

Breaking Social Barriers: Participation of Women of Haryana in the Indian Independence Movement

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Abstract—India’s struggle against British colonial rule represents one of the most significant movements in modern history. People from different linguistic, religious, social, and economic backgrounds came together with a shared objective of ending imperial domination. By setting aside differences related to language, caste, religion, region, gender, and class, Indians collectively challenged the authority of one of the most powerful colonial empires in the world. After decades of persistent resistance, hardships, and sacrifices, the country eventually achieved independence.

The history of India’s freedom movement cannot be fully understood without recognizing the crucial contributions made by women. Their courage, dedication, and sacrifices formed an essential part of the national struggle. Numerous examples highlight the bravery and commitment of women who actively participated in various phases of the independence movement. Despite this, the contributions of many women remain less widely known. In reality, hundreds of women stood shoulder to shoulder with male freedom fighters, demonstrating extraordinary determination and patriotic spirit.

Participation in the freedom struggle enabled many Indian women to move beyond traditional social restrictions that had confined them largely to domestic roles. While historical narratives often emphasize the role of male leaders, the involvement of women was equally vital in shaping the path toward independence. Many women who had earlier faced social discrimination, limited access to education, and oppressive practices gradually emerged as influential participants and leaders in the national movement. Their involvement not only strengthened the freedom struggle but also contributed to the broader transformation of women’s status in society.

The region of Haryana also made an important contribution to the Indian national movement. People from this area actively supported the struggle against colonial rule, and women in particular played a significant role despite facing numerous challenges. Their participation took different forms, reflecting their commitment to the larger goal of national liberation.

Although scholars have conducted extensive research on various dimensions of the Indian freedom movement, the specific role of Haryana especially the contribution of women from the region has received comparatively limited attention. Therefore, this study

aims to address this gap by examining and analyzing the participation of women from Haryana in the national freedom struggle through a systematic historical approach.

The study is based on secondary sources, including books related to Indian history, the freedom movement, women’s organizations, and women’s movements. In addition, articles published in academic journals, magazines, and other research publications have been consulted to support the analysis.

I. INTRODUCTION

The contribution of women to India’s freedom struggle has not received adequate attention in many historical narratives. Traditional histories of the independence movement often highlight the achievements and sacrifices of male leaders, while the participation of women is discussed only briefly. However, the success of the Indian freedom movement would have been difficult to achieve without the active involvement of women and women’s organizations. When many prominent freedom fighters were imprisoned by the British authorities, women stepped forward to take responsibility and continued the struggle with determination and courage.

Indian society has long been shaped by social customs, caste divisions, gender inequalities, and traditional values. Before independence, women were largely confined to the domestic sphere and were often unaware of political and social developments outside their homes. They were frequently treated as second-class citizens and had limited access to education and skill development. Although women in ancient India, particularly during the Vedic period, had opportunities for education and intellectual participation, these privileges gradually declined over time.

During the nineteenth century, several social reformers made significant efforts to improve the status of women in Indian society. Reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Jyotirao Phule, and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar worked to challenge oppressive social practices and promote women’s education and social rights. Their initiatives played an important

role in raising awareness about women's issues and contributed to the gradual transformation of women's position in society.

Women played a significant role in the struggle against British imperialism and endured immense hardship, suffering, and exploitation for the cause of national freedom. Their participation can be seen in several major events and movements of the independence struggle, including the Indian Rebellion of 1857, the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Civil Disobedience Movement, the Dandi March, and the Quit India Movement. Women from different backgrounds including educated urban families as well as rural communities belonging to diverse castes and religions joined the national struggle and contributed in various ways.

The freedom movement also provided women with an opportunity to participate in public activities outside the home for the first time. National leaders emphasized that the success of the movement depended upon the participation and inner strength of women. However, the main challenge was that women had traditionally been restricted to domestic roles, and their abilities remained largely unrecognized.

Mahatma Gandhi played a crucial role in overcoming this challenge. By linking the freedom struggle with principles of non-violence and moral strength, he created a movement in which qualities such as patience, sacrifice, and endurance often associated with women became central to political action. Gandhi's leadership encouraged large numbers of women to participate actively in the national movement. As he once observed, when many men were imprisoned during the struggle, women courageously stepped forward to continue the fight against British rule.

From the uprising of 1857 to the nationwide mass movements of 1920, 1930, and 1942, women made remarkable contributions and were ready to sacrifice their lives for the cause of independence. They participated in protest meetings and supported nationwide programmes that called for the boycott of titles, honours, legislative institutions, educational institutions, courts, and foreign goods. Their actions demonstrated deep patriotism and commitment to national freedom. Some women also supported underground revolutionary groups that believed armed resistance could help achieve independence. Although more than a hundred women actively participated in the freedom struggle and sacrificed greatly for the nation, only a limited number of their names are widely recognized today. As a society

historically dominated by male perspectives, India has often overlooked the important role played by women in the independence movement. Their contributions deserve greater recognition and respect in the study of history. The present study therefore aims to examine the role of women particularly women from Haryana in the Indian freedom struggle.

