

The Freedom Struggle of India

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Abstract- India's freedom struggle is one of the most remarkable liberation movements in human history. Spanning nearly two centuries of British colonial rule (1757–1947), the struggle witnessed an extraordinary confluence of armed uprisings, mass non-violent movements, intellectual awakening, and political organisation. This research paper provides a comprehensive examination of the Indian freedom movement from its earliest seeds of resistance to the final attainment of independence on 15 August 1947. The paper traces the multifaceted nature of the struggle encompassing early revolts, the formation of the Indian National Congress, the transformative leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, the militant nationalism of Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Subhas Chandra Bose, the revolutionary ardour of Bhagat Singh, and the contributions of countless unnamed patriots. The paper also analyses the socio-economic and political contexts that shaped each phase of resistance and evaluates the legacies of the independence movement for modern India.

I. INTRODUCTION

India, one of the world's oldest civilisations, endured nearly 200 years of British colonial domination that fundamentally altered its economic, social, and political fabric. Yet throughout this long period, the spirit of resistance never died. From the Santhal Rebellion of 1855 to the Quit India Movement of 1942, generations of Indians from every region, religion, and social class rose up to reclaim their sovereignty.

The freedom struggle was not a single monolithic event but a rich tapestry of diverse strategies and ideologies. It encompassed non-violent civil disobedience championed by Mahatma Gandhi, armed revolutionary nationalism led by figures like Bhagat Singh and Chandrashekhar Azad, diplomatic and constitutional agitation by moderates such as Dadabhai Naoroji and Gopal Krishna Gokhale, and

military resistance through the Indian National Army (INA) under Subhas Chandra Bose.

This paper is organised into seven major sections: the colonial context and early revolts; the emergence of organised nationalism; the Gandhian era and mass movements; revolutionary nationalism; the final phase leading to independence; the roles of women and marginalised communities; and the legacy of the freedom movement.

II. COLONIAL CONTEXT: THE BRITISH RAJ AND ITS IMPACT

2.1 Establishment of British Rule

The East India Company (EIC) arrived on Indian shores in 1600 as a trading enterprise, but through a combination of military force, diplomatic manipulation, and political cunning, it steadily expanded its territorial control. The Battle of Plassey (1757) marked the turning point when Robert Clive defeated Siraj ud-Daulah, the Nawab of Bengal, paving the way for British supremacy. After the Revolt of 1857, the British Crown assumed direct control, and India formally became a Crown Colony under the Government of India Act 1858.

2.2 Economic Exploitation

British colonial policies systematically deindustrialised India. The once-thriving textile industry was destroyed by cheap machine-made British goods, while India was reduced to a supplier of raw materials. Dadabhai Naoroji's "Drain of Wealth" theory demonstrated how British policies siphoned India's resources to Britain, impoverishing the subcontinent. Land revenue systems such as the Permanent Settlement (1793) enriched British coffers while pushing millions of peasants into destitution.

2.3 Social and Cultural Subjugation

Colonial rule was accompanied by a systematic denigration of Indian culture, religion, and intellect. The Macaulay Minute on Indian Education (1835) sought to create a class of Indians “Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.” Racial discrimination was institutionalised; Indians were barred from senior administrative positions and treated as second-class subjects in their own land.

III. EARLY REVOLTS AND SEEDS OF RESISTANCE (1757–1857)

3.1 Peasant and Tribal Uprisings

It is a common misconception that the Indian resistance began suddenly in 1857. In reality, the British East India Company faced a persistent "death by a thousand cuts" from various regions and communities long before the Great Uprising. These early movements weren't just random skirmishes; they were deeply rooted in the defence of local culture, land, and sovereignty.

The Early Sparks of Resistance

Long before the widespread flames of 1857, British authority was consistently challenged by localized revolts that laid the groundwork for future independence movements. In the late 18th century, the Sanyasi and Fakir Rebellions (1763–1800) saw wandering monks and Muslim ascetics in Bengal fiercely resisting oppressive revenue collection. This struggle was so culturally significant that it later inspired Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's seminal novel *Anandamath* and the national song *Vande Mataram*. Meanwhile, in South India, the Polygar Wars (1799–1805) forced the Company into a grueling conflict against local chieftains like Kattabomman who refused to bow to annexation.

