

Women's Participation in India's Freedom Struggle: A Historical and Gender-Based Reinterpretation

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Abstract—The Indian freedom struggle was not only a political movement against British colonial rule but also a broad social, cultural, and moral awakening. Women played a significant role in this national movement as leaders, protestors, reformers, revolutionaries, satyagrahis, organizers, writers, and supporters of underground activities. However, mainstream nationalist historiography has often given greater attention to male leaders, political organizations, and constitutional developments, while women's contribution has frequently been treated as secondary or symbolic. This research article attempts to reinterpret women's participation in India's freedom struggle from a historical and gender-based perspective. It highlights how women moved from the domestic sphere to public life and challenged both colonial domination and patriarchal restrictions. The article argues that women's participation gave the freedom movement moral strength, social depth, and democratic character. It also emphasizes the need to recover the contribution of both famous and lesser-known women freedom fighters in order to build a more inclusive understanding of Indian nationalism.

Index Terms—Women's participation, Indian freedom struggle, nationalism, gender history, colonial India, women freedom fighters, empowerment.

I. INTRODUCTION

The historical development of women's participation in India's freedom struggle is a powerful journey of courage, sacrifice, awakening, leadership, and social transformation. The topic seeks to understand the Indian national movement not only as a political struggle against British colonial rule but also as a gender-transformative movement in which women challenged both colonial domination and patriarchal restrictions.

For a long time, the history of India's freedom struggle was mainly written around major male leaders, political parties, constitutional developments, and national movements. However, a deeper historical study shows that women were present in almost every phase of the struggle. They participated as rulers, warriors, reformers, revolutionaries, satyagrahis, writers, organizers, social workers, underground activists, and mass mobilizers. The uploaded thesis also emphasizes that women were active participants in armed resistance, mass movements, political mobilization, social reform, underground activities, literary expression, and community-level organization.

Therefore, the historical development of this topic can be understood through different phases: early resistance, the Revolt of 1857, social reform and women's awakening, the rise of nationalism, Gandhian mass movements, revolutionary participation, the Quit India Movement, and the post-independence legacy of women's empowerment.

II. STATUS OF WOMEN IN COLONIAL INDIA: BACKGROUND OF PARTICIPATION

Before discussing women's role in the freedom struggle, it is necessary to understand their social position in colonial India. Indian society during the colonial period was largely patriarchal. Women were generally expected to remain within the domestic sphere. Their roles were mostly connected with marriage, motherhood, household duties, family honour, and social morality.

Many women faced restrictions related to education, property rights, mobility, public speaking, and political participation. Social practices such as child marriage, purdah system, widowhood restrictions,

limited female education, and dependence on male guardians affected women's social status. However, women's experiences were not uniform. Elite women, middle-class women, peasant women, tribal women, working-class women, and royal women experienced colonial society differently.

Despite these limitations, the nineteenth century created new opportunities for women's awakening. Social reform movements raised questions related to women's education, widow remarriage, child marriage, and social equality. Reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, and Swami Dayanand Saraswati contributed to debates on women's dignity and education.

These reform movements created the foundation for women's later participation in nationalist politics. Women gradually moved from private domestic life to public social activity. Education, print culture, women's organizations, social reform associations, and nationalist debates helped women develop political awareness.

III. EARLY RESISTANCE AND WOMEN'S COURAGE BEFORE 1857

Women's participation in the struggle against British rule did not begin with the organized nationalist movement. Even before the Revolt of 1857, several women rulers and regional leaders resisted British expansion. These women acted as political leaders and defenders of regional sovereignty.

Rani Chennamma of Kittur was one of the earliest women rulers to resist British interference. She opposed British control over her state and challenged colonial expansion. Her struggle showed that women could take political and military leadership during a crisis.

Bhima Bai Holkar also resisted British power and became an example of courage in early anti-colonial resistance. These early women leaders proved that resistance to colonial rule was not limited to men. Their contribution laid the foundation for later nationalist memory.

