,’ which encouraged women’s education, a cause supported by Indian liberals, reformers, reformist organisations since 1830’s. Thus Atmiya Sabha, Bramho Samaj, Arya Samaj, Prartahana Samaj, Theosophical Society, Ram Krishna Mission, Indian National Congress (from 1885), linked national regeneration to women’s education, rights, dignity,⁷ reminding that the prime moral justification for foreign domination was women’s inferior, oppressed



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position, illiteracy which ill equipped almost half the Indian population to think or act for itself, thus rendering India unfit to govern itself.

These encouraged women's education, membership of their organisation, participation in diverse nationalist projects becoming the story of spread of nationalism. Women were posited as significant symbols of national pride, enlightenment or backwardness, emphasising that even traditionally women were never as inert, unintelligent, subordinated as hegemonic imperial narratives projected, a viewpoint reiterated by recent researches which highlight women's power within family, their struggles, critique, resistance, how they fractured, negotiated male dominated socio-economic, political, power relations in differing cultural, political, educational contexts. Thus, widows recoured Law Courts for enforcement of inheritance rights, dignity, fought for their husband's property, even for divorce from oppressive husbands, in-laws; during famines, women petitioned government for relief, critiquing colonialism which compromised their illustrious past.

Such dynamic sharpened with percolation of education which though slow, riddled with opposition, complex situations, yet enabled women, however few in numbers, to pursue education especially in urban university centres like Bombay, Poona, Calcutta, Madras and Allahabad, creating small, visible groups of female intelligentsias exposed to science - technology, processes of modernisation which altered ways of thinking and living. Thus education equipped fourteen year old Mukatabai, a Mang girl in Jotiba Phule's school (in 1855) to highlight the injustices, cruelties lower caste women were subject to by the dominant Brahmanical order (Mang Maharachya Dukha Viasaiyi); Tararbai Shinde scripted 'Stree-Purush tulna', (a comparison between men and women); and Phule's wife Savitri, critiqued the prevailing socio-political conditions, patriarchal order, stressed lack of education as the prime determinant which suppressed women's potential, rights.

Arise of Women Consciousness

Circumventing all hurdles Kadambini Ganguly, Chandramukhi Basu, became the first female graduates of the British empire (Calcutta University, 1883). Kadambini, Haimavati Sen, Anandibai became medical doctors. Anandibai, the reformer Pandita Ramabai travelled to USA and England respectively to pursue professional aspiration. Ramabai married cross culturally, converted to Christianity, returned to India, crusaded for women's general upliftment, education, particularly of widows. For achievement of such objectives, she founded the Mahila Samaj, and with Justice Ranade's assistance 'The Aryan Women's Association.' Another Maharashtrian Ramabai Ranade founded the Seva Sadans with similar aims. In Bengal begum Rokeya Sakahawat Hossain worked for muslim women's upliftment. The writer Swarana Kumari Ghoshal, established the Sakhi Samiti (1886), to promote traditional handicrafts, Sarala Ghoshal founded a gymnasium in Calcutta (1902); Sarala Devi Chaudurani's Bharat Stree Mahamnadal (1910), having branches all over India promoted women's education, and Annsuiyabai Kale started the Bhagini Mandal (1925), organised the Provincial Ladies Association Conference thus empowering women whose activism increased perceptibly. Educated women also interogated, critiqued, decried Indian subjugation by the British, so proud of representative rule in their own country. By the early twentieth century women laboured in tea, coffee plantations, in various mines, Jute and Cotton mills, as agricultural labourers. Basanti Devi, Cornelia Sorabji, Sarojini Naidu, Ladorani Zuthshi, Annie Besant, Muthulaksmi Reddy, Mitain Tata Lam, Perrin Captain, Freda Bedi, Durgabai Joshi, Mahadevi Verma, despite the slurs, aspersions of perverse minds became political activists, lawyers, legislators, reformists, poets, writers, took to revolutionary, trade Union activities. Bhikaji Cama, an iconic figure for Indian youth abroad, started the 'Free India Society,' and the journal 'Vande Matram,' travelled extensively crusading for India's freedom, unfurled the national flag at the international Socialist Conference in Stuttgart (Germany) in 1907. Bhikaji also discreetly helped Savarkar publish his pioneering book 'Indian War of Independence,' almost the first to suggest that 1857 was a unified national war for independence, banned in Britain/India, even before publication. But Bhikaji ultimately got the book published in Holland discreetly, coverless, then smuggled it into India. Such courageous, clandestine acts though barely recognised outside an immediate circle, postulated cohesive resistance, struggles, demonstrating feminine power, outlook, their resolve not to let femininity impede the realisation of their potential, aspirations, thus redefining, consolidating feminine interests, leaving an indelible mark on women's question.