II. HARYANA IN THE FREEDOM STRUGGLE

The region of Haryana holds an important place in the historical development of India. Since ancient times, this land has witnessed several significant historical events. According to tradition, a major part of the epic Mahabharata is associated with this region, particularly the battlefield of Kurukshetra, where the legendary war between the forces of righteousness and injustice is believed to have taken place. Throughout history, Haryana has remained a region where many decisive battles occurred.

Haryana also made a notable contribution to India's struggle for independence. Even in earlier centuries, the people of this region resisted foreign invasions and fought to protect their land and identity. Historical figures such as Harshavardhana of Thanesar made efforts to strengthen and safeguard the prestige of the country. Similarly, Prithviraj Chauhan fought determined battles against foreign invaders.

In the sixteenth century, the plains of Panipat witnessed several significant battles involving foreign forces and Indian rulers. Despite the establishment of foreign rule in Delhi, the spirit of resistance among the people of Haryana continued. The tradition of sacrifice and bravery remained strong in the region.

During the Indian Rebellion of 1857, the people of Haryana played an active role in opposing British authority. Freedom fighters from districts such as Ambala, Karnal, Gurgaon, Rohtak, Rewari, and Hisar organized resistance against colonial rule. Among the prominent leaders of this uprising was Rao Tularam of Rewari, who openly challenged British authority and became a symbol of resistance in the region.

Even after the events of 1857, Haryana continued to participate actively in the national movement until independence in 1947. People from the region joined various mass movements and campaigns led by Mahatma Gandhi. Many individuals from Haryana also became part of the Indian National Army established by Subhas Chandra Bose.

Leaders such as Sir Chhotu Ram and Sir Neki Ram

Sharma also played significant roles in political and social movements in the region. The sacrifices made by the people of Haryana during the freedom struggle contributed greatly to the achievement of India's independence. The courage shown by these individuals, many of whom faced violence and repression under British rule, helped sustain the larger national movement.

III. PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN OF HARYANA IN NATIONALIST MOVEMENT

The participation of women from Haryana in the Indian nationalist movement evolved gradually between 1901 and 1947. Their involvement can be understood through different phases of political and social awakening. While early participation was largely confined to social reform activities, women gradually became active participants in the political struggle against British colonial rule. The following discussion highlights some of the major events and developments that demonstrate the role played by women in this movement.

Early Reform Activities (1900–1910)

During the first decade of the twentieth century, women in Haryana were primarily involved in social reform activities rather than direct political agitation. Several educational institutions, widow homes, and reform organizations were established in cities such as Karnal, Bhiwani, Rohtak, Hisar, Panipat and Kurukshetra. These institutions worked towards improving the social condition of women and promoting education.

During the early decades of the twentieth century, social reformers and local leaders strongly opposed harmful social practices such as female infanticide, child marriage, the purdah system, widowhood restrictions, and the practice of sati. Female education was regarded as one of the most effective ways to achieve women's empowerment and social upliftment.

Several associations and organizations were also formed that encouraged women to step outside their homes and participate in public activities. Through these engagements, women became increasingly aware of developments occurring in other parts of India. The vernacular press also played a significant role in this process. Newspapers and journals published appeals and speeches of national and local leaders, which encouraged women to participate in the growing nationalist movement. As a result, the anti-colonial struggle gradually mobilized both men and women across the country.

Impact of the Swadeshi Movement

An important turning point occurred after the partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon on 16 October 1905, which sparked the Swadeshi Movement. The day of the partition was observed as a National Day of Mourning, and a general hartal was declared. People fasted and performed ritual baths in the Ganges as a symbolic protest. The slogans of Swaraj, Swadeshi, and national education soon became powerful expressions of nationalist sentiment.

Women played an active role by organizing meetings and spreading the ideals of Swadeshi. The movement in Bengal inspired women in Haryana as well. One prominent activist was Puran Devi of Hisar, who advocated the adoption of Swadeshi goods. As an active member of the Arya Samaj, she encouraged women to reject caste discrimination and to raise their children with a spirit of self-reliance and national pride.

Similarly, Agyavati established a widow's home in Delhi where widows and other women received education and political training without discrimination based on caste or religion.

Growing Political Awareness (1914–1919)

Between 1914 and 1918, women in Haryana were influenced by prominent national leaders such as Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu, and Bhikaiji Cama. These leaders addressed public gatherings and promoted the idea of Indian self-rule. Their writings and speeches were widely circulated through vernacular journals such as Sughar Saheli.

In October 1916, Annie Besant encouraged women to participate in the movement for self-government through the Home Rule Movement.

The introduction of the Rowlatt Act in 1919 further intensified political activity. Women joined the Satyagraha movement and participated in protests against the legislation. On 30 March 1919, hartals were observed in several towns including Panipat, Kurukshetra and Karnal. Women and children observed fasts and organized prayers in their homes. Several women associated with nationalist leaders also participated in the movement, including Satyawati, Pushpa Gujral, Bhag Devi, and Guran Devi. Women such as Shakuntala Devi of Ambala, Channo Devi and Khajani Devi of Bhiwani, and Dayawanti and Krishnawanti of Ambala actively participated in protest meetings and assisted in distributing revolutionary literature.