Resistance also took a legendary form in Velu Nachiyar (1780), the Queen of Sivaganga, who holds the distinction of being the first Indian queen to militarily defeat the British. As the mid-19th century approached, the pressure reached a breaking point with the Santhal Rebellion (1855–56). Led by the brothers Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu, tens of thousands of Santhal tribal members in Jharkhand rose up against the predatory alliance of British officials and exploitative zamindars, proving that the spirit of rebellion was as much about social justice as it was about territorial control.

3.2 The Revolt of 1857: India's First War of Independence

The Revolt of 1857, variously described as a sepoy mutiny by the British and as India's First War of Independence by nationalists like V.D. Savarkar, was the most significant armed challenge to British rule in the nineteenth century. The immediate trigger was the introduction of Enfield rifle cartridges greased with animal fat, deeply offensive to both Hindu and Muslim soldiers. However, the underlying causes were far deeper — economic grievances, annexation policies under the Doctrine of Lapse, and the destruction of traditional power structures.

Key figures of the revolt included:

- [1] Mangal Pandey: A sepoy of the 34th Bengal Infantry who fired the first shots of rebellion at Barrackpore.
 - [2] Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi: The legendary queen who fought valiantly against British forces and died on the battlefield.
 - [3] Nana Sahib and Tantia Tope: Leaders of the Kanpur uprising who organised resistance in central India.
 - [4] Bahadur Shah Zafar: The last Mughal emperor who became a symbolic figurehead of the revolt.
- Though the revolt was eventually suppressed, it fundamentally changed the relationship between India and Britain. The British Crown assumed direct rule, the East India Company was dissolved, and Indians across the subcontinent became acutely aware of the need for organised, sustained resistance.

IV. THE RISE OF ORGANISED NATIONALISM (1858–1905)

4.1 Social and Religious Reform Movements

The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed a remarkable intellectual and social awakening that laid the ideological foundations of nationalism. Reform movements played a crucial role:

While the battlefield saw physical resistance, a parallel "intellectual revolution" was brewing in the classrooms and prayer halls of India. This period, often called the Indian Renaissance, saw thinkers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy lead the charge. In 1828, he founded the Brahma Samaj, which took a sledgehammer to entrenched social evils like *sati*, child marriage, and idolatry, while championing the

then-radical ideas of modern education and women’s rights. By 1875, the momentum shifted toward a revival of roots with Swami Dayananda Saraswati’s Arya Samaj. By promoting Vedic values and Hindu pride, he fostered a potent spirit of cultural nationalism that gave Indians a sense of identity that wasn’t defined by their colonial masters.

The turn of the century brought a more global outlook through Swami Vivekananda, who founded the Ramakrishna Mission in 1897. Vivekananda masterfully blended spiritual nationalism with social

service, famously galvanizing the youth with his fiery call: “Arise, Awake, and stop not till the goal is reached.” Simultaneously, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan recognized that the Muslim community needed to adapt to survive the changing political landscape. Through the Aligarh Movement, he advocated for modern Western education and a pragmatic, cautious relationship with British power, ensuring his community wasn’t left behind in the race for modern progress.

Key Socio-Religious Reform Movements

Movement	Founder	Year	Core Focus
Brahmo Samaj	Raja Ram Mohan Roy	1828	Social reform (Sati, child marriage) & modern education.
Arya Samaj	Swami Dayananda Saraswati	1875	Vedic revivalism and cultural nationalism.
Ramakrishna Mission	Swami Vivekananda	1897	Spiritual nationalism and social service.
Aligarh Movement	Sir Syed Ahmed Khan	Late 19th C	Modern education for Muslims and political pragmatism.