Women Arise in National Movement

The formation of the Indian National Congress (1885), provided the most significant pan-nationalist platform which encouraged women to take initiatives in diverse national projects, work together tied in common ideological bonds, objectives, vision, resulting in a measure of national integration. District Congress Committees forged links with women's associations for example-Rashtriya Stree Sangha, Rashtriya Stree Sabha, Devdasis Sangha, Desh Seviaka's, Bharat Stree Mahamnadal, whose members compulsorily had to be members of the District Congress which created a strong feminine base for the Congress.¹⁵ Every General Session of the Congress was attended by increasing numbers of women delegates, observers (in 1889 by Swarna Kumari Ghoshal, Kadambari Ganguli). Such developments meant women met women across religious regional, linguistic, divisions, in out of domestic spaces. They exchanged ideas, scrutinised feminine problems, created women's only schools, hospitals, dispensaries, shelter homes;



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besides micro social networks, associations which often merged into macro, umbrella associations - Women Indian Association (1917), National Council for Indian Women (1925), the All-India Women's Conference (1927), which within a decade established several sub committees - labour, Industries, Child marriage, Opium indicating feminine activism in diverse causes.

In (1905) occurred the partition of Bengal aimed at driving a wedge between the muslim dominated east and Hindu dominated west Bengal, giving rise to a massive anti partition movement which steadily also incorporated broader socio-economic, political, issues. It stressed Swadeshi, national education, establishment of cottage industries, indigenous institutions, and espoused passive resistance to unjust laws, thus a precursor of Gandhian traditions, agenda. In Bengal lakhs of women led by Basanti, Urmila, Suniti Devi, wife, sister, niece of veteran lawyer, freedom fighter C.R.Das, joined hartals, protest marches, picketing foreign goods/liquor shops, courting arrest, singing patriotic songs, the bonfires of foreign goods reflected their commitment to nationalism, inspiring women across India.

The outbreak of World War I put curbs on civil liberties, agitational politics in India. But the Irish lady Mrs. Annie Besant, through her home rule movement radicalised Indian politics, continuously protested India's subjugation, crusaded for swarajya. Under her Presidency (1917), the Congress stood for complete self-government. Besides, she focused on women issues, encouraged women's membership, activism, education, founding the Central Hindu College, aided by the Maharaja of Banaras.

Home Rule Movement

Annie Besant, other committed women also crusaded for the extension of Universal Adult Suffrage to Indian women. At the 1918 special Congress session in Mumbai, Sarojini Naidu, underlined the growth of education, civic consciousness amongst women, their greater engagement with political processes, serving on municipal councils, other local bodies, therefore deserved voting rights. Sarla Devi Chaudurani citing similar arguments also passed a resolution demanding adult suffrage. It's denial infuriated women. Princess Sophie Duleep Singh (granddaughter of Raja Ranjit Singh), Lady Herabai Tata, Mitian Tata-Lam, a graduate of London School of Economics, Mrs. Radhabai Subbrayan, Mrs. Shah Nawaz, Mrs. Muthulakshmi Reddy, Sarla Ray, Dorothy Jinarjadas, Margaret Cousins over the years organised protest meetings, passed resolutions, wrote letters, petitions, emphasising the right to vote as essential for women's overall empowerment. As a result, between 1921-30 Provincial legislatures granted voting rights to women subject to educational and property qualifications, and the Government of India Act (1935) 'reserved' seats for women. By the first provincial elections (1937), about 4.25 million women had acquired and exercised their right to vote.