This phase is important because it shows that women's political agency existed before modern nationalism. Their leadership was connected with honour, sovereignty, justice, and resistance to foreign domination.

IV. WOMEN IN THE REVOLT OF 1857

The Revolt of 1857 was a major turning point in the history of India's struggle against British rule. It was one of the earliest large-scale challenges to colonial power. Women played an important role in this revolt, and their courage became part of India's nationalist memory.

Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi became one of the most powerful symbols of resistance. The British policy of annexation and the Doctrine of Lapse affected Jhansi, but Rani Lakshmibai refused to surrender. She organized her forces, defended Jhansi, and fought against British troops with extraordinary bravery. Her courage made her an enduring icon of patriotism and women's leadership.

Begum Hazrat Mahal of Awadh also played a significant role in the revolt. She challenged British control in Lucknow and showed political intelligence, courage, and administrative ability. Her role proves that women were not only emotional symbols but also strategic political actors.

Other women such as Jhalkari Bai, Uda Devi, Azizun Bai, and several regional participants also contributed to the revolt. Some fought directly, some supported soldiers, and some helped in communication and local mobilization.

The uploaded thesis specifically identifies the Revolt of 1857 and women such as Rani Lakshmibai and Begum Hazrat Mahal as important examples of women's agency in the anti-colonial struggle.

The historical importance of this phase lies in the fact that women emerged as leaders, warriors, strategists, and symbols of national pride. Their memory inspired later generations of women to participate in the freedom movement

V. SOCIAL REFORM, EDUCATION, AND WOMEN'S AWAKENING

After 1857, the rise of social reform movements, modern education, and public debate contributed to women's awakening. Reformers and nationalist thinkers began to realize that no society could progress without improving the condition of women.

Women's education slowly expanded in urban and reformist circles. Educated women began to read, write, attend meetings, and participate in social discussions. The growth of newspapers, journals,

biographies, and public associations created a new intellectual environment.

The formation of women's organizations also helped women enter public life. Organizations such as the All India Women's Conference provided a platform for women's education, social reform, political awareness, and public participation.

This phase is important because it prepared women for later nationalist action. Women began to understand social rights, public responsibility, and national duty. The boundaries between social reform and nationalism gradually became connected.

VI. WOMEN AND THE RISE OF INDIAN NATIONALISM

Indian nationalism developed as a response to British colonial exploitation, racial discrimination, economic drain, political subordination, and administrative injustice. The formation of the Indian National Congress in 1885 gave organized political expression to nationalist aspirations.

In the early phase of nationalism, women's participation was limited, but not absent. Women participated indirectly through family networks, social reform activities, education, cultural programmes, and nationalist households. As nationalist politics expanded, women's role also increased.

The Swadeshi Movement of 1905 after the partition of Bengal became an important moment in women's political awakening. Women participated in the boycott of foreign goods, promotion of indigenous products, use of swadeshi cloth, and nationalist cultural activities. Since household consumption became political, women could participate through everyday domestic choices.

The Home Rule Movement led by Annie Besant also encouraged women's political participation. Annie Besant herself became a major political figure and inspired women to engage with public life and self-rule.

This phase shows that women's participation developed gradually. They first entered nationalist activity through social reform, cultural nationalism, swadeshi, education, and public awareness.

VII. GANDHIAN PHASE AND MASS PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN

The arrival of Mahatma Gandhi transformed the Indian freedom struggle into a mass movement. Gandhi's methods of non-violence, satyagraha, civil disobedience, swadeshi, boycott, khadi, and constructive work created new opportunities for women's participation.

Before Gandhi, women's role was present but limited in scale. Under Gandhi's leadership, women from different regions, classes, and backgrounds entered public life. Gandhi believed that women possessed moral strength, patience, courage, discipline, and capacity for sacrifice. His method of non-violent struggle allowed women to participate without military training or formal political office.