4.2 Formation of the Indian National Congress (1885)

The Indian National Congress (INC), founded in 1885 by Allan Octavian Hume with the support of Indian leaders, became the primary vehicle for the freedom movement. Its early leaders Dadabhai Naoroji, Pherozeshah Mehta, and Gopal Krishna Gokhale were ‘Moderates’ who believed in constitutional agitation, petitions, and resolutions. They demanded greater Indian participation in governance, the Indianisation of civil services, and economic reforms.

Though critics later dismissed the early Congress as a ‘safety valve’ for elite grievances, it served vital functions: it created a pan-Indian identity, trained a generation of leaders, and established the principle that Indians must govern themselves.

4.3 The Extremists: Lal-Bal-Pal

It destroyed an illusion of moderation and yielded to a more violent nationalism in the late 1890s. Swaraj (self-rule) was also a birthright of Lala Lajpat Rai or Lal Bal Pal, the three Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Bipin Chandra Pal. The yell of violent nationalism was the

language of Tilak: swaraj is my portion and I shall possess it. He used the mass mobilisation e.g. use of ancient festivals like Ganesh Chaturthi and Shivaji Jayanti as a tool in order to convey the power of cultural symbols to the generation of mass consciousness.

V. SWADESHI MOVEMENT AND THE PARTITION OF BENGAL (1905-1911).

In 1905, Viceroy Lord Curzon partitioned Bengal along religious lines, on the pretext of giving administrative convenience, but which is widely seen as a well calculated policy of alienating Hindus and Muslims and weakening nationalism. The split resulted in an enormous popular outcry - the Swadeshi Movement.

The Swadeshi Movement was in many ways: Economic Boycott: Indians put a boycott on the British goods, particularly the Manchester goods and popularized the local (swadeshi) goods.

National Education: National alternative schools and colleges were established as the weapon of opposition to colonial system of education.

Political Mobilisation: Mass meetings, processions and rallies and later in other provinces masses of people.

Revolutionary Activity: Secret revolutionaries were organized like Anushilan Samiti and Jugantar and the physical fitness and radical politics of the revolutionary movements were instructed to young men.

Swadeshi Movement was a tidal wave - the fight of freedom has become a mass movement, not an issue of the elite. The annulment of the partition of Bengal in 1911 was the first great triumph of popular agitation, against British policy.

VI. GANDHIAN PERIOD AND MOVEMENT OF MASS

6.1 Satyagraha and Gandhi philosophy.

In 1915, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi introduced the most important weapon to India; Satyagraha or truth-force, a South African production. The philosophy of Gandhi was that the end justifies the means. It was composed of three pillars, that is, non-violence (ahimsa), truth (satya), and self-suffering. This time Gandhi applied this tested strategy to the Indian freedom movement, which he was also fighting against the discrimination of Indian people in South Africa.

And the genius was that Gandhi could make abstract political needs more practical and more prosaic as he sewed khadi, broke salt laws and boycotted trains he was segregated to. He gave the ordinary Indians: peasants, women, workers a decent and comprehensible way of resistance.

6.2. Rowlatt Act / Jallianwala Bagh Massacre (1919)

Anger grew when Rowlatt Act of 1919 was introduced that enabled the British to arrest and detain any Indian without trial. Gandhi insisted on a hartal (strike). The Jallianwala Bagh Massacre (also caused by the peaceful demonstrations in Amritsar, Punjab) occurred on 13 April 1919, and was one of the most perverted moments in the colonial history. His Gen. Reginald Dyer, and his men opened on a previously quiet crowd of thousands of people killing at least 379 people (authorities said that many, many more were

killed) and wounding more than 1,200. This worsened the Indian mindset on the British rule as nothing was previously doing so. Rabindranath Tagore protested by rejecting his knighthood.

6.3 Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–1922)

In 1920, following the failure of the British government to act on the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, and the subsequent failure of the British government to act on the general Dyer, Gandhi led the Non-Cooperation Movement that was supported by the Khilafat Movement which attempted to save the Ottoman Caliphate. Indians were urged to:

- British government abandoned titles and awards.

Boycott of state schools, colleges and law courts. The refused to serve in the British Police force or army.

Boycott foreign products and replace them with swadeshi products.