But it was the enterprising Mohan Das KaramChand Gandhi, who assessed, skilfully harnessed women's capabilities, potential to serve familial, community, nationalist projects to bring socio-political changes locally, nationally. Gandhian political traditions did not require sophisticated weaponry, ammunition, military training, or complicated mechanisms, but stressed firm resistance to subjugation, brute force through non-violent, peaceful Satyagraha, self-discipline, ability to transform individuals, systems, through love, ahimsa, sacrifice which women embodied, thus ideally suited to lead the freedom struggle. Drawing from diverse sources including the Hindu scriptures, mythological traditions, Gandhi venerated women as Janani, Shakti, Lakshmi; cited examples of Sita, Durga, Draupadi, Damyanti, Savitiri, powerful, noble figures, tempered by virtue; these resisted unfairness in human relations, chose suffering, death, over compromising feminine cause, honour. He invoked such feminine courage, veneration to build a strong, free India, which ate its way in the nationalist thought. India was 'mother' who had to be freed, a them most famously represented earlier in Bankim Chandra Chatterji's 'Anand Math'. In effect a dynamic role, not confined to domesticity provided impetus for the intensification for women's rights, education, empowerment. Such advocacy combined with socially reformative agenda-communal harmony, dalit upliftment, rights, opposing most forms of discriminating treatment imparted the national movement a socially, gender inclusive, morally uplifting dimension. Gandhian tradition created tactical spaces for even the weakest, poorest illiterate women, mobilising their activism through multiple forms of peaceful but firm resistance reflected in three main Gandhian movements; herein women confronted the colonisers, emerged as agents of change.

Non-Co-operation Movement

Post-World War I, Indians expected substantial political concessions from the Raj, which instead extended the draconian Rowlatt Acts which subverted civil liberties, fundamental rights; subsequent martial law in Punjab, brutal Jallianawala Bagh massacre, the crawling orders, public floggings had a catalytic effect, numerous women being massacred, maimed, widowed, losing children; the unwanted Montague-Chelmsford Act adding to the injury. Gandhi incorporated these grievances with Khilafat, swadeshi, and called for Swarajya. Gandhi reasoned that if Indians, individually and collectively, peacefully non-co-operated with the colonisers, governance would become impossible.



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Non –co-operation movement started in January 1921, tested satyagraha on the national canvas. It commenced with the Indians withdrawing from membership of the reformed councils, boycott of law Courts, schools, Universities, government run hospitals, dispensaries, resigning government positions, retainers, coolies, refusing to work for the colonisers thus creating a crisis. Leading women by example was Gandhi’s wife Kasturba- disciplined, peaceful, resilient, running the Gandhian household, routinely spinning charkha weaving, wearing khadi, demonstrating feminine self-reliance, economically, morally. She remained Gandhiji’s greatest support through his numerous trials beginning South Africa till the Quit India, when she was arrested and died in prison.

Basanti, Urmil, Sunit devi, Hemparabha Mazumdar led women in Bengal capitalising on their rich anti partition experience. Basanti also the President of the Bengal Congress Committee (1921-22), enjoyed towering moral stature. These not only embraced swadeshi, swarajya, but also women’s overall upliftment, education, therefore had access and influence with the general body of women they socialised into non-co-operation. Students, and Sikh lady volunteers joined in large numbers.²⁴ The arrest of Basanti, Suniti, Urmila devi provoked such mass outrage across socio- religious, ideological affiliations, that police fearing escalation in popular unrest released them within hours, the ladies commencing their activities almost immediately.