Women participated in the Non-Cooperation Movement by promoting khadi, encouraging boycott, supporting national education, attending meetings, and spreading nationalist ideas. They persuaded families to give up foreign cloth and adopt swadeshi products.

During the Civil Disobedience Movement and Salt Satyagraha, women became more visible. Salt was a household necessity, and the salt tax affected ordinary people. By choosing salt as a symbol of resistance, Gandhi made the movement understandable to women and men alike. Women joined processions, made salt, picketed shops, and faced arrest.

The khadi movement gave political meaning to domestic labour. Spinning became a nationalist act. Women who could not attend public meetings could still contribute by spinning, wearing khadi, and promoting swadeshi.

Women also participated in picketing liquor shops and foreign cloth shops. These activities required courage because women often faced police repression, arrest, and social criticism.

Important women leaders of this phase included Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Annie Besant, Sucheta Kripalani, and Vijayalakshmi Pandit. Their leadership showed that women were capable of public speaking, organization, discipline, sacrifice, and national service.

The thesis clearly states that Gandhian methods of non-violence, civil disobedience, mass mobilization, swadeshi, and khadi created new opportunities for women's participation in the nationalist movement.

VIII. REVOLUTIONARY AND UNDERGROUND ACTIVITIES OF WOMEN

Women's participation was not limited to non-violent movements. Some women also joined revolutionary and underground activities. They carried messages, transported materials, sheltered revolutionaries, raised funds, distributed nationalist literature, and sometimes participated directly in revolutionary actions.

Women such as Kalpana Dutt, Pritilata Waddadar, Bina Das, Durga Bhabhi, and Madam Bhikaji Cama represent the revolutionary spirit of women in the freedom struggle. Their activities show that women were ready to take risks and confront British authority through radical methods.

The role of revolutionary women is important for a gender-based reinterpretation because it challenges the stereotype that women were naturally passive or only suited to peaceful activity. These women demonstrated courage, planning, secrecy, and political commitment.

IX. WOMEN IN THE QUIT INDIA MOVEMENT OF 1942

The Quit India Movement was one of the most intense and decisive phases of India's freedom struggle. It was launched in August 1942 with the demand that the British should leave India immediately. Gandhi's call of "Do or Die" created a powerful national response. Soon after the movement began, the British government arrested Gandhi and many senior leaders. This created a leadership vacuum in several places. Women came forward to sustain the movement. They organized protests, circulated messages, supported underground activities, sheltered activists, distributed literature, participated in processions, and faced imprisonment.

Aruna Asaf Ali became a symbol of defiance when she hoisted the Congress flag at Gowalia Tank Maidan in Bombay. This act inspired many nationalists at a time when British repression was severe.

Usha Mehta made a remarkable contribution through underground Congress Radio. During the movement, British censorship tried to suppress nationalist communication. Usha Mehta helped broadcast nationalist messages and news, showing that women participated in strategic and technological forms of resistance.

Sucheta Kripalani also played an important role in organization and mobilization. Her work reflected discipline, coordination, and political commitment.

The Quit India Movement also involved thousands of ordinary women. Many women carried secret messages, sheltered underground activists, arranged food and medicine, protected documents, warned activists about police movements, and faced arrest. Rural women, students, working-class women, and local activists contributed in different ways.

The uploaded thesis identifies the Quit India Movement as a high point of women's participation and mentions that women were at the forefront of protests, faced repression, provided shelter, organized supplies, and spread nationalist literature during this period.

This phase demonstrated women's independent political agency. Women were not merely assisting male leaders; they were leading, organizing, communicating, protecting, and resisting.

X. LESSER-KNOWN WOMEN FREEDOM FIGHTERS

A gender-based reinterpretation of the freedom struggle must include lesser-known women freedom fighters. Indian history often remembers a few famous women, but thousands of ordinary women contributed silently.