The movement galvanised millions of people. It was however suspended by Gandhi in February 1922, following the violent burning of the police station in Chauri Chaura in Uttar Pradesh and this marked the importance that he accorded non-violence more than political momentum.

6.4 The Salt March Dandi March (1930)

Salt March of March 1930- April 1930 is considered to be one of the most well-known civil disobedience of the world history. Gandhi led a 390 km (Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi on the coast of Gujarat) salt march due to the British Salt Laws that imposed a basic need of man. Thousands of people followed the move. The act of salt-gathering was in itself a protest against an entire colonial system.

The Salt March was the rousing of India and the world. Popular action ensued, salt laws everywhere, boycotting of foreign cloth, picketing of liquor stores. Over 60,000 were arrested among them being Gandhi. The agitation compelled the British government to give up and the Gandhi -Irwin Pact of 1931 was achieved.

6.5 Quit India Movement (1942)

The Quit India Movement that was initiated by Gandhi on 8 August 1942 was the most radical mass movement of the freedom struggle. The World War II and Japanese Favours in Southeast Asia had led to the call: Do or Die by Gandhi. He demanded the end of

the British rule. The British were fast to the trigger Gandhi and most of the Congress leadership was in a few hours under arrest. Nevertheless, the movement was bush fire without a central leadership throughout the country.

Secret networks were established, student, workers and peasants interfered with communications, stormed government buildings and were parallel governments in most locations. The movement could demonstrate that the British rule could not be extended against the will of the Indian people at least five years as officially independent.

VII. REVOLUTIONARY NATIONALISM

7.1 Early Revolutionaries

Although Gandhi was a proponent of non-violence, there was also a parallel school of revolutionary nationalism that believed that armed struggle was the only way to liberate India under the British rule. European nationalist movements and the works of Tilak, V.D. Savarkar and Aurobindo Ghose inspired the revolutionary tradition.

There were early revolutionary organisations such as: Abhinav Bharat Society (1904): This was a group organized by V.D. Savarkar in London and organized uprisings and revolutionary activities.

- Anushilan Samiti and Jugantar: Secret societies in Bengal who engaged in bomb-making, physical training and political assassinations.

- Ghadar Party (1913): It was established in San Francisco by Lala Hardayal, who rallied the Indian immigrants in North America to topple the British rule and members of this party went back to India to arrange an armed rebellion.

7.2 Bhagat Singh and Hindustan Socialist Republican Association.

Bhagat Singh is probably the most eminent leader of revolutionary nationalism. He was born in the year 1907 in Punjab and was radicalised by the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and the death of Lala Lajpat Rai as a result of police brutality during anti-Simon Commission protests in 1928. He was a leader of Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA) along with Chandrashekhar Azad, Sukhdev and Rajguru.

Bhagat Singh and HSRA: Major activities:

- British police officer J.P. Saunders assassination (1928): In response to Lala Lajpat Rai assassination.

- Central Legislative Assembly Bombing (1929): To make the deaf hear Bhagat Singh and Batukeshwar Dutt planted non-lethal bombs in the Assembly before going out of their way to get arrested as an excuse to use the trial as a political platform.

Hunger Strike in Prison: A 116-day hunger strike that insisted on the political prisoners being provided with better conditions, a remarkable courage.

On 23 March 1931, at the age of 23, Bhagat Singh was hanged, together with Sukhdev and Rajguru. His demise made him a legend. His works, especially Why I am an Atheist, can be viewed as the signs of a mature thinker who tried not only to gain political independence but a socialist revolution of Indian society.

7.3 Subhas Chandra Bose and Indian national army.

Subhas Chandra Bose or Netaji, is the most dramatic and the most dramatic episode of revolutionary nationalism. Having been elected President of the Indian National Congress twice, Bose did not see eye to eye with the non-violent approaches of Gandhi. He was of the view that the wartime troubles that Britain was going through offered India the best chance to be liberated.

Bose fled house arrest in Calcutta in 1941, and went to Germany and then Japan. In 1943, he assumed the leadership of the Indian national army (INA) which was an army of approximately 45,000 men made up of Indian prisoners of war and Indian expatriates in Southeast Asia.