Gandhian Movements and Mass Mobilization

The leadership of Mahatma Gandhi brought a significant transformation in the participation of

women in the freedom struggle. Gandhi encouraged women to participate in non-violent activities such as spinning khadi, boycotting foreign goods, promoting communal harmony, and working for the eradication of untouchability.

Between 1912 and 1922, demonstrations and meetings were organized across various districts. In January 1922, Parmeshwari Devi of Bhiwani addressed a public gathering emphasizing the importance of Swadeshi and organized a procession of women.

Women such as Kumari Lajjawati, Parvati Devi (daughter of Lala Lajpat Rai), and many others participated in meetings, patriotic songs, and Swadeshi campaigns. Separate women's committees of the Indian National Congress were formed in several areas, encouraging women to take part in political activities.

Women also participated in picketing foreign cloth shops and liquor shops. Their presence often discouraged buyers from entering these shops, which made the boycott movement highly effective. Among the women who participated were Sarla Devi Chaudhrani, Puran Devi, Gauran Devi, Pushpa Gujral, Chand Bai, Kasturi Bai, and Lado Rani Zutshi.

Role of Laxmibai Arya and Other Activists

One of the most prominent women leaders from Haryana was Laxmibai Arya of Rohtak. She actively participated in Gandhian movements between 1920 and 1940. After joining Sabarmati Ashram in 1930, she took part in several political campaigns including the Salt Satyagraha and individual Satyagraha movements.

She organized picketing campaigns against liquor shops and foreign cloth and was imprisoned several times. In addition to her political work, she contributed to social reform activities and supported the upliftment of marginalized communities.

Women such as Chandbai, Tarawati, Gayatri Devi, Mohini Devi, Sauhag Rani, Somwati, and Shanno Devi also participated in the nationalist movement. Chandbai of Hisar raised anti-war slogans at Ramleela Maidan and was arrested for her activities. Her daughter-in-law Tarawati supported the protests despite being pregnant. Gayatri Devi led women during the Salt Satyagraha, while Kasturi Bai mobilized women in Rohtak to participate in the movement.

Underground Activities and the Quit India Movement

During the later stages of the freedom struggle, some

women participated in underground activities to evade colonial repression. Subhadra Joshi edited an underground cyclostyled newspaper titled Hamara Sangram, which spread nationalist ideas.

Similarly, Nirmala Devi, who had lived at Sevagram Ashram in Wardha, participated in the Quit India Movement of 1942 and was imprisoned for her activities.

Many women from Haryana were arrested during this movement, including Kasturi Bai, Mani Devi, Asha Devi, Radha Devi, Mohini Devi, Parmeshwari Devi, Phoola Devi, and Kalavati Devi. In some cases, entire families participated in the movement and endured imprisonment together.

Influence of Arya Samaj

The teachings of Swami Dayanand Saraswati and the activities of the Arya Samaj had a strong impact on women in Haryana. The first Arya Samaj branch in the region was established in Rewari in 1880 and later spread to Rohtak, Hisar, Ambala, Karnal, and Gurgaon.

Arya Samaj emphasized women's education and social reform, which helped create political awareness among women. Many women from Arya Samaj families began attending meetings and participating in nationalist activities.

IV. CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS

After independence, the Constitution of India was adopted in 1950, guaranteeing justice, liberty, equality, and dignity to all citizens. The Preamble declares India to be a sovereign, socialist, secular, and democratic republic. It ensures equality of status and opportunity and promotes fraternity among all citizens.

The Constitution prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, caste, sex, or place of birth and guarantees equal opportunities under the law. The Directive Principles of State Policy also advocate equal pay for equal work and encourage special measures for the welfare of women.

Articles 325 and 326 grant universal adult suffrage, ensuring that every adult citizen has the right to vote regardless of gender, caste, religion, or community. Further progress was made through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments of 1992, which reserved one-third of seats for women in local self-government institutions.

In 2023, the Parliament of India passed legislation reserving 33 percent of seats for women in Parliament and State Legislatures, which is expected to be implemented after the next delimitation process.

V. CONCLUSION

The Indian freedom movement represents a remarkable story of sacrifice, determination, and collective struggle. Women played an essential role in this historic process. The women of Haryana also participated enthusiastically and made significant contributions to the nationalist movement.

Despite social restrictions and limited educational opportunities, many women actively participated in protests, demonstrations, and Satyagraha campaigns. They faced imprisonment, repression, and social challenges, yet remained committed to the cause of independence.

The participation of women strengthened the mass character of the national movement. Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi believed that women possessed immense moral strength and the power of non-violence. When women joined the struggle, entire families and communities became involved.

Thus, the freedom struggle of India would not have been successful without the courage, dedication, and sacrifices of women. The contributions of the women of Haryana many of whom remain relatively unknown deserve recognition and a place of honour in the history of India's independence movement.

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