Women Movement in Punjab

In Punjab Lado Rani Zutshi, Kumari Lajjawati (wife of Dhuni Chand, Lahore), Smt. Parbati Devi (d/o Lajapat Rai), Pushpa Gujral above all Sarla Devi Chudurani led the confrontation. Encouraged by their example five hundred ladies in May 1921 enrolled themselves as members of Rawalpindi Congress Committee whose numbers steadily swelled henceforth. In the United Provinces ladies of the Nehru clan led by example. Swarup Rani wife of Pandit Motilal Nehru, Kamala Nehru, Vijay Laxmi Pandit, Krishna Nehru-HuttheeSingh, Uma Nehru were at the forefront. They spun charkha, weaved, wore khadi participated in protests, rallies, addressed and organised meetings, transformed Swarajya and Ananad Bhawan into cradles of patriotism where hospitality, logistical support was extended to freedom fighters.

In Bihar, Sarla Devi, Savitri Devi (Hazaribagh), through similar activities mobilised thousands of women who went from door to door spreading awareness of Gandhian ideals, Khadi and boycott of foreign goods. Elsewhere Sarojini Naidu returned her Kaiser-i-hind medal (1921). Durgavati Deshmukh, Muthulakshmi Reddy, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Sucheta Kriplani, S. Ambujammal, Krishnabai Ram, Padmaja Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyia inspired women to join the national cause.

Bi Amman, the mother of Khilafat leaders Maulana Mohammad and Shaukat Ali, Mrs. Haji Yousuf Shobhani, Mrs.Mazhar ul Haq were ardent votaries of swadeshi, Hindu- Muslim unity, addressed women’s meetings across India - United Provinces, Patna, Bombay, Punjab, mobilising muslim women into mainstream nationalism. Bi, sometimes addressed meetings with her face unveiled thereby making a socially bold statement. At the All-India Women’s Conference in Ahmadabad, attended by over six thousand women delegates, Bi urged women to become Congress volunteers, economically self-reliant through Khadi spinning, boycott foreign goods, raise funds for Khilafat-non-co-operation, and considered women particularly suitable for picketing of liquor shops.³⁰ Enthused women voluntarily parted with their precious ornaments, Mrs.Mazhar Ul Haq donating four diamond bangles, showcasing commitment to independence.

Committed participation of women

Thus, women struggled across India, tied to Gandhian ideals, though their perceptions of Gandhi his cause often varied, hazy, as did their motives, methods. But women’s participation though visible was not mass based, confined to urban, educated, middle classes, though even Devdasis, prostitutes contributed to Gandhi baba’s funds. Gendered activism was strong where there were pre-existing women’s institutions, societies, organisational structures. But even here women were not included in volunteer movements, gender equity yet a far cry, though Khadi clad female satyagrahi’s, giving fiery speeches despite prohibitory orders, participating in hartals, in peaceful political protests, marches, rallies, picketed liquor, foreign goods shops, distributed anti- colonial literature, such activities replicated across India, crystallising during the Satyagraha week. (6-13 April, 1920). Women’s participation was often in defiance of patriarchy, but also often facilitated by men admiring of feminine dynamic, potential, patriotism.

Innumerable women contributed indirectly by participating in village reconstruction projects, civic affairs, spread the message of charkha, khadi as ideal mechanisms to achieve economic self-reliance, welcomed freedom fighters to their homes, cooking, running errands for them, co-ordinating work amongst various groups, taking part in prabhat pheris, singing patriotic songs; they narrated stories of heroism, sacrifices, courage of Indians to their little ones, thus instilling pride, love of the motherland in their children. Many ladies like my literate grandmother began their letters not with Namaste, pranam, but with ‘Vande matram’ and later from 1940’s ladies pre fixed their letters with ‘Jai Hind,’ demonstrating the spread of nationalism, depth of gendered contribution yet to be properly assessed.



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Non-co-operation instilled a sense of self-worth, awakened women to their crucial role in the nationalist struggle, spurring them to create spaces for autonomous action, and numerous women's nationalist organisations spread awareness of nationalism.

Salt Satyagraha

Post non-co-operation the fire of resistance to colonialism continued to simmer, resurfacing during the Civil disobedience (1930-32), which also included nonpayment of taxes. Congress specially appealed women to spin charkha, weave, wear, sell Khadi, boycott foreign goods, break local oppressive laws, and not pay taxes.