The battle cry of the INA was Chalo Dilli (March to Delhi). It seized the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and pushed up to the India-Myanmar frontier at Imphal and Kohima. The campaign did not succeed militarily, but with its moral and political effects, its impact was tremendous. Their trials in 1945/46 by the INA, when the British accused the INA officers of treason, backfired spectacularly, becoming a point of focus to Indian opinion and also helping lead to the mutiny of the Royal Indian Navy in 1946, which indicated to the British that their military grip on India was slipping.

Bose met his death in a plane crash in Taiwan in August 1945, but his legacy as an unscared nationalist who sacrificed everything to win freedom to India continues to live to date.

VIII. WOMEN AND MARGINALISED COMMUNITIES IN THE FREEDOM STRUGGLE

8.1 Women's Participation

The freedom struggle was profoundly shaped by the participation of women. Gandhi's non-violent movements actively involved women, revolutionising their public role. Among the notable women freedom fighters:

- [1] Sarojini Naidu: Poet and politician, the first Indian woman to become President of the Indian National Congress and later the first woman Governor of a state.
- [2] Kasturba Gandhi: Gandhi's wife, who participated in several satyagrahas and was imprisoned multiple times.
- [3] Aruna Asaf Ali: Known as the "Grand Old Lady of the Independence Movement," she hoisted the Congress flag at the Gowalia Tank Maidan in Mumbai at the start of the Quit India Movement.
- [4] Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay: Organised women's brigades and later transformed Indian handicrafts and arts.
- [5] Begum Hazrat Mahal: Led the resistance against the British in Lucknow during the 1857 revolt.
- [6] Kittur Chennamma: The Queen of Kittur who led armed resistance against the British in 1824.

8.2 Dalits, Tribals, and Muslims

The freedom struggle was not homogeneous it encompassed the complex aspirations of India's diverse communities. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, while a fierce critic of the caste system within the Congress movement, ultimately supported the goal of independence while demanding social justice for Dalits. He led the Mahad Satyagraha of 1927, asserting untouchables' rights to use public water sources.

Tribal communities like the Santhals, Mundas (under Birsa Munda's Ulgulan movement of 1899–1900), and Gonds mounted fierce armed resistance against colonial land policies. The Muslim League and Muslim leaders like Maulana Abul Kalam Azad played significant roles, though the movement was ultimately complicated by the demand for Pakistan under Muhammad Ali Jinnah.

IX. THE FINAL PHASE: PARTITION AND INDEPENDENCE (1945–1947)

9.1 Post-War Context

World War II exhausted Britain economically and militarily. The Labour Party victory in the 1945 British elections brought to power a government more inclined toward Indian independence. The INA trials, the Royal Indian Navy Mutiny (February 1946), and widespread civil unrest made it clear to Britain that the cost of maintaining India had become prohibitive.

9.2 The Cabinet Mission Plan and Constitutional Negotiations

In 1946, the British sent the Cabinet Mission to negotiate the transfer of power. While the Mission's plan for a federal India failed largely due to the breakdown of negotiations between the Congress and the Muslim League it set in motion the process that led to independence. The Direct Action Day called by Jinnah on 16 August 1946 led to devastating communal violence in Calcutta, foreshadowing the horrors of Partition.

9.3 The Mountbatten Plan and Partition

Lord Mountbatten, appointed as the last Viceroy of India in 1947, concluded that partition was the only practical solution. The Indian Independence Act of 1947, passed by the British Parliament, created two independent dominions India and Pakistan from 15 August 1947.

Partition was accompanied by one of the largest forced migrations in human history approximately 14 million people displaced and between 200,000 and 2 million killed in communal violence. The joy of independence was inseparably intertwined with the tragedy of partition, a wound that continues to shape South Asian history and politics.

9.4 Independence — 15 August 1947

At the stroke of midnight on 14–15 August 1947, India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru delivered his immortal "Tryst with Destiny" speech in the Constituent Assembly: "At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom." The tricolour was unfurled at the Red Fort in Delhi, and after nearly two centuries of colonial rule, India was free.