Many lesser-known women worked as messengers, shelter providers, fundraisers, local organizers, singers of patriotic songs, distributors of nationalist literature, and protectors of underground activists. Some donated jewellery and household resources to support the movement. Some educated children in nationalist schools. Some encouraged village women to join swadeshi and boycott campaigns.

Rural women played a special role. They warned activists about police searches, provided food and shelter, and supported local nationalist networks. Tribal women and women from marginalized communities also contributed to anti-colonial struggles, especially in movements related to land, forest rights, and community dignity.

These women may not appear prominently in official records, but their contribution was essential. A mass movement cannot succeed only through famous leaders. It requires the participation of ordinary

people. Therefore, lesser-known women must be brought into historical discussion.

XI. GENDER-BASED REINTERPRETATION OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

The topic requires a reinterpretation because traditional nationalist history often placed women on the margins. A gender-based approach asks new questions:

Were women only supporters, or were they leaders? Were domestic activities also political? Did women's participation challenge patriarchy? How did nationalism change women's identity? Why were many women left out of mainstream history?

A gender-based reinterpretation shows that women's participation was both national and social. It was national because women fought against British rule. It was social because they challenged gender restrictions within Indian society.

Women's entry into public life changed the meaning of politics. Politics was no longer limited to formal offices, speeches, or male-dominated organizations. Carrying a message, hiding a revolutionary, spinning khadi, boycotting foreign cloth, donating jewellery, singing patriotic songs, or educating children also became political actions in the context of colonial rule. This reinterpretation also broadens the meaning of leadership. Women led not only through public speeches or military command but also through sacrifice, organization, moral courage, social service, discipline, and community mobilization.

XII. IMPACT OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

Women's participation had a deep impact on India's freedom struggle.

First, it gave the national movement moral strength. When women faced police repression and imprisonment, the injustice of colonial rule became more visible.

Second, it widened the social base of nationalism. Women brought nationalist ideas into homes, families, villages, schools, colleges, and local communities.

Third, it challenged patriarchal restrictions. Women proved that they could lead, organize, protest, suffer, and sacrifice for the nation.

Fourth, it strengthened democratic consciousness. Women began to see themselves as citizens and contributors to national life.

Fifth, it created a foundation for post-independence women's empowerment. Their role in the freedom struggle supported later ideas of equality, citizenship, voting rights, and public participation.

XIII. LEGACY IN POST-INDEPENDENCE INDIA

The legacy of women's participation continued after independence. The Constitution of India guaranteed equality before law, non-discrimination, and political rights. Women received equal voting rights in independent India. Their participation in the freedom struggle helped create the moral and political foundation for these democratic values.

Women freedom fighters became symbols of courage, sacrifice, and national service. Their stories continue to inspire women's participation in education, politics, administration, social work, law, literature, and public life.

However, the legacy is still incomplete if lesser-known women remain forgotten. Therefore, historical research must continue to recover the stories of women from villages, tribal areas, working-class communities, student movements, and local nationalist networks.

XIV. CONCLUSION

The historical development of "Women's Participation in India's Freedom Struggle: A Historical and Gender-Based Reinterpretation" shows that women were active makers of Indian history. Their participation developed from early armed resistance to mass nationalist movements and underground activism.

Women such as Rani Lakshmibai, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Rani Chennamma, Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Annie Besant, Aruna Asaf Ali, Usha Mehta, Sucheta Kripalani, and many lesser-known women contributed significantly to India's independence.

Their participation challenged British colonial rule and patriarchal social norms. They moved from private domestic spaces to public political life. They transformed household activities into nationalist actions. They gave the freedom movement moral

power, social depth, emotional strength, and democratic character.

Thus, a gender-based reinterpretation of India's freedom struggle is essential because it brings women from the margins to the centre of historical analysis. It proves that the freedom of India was not achieved by men alone. It was the collective achievement of both men and women. A complete and balanced history of India's independence must therefore recognize women as leaders, organizers, revolutionaries, satyagrahis, reformers, and nation-builders.

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