Salt satyagraha was Gandhi's master stroke. Salt was an essential ingredient routinely used in cooking, therefore feminine oriented. Being bestowed by nature it cost nothing, yet taxed, its manufacturing monopolised by the colonisers, which Gandhiji decided to break, by manufacturing salt on the Dandi sea coast. The march commenced from Sabaramati Ashram on 6 April 1930, but with only seventy women volunteers. Such poor representation strongly protested by Sarojini Naidu who insisted on women's equal, robust participation. Sarojini was poet activist, the first woman President of the Congress (1925), a participant in the Round Table Conferences, and the first lady Governor of Post-independence Uttar Pradesh. Her presence alongside Gandhiji throughout the satyagraha, signaled for lakhs of women across the Indian social spectrum to join. Enroute the Dandi march at almost every stop woman in thousands gathered to hear Gandhiji making Civil disobedience distinct for mass feminine participation.

Suppression on Women

Undeterred by police excesses and patriarchal barriers, women even widows aged mere sixteen (Ambabai in Karnataka), joined the Satyagraha. Often processions comprised two –three thousand women marched towards rivers, sea, other water bodies armed with pots, pans, clay pitchers to manufacture, sell, buy salt in markets, breaking oppressive local laws including forest laws without fear, embarrassment astounding the authorities. The north east was not insulated from the spirit. Led by Rani Gaidineliu, aged but thirteen, the Naga nationalist struggled continuously to oust the foreigners from Manipur. Rani Gaiineliu was arrested, (1932), spending the next fifteen years in the excruciating hell of colonial jails. Nehru's almost the first act after independence was to sign the release orders of his 'Naga princess,' whose remarkable patriotism inspired generations.

In the United Provinces Vijay Laxmi Pandit was the organising force, Kamala Nehru playing crucial role in the no tax campaign. On 26 December 1930, defying prohibitory orders, Kamala addressed 5,000 persons in Bazaar Kareem, Bradbuza village, exhorting them to join the Congress, promote khadi, not pay taxes. She was sentenced to six months simple imprisonment which received much publicity. But sadly, yet unsung are contributions of lakhs of brave ladies like Saraswati Devi and twentysix others, Sunder Devi and thirty-six others each imprisoned to six months rigorous imprisonment for participating in protests, rallies, picketing foreign goods and liquor shops, prabhat pheris, singing patriotic songs, bhajans in Allahabad. Mrs. Bannerji daughter-in-law of Pranalal Bannerji (Allahabad), participated in procession, and Independence Day celebrations in Mohammad Ali Park (26/1/32), despite prohibitory orders, was arrested, sentenced to one-year rigorous imprisonment. Mohini Devi was sentenced for one year, whilst Hari Devi, Ganga Devi, sentenced to six months rigorous imprisonment for similar activities.

In Bombay, Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya's daring entry in a Court room of a startled magistrate requesting him to purchase a packet of 'salt freedom,' created much excitement. Perrin Captain the founder member of Rashtriya Stree Sabha, courted arrest here. Sarojini Naidu, Mrs. HariRam (daughter- in- law of Sir Ganga Ram, Lahore), Smt.Gyan Devi, wife of Jung Bahadur, Ms. Zuthshi, Mrs Tarachand were each imprisoned for varying terms. Ms. Satyavati elected to Meerut Municipal council (1931), editor of 'Jwala Sakha' a journal devoted to feminine causes, was sentenced to two years rigorous imprisonment (1932); from jail she continued her anti-colonial writings. Women breaking salt monopoly represented how domestic life, was interlinked to political, and Indian nationhood- contemporarily fashionable research themes in gender studies.

During Swadeshi, non-co-operation movements, police were cautious of brutalising women, but during Civil Disobedience women were not spared. As police unleashed brute force to break the Satyagraha, women volunteers stepped forward to aid their unarmed male satyagrahis, so poignantly depicted in Attenborough's Oscar winning film 'Gandhi.' Arrested women testified during their trial of being dragged by hair, beaten, spat upon, stripped even of their thalis, some left in jungles by night. Authorities variously described them, as 'low castes,' not being from 'respectable classes', 'loose charactered,' 'kept women.' Such insults incensed nationalist leaders including Lilavati Munshi, who debunked Britain's moral, civilising claims, reported in the world press, winning sympathisers for the Indian cause.