X. KEY MOVEMENTS AT A GLANCE

The following summarises the major movements of the Indian freedom struggle and their significance:

- [1] 1857 Revolt First large-scale armed uprising; displaced the East India Company; transformed nationalist consciousness.
- [2] Swadeshi Movement (1905–11) Economic boycott of British goods; first mass movement; partition of Bengal annulled.
- [3] Home Rule League (1916) Tilak and Besant demanded self-governance within the British Empire.
- [4] Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22) First all-India mass movement under Gandhi; demonstrated power of passive resistance.
- [5] Simon Commission Protests (1928) All-India protests against all-British commission to review India's political future; death of Lala Lajpat Rai.
- [6] Civil Disobedience / Salt March (1930–34) Iconic symbol of non-violent resistance; global attention; Gandhi–Irwin Pact.
- [7] Individual Satyagraha (1940–41) Selected individuals courted arrest to assert freedom of speech during wartime.
- [8] Quit India Movement (1942) most radical mass movement; “Do or Die”; widespread underground resistance.
- [9] INA Campaign (1943–45) Military challenge to British power; INA trials galvanised Indian opinion.
- [10] Royal Indian Navy Mutiny (1946) Signal that the British military could no longer rely on Indian troops.

XI. LEGACY OF THE FREEDOM STRUGGLE

India's freedom movement left an enduring legacy that extends far beyond the political fact of independence:

11.1 Democratic Republic

The values of the freedom movement democracy, secularism, social justice, and the rule of law were enshrined in the Constitution of India (adopted 26 January 1950), drafted under the chairmanship of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. India became the world's largest democracy, a remarkable achievement given the country's diversity and the challenges of the post-independence era.

11.2 Influence on Global Decolonisation

India's independence inspired independence movements across Asia and Africa. Gandhi's philosophy of non-violent resistance influenced leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. in the American Civil Rights Movement, Nelson Mandela in South Africa, and independence movements in Ghana, Kenya, and Vietnam.

11.3 Cultural and Intellectual Legacy

The freedom movement produced an extraordinarily rich cultural and intellectual legacy the writings of Rabindranath Tagore, the novels of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Premchand, the poetry of Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Subramanya Bharati, and the films of the post-independence era all drew deeply from the well of nationalist feeling. The movement also transformed gender relations, caste dynamics, and religious identity, though many of these transformations remain incomplete.

11.4 Unresolved Questions

The freedom struggle also bequeathed unresolved questions. Partition and its communal violence remain an open wound. Questions of social justice particularly the emancipation of Dalits and tribal communities were not fully resolved at independence and continue to animate Indian politics. The competing visions of Gandhi (village-centred, spiritually grounded), Nehru (industrial, secular, socialist), Ambedkar (social justice-centred), and Bose (nationalist, authoritarian) continue to be debated in contemporary India.

XII. CONCLUSION

The freedom struggle of India stands as one of history's greatest liberation movements. It was not the work of a single leader or a single method, but a convergence of diverse streams the constructive work of Gandhi, the revolutionary fire of Bhagat Singh, the diplomatic skill of Nehru, the intellectual rigour of Ambedkar, the military audacity of Bose, and the quiet courage of countless ordinary men and women who went to prison, faced lathis and bullets, and refused to be broken.

What made India's freedom struggle exceptional was precisely this diversity the ability of a vast, pluralistic nation to mobilise across lines of religion, caste, region, and language in pursuit of a common goal. The

freedom struggle demonstrated that colonial subjugation, however powerful, is ultimately unsustainable when confronted by the sustained, organised will of an entire people.

On 15 August 1947, when Jawaharlal Nehru's voice rang out across a newly independent nation, it carried within it the echoes of millions the Santhal tribals of 1855, the sepoys of 1857, the marchers of Dandi, the hunger strikers in colonial jails, and the soldiers of the INA. Their collective sacrifice is the foundation on which modern India stands.

India's freedom was not a gift from Britain it was wrested from the jaws of empire through sacrifice, perseverance, and an indestructible love for the motherland. Vande Mataram.

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