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The Quit India movement

When in 1942 Gandhi launched the 'Quit India,' Bharat Chodo Aandolan, numerous women were occupying influential positions, -members of student, trade, labour unions, peasant movements, and revolutionary outfits. Uma Nehru elected member and Chairman of the education committee of Allahabad municipality (1926); Bibi Raghbir Kaur was member Punjab legislative Council to which Begum Shah Nawaz, Ms. Lekhwati Jain was also connected. Durgbai Joshi elected member of Central Provinces Assembly; Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur, was an influential member of the Congress and All India Women's Conference (AIWC); Sucheta Kriplani headed the women's wing of the Congress.

In 1942, the colonisers swiftly arrested almost the apex national leaders, but local, activists often women, propelled the movement, leading protest marches, hartals, demonstrations, hoisting the national flag, courted arrest, distributed anti colonial literature. Subhadra Joshi from underground published the cyclostyled newspaper 'Hamara Sangram.' Aruna Asaf Ali, the editor of the monthly Congress journal 'Inquilab' unfurled the national flag at Gowalia tank maidan in Bombay, went underground to direct the movement. Equally active were Kasturba Gandhi, Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur, Rameshwari Nehru, Mrs. Satyavati, Lajjavati, Prbhavati Devi, who were each imprisoned for varying terms, some kept in solitary confinement. Kasturba's death in prison was nationally mourned. Indira Nehru who as a child organised the Vanar Sena, joined the Congress in 1938, was imprisoned for thirteen months.

Women Active Participation in Quit India

Quit India was unique for women's participation in the hinterland, where students, peasant and left party campaigns had created associations, societies having women cadres. Thus Kisan Sabhas (Awadh), and All India Students Federation, the Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti's in Bengal mobilised their women cadres often from socially- economically marginalised backgrounds like Ram Piyari and Maharaj Kumari, in Fatehpur (UP), imprisoned for six months for addressing a gathering of a hundred people in Graghipur bazaar, shouting antiwar slogans, that it was 'haram' to aid government's war efforts.

It is here appropriate to recount the role of fiery, patriotic women who spurned petition politics, believing in countering force by force. Women revolutionaries, almost always educated, usually came in contact with revolutionaries in college whose vision, daring inspired them to join their outfits. They made socially bold statements by contracting inter-faith, inter-caste marriages, trained in making bombs, handling arms, therefore socially, familially ostracised. Many like Nonibala Devi (1888-1967-Jugantar party), and Mrs.Vohra (Durga Bhabhi), hid weapons, provided cover to revolutionaries by acting as their wife, hoodwinking authorities, thus helped perpetuate revolutionary agenda. Such clandestine acts required tremendous courage, intelligence, diplomacy.

Summing Up

Revolutionary Latika Ghosh founded the Mahila Rashtriya Sangha (1928); Veena Das attempted to assassinate the Governor of Bengal, the radical activities of Kamala das Gupte and Kalyani Das excited admiration. Kalapana Datta, Preetilata participated in the Chittagong armoury raids in which numerous revolutionaries were captured, killed. Pritilata embraced martyrdom bombing the European club in Chittagong, but Kalpana Das escaped, spending years in hiding and in prison. She joined the communist party of India, worked towards improving the lives of the poor, organised relief including medical during the 1943 Bengal famine; and during partition sheltered the Hindus, Muslims alike. Such commitment to India's freedom, humanitarianism attracted international attention, yet marginalised in South Asian history. The raising of women's exclusive Rani Laxmibai regiment (INA) led by Dr.Lakshmi Swaminathan was an ultimate tribute to female courage, patriotism. This essay highlights women's exceptional struggles, often unsung, with patriarchal and foreign domination through multiple modes, which so richly contributed to securing Indian freedom and brought centre stage the contemporarily pressing question of women empowerment.

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