

Women's Participation in India's Freedom struggle Movement special references to Bengal

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Abstract—The remarkable mobilization of women during the years 1900–1942 was a pivotal time in India's freedom struggle. This involvement changed in undivided Bengal from domestic support to radical, front-line activism. First sparked by the anti-partition Swadeshi movement in 1905, women went from rejecting foreign products in their homes to planning political protests.

Bengali women eagerly joined the Non-Cooperation and Salt Satyagraha movements, despite widespread arrests and police abuse, as Mahatma Gandhi infused the mainstream movement with nonviolent civil disobedience. At the same time, revolutionary nationalism gained significant traction in Bengal. Pioneering women like Pritilata Waddadar, Kalpana Datta, Bina Das, and Matangini Hazra fought in armed resistance, acquired intelligence, and carried out audacious attacks against British officials, shattering long-standing patriarchal restrictions.

The dual nature of women's participation both institutional and revolutionary is examined in this essay, emphasizing how undivided Bengal acted as a vital testing ground for female political activity. This study highlights how Bengali women significantly reshaped the socio-political dimensions of the anti-colonial struggle, defying both imperial power and conventional gender conventions, by examining the transition from passive supporters to active warriors up until the Quit India Movement of 1942.

The Indian Independence movement was a series of historic events with the ultimate aim of ending British rule in India, lasting from 1857-1947. Woman's participation in India's freedom struggle began as early as in 1817. Many women including Rani Channama of Kittur, Rani Begam Hazrat Mahal of Avadh fought against British East India company in the 19th century . 30 years before the “First War of Independence 1857”. Women played a pivotal role in achieving India's independence. However, their lives, struggles, and contributions to the movement are never recognized at the same level of prominence as that of the men of the movement.

I. INTRODUCTION

When most of the men folk were in prison, a wonderful thing happened. Our women jumped into the arena of freedom struggle. They had always been contributing in the freedom struggle, but the wave of their unprecedented enthusiasm had surprised the British Government. The Home Secretary of the British govt. had to confess that nothing had disturbed him more than the great awakening among the Indian Women and the part played by them in Indian politics. The consciousness of the women in the whole of India took a unique shape and the women of Bengal did not lag behind. The participation of the Bengali women in resistance movement had its origins and background in the social reforms of the 19th century. It may be recalled that during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries protestant missionaries with the support of allies in India and England took the initiative in advocating a number of social reforms in Hindu Society. They drew attention to practices such as infanticide, child marriage, the deplorable conditions of widows, the exposure of the sick and dying on the banks of holy rivers, Hook swinging at the Hindu festivals, the practice of sati, the prevalence of caste system that dehumanized a great part of the society, bonded labour etc. The decision for the partition of Bengal, announced by the Govt. on 20th July 1905, first time galvanized the common people including women into political action. In Sept. 1905, Rabindranath Tagore announced his plan for observing Rakhi Bandhan on the partition Day i.e. 16 October. Women also took ‘non-cooking day’ as suggested by Ramendra Sunder Trivedi. Protest meetings were convened by women and about five hundred of them witnessed the laying of the foundation stone of the Federation Hall at Calcutta on

16 Oct. 1905. Women organized Swadeshi fairs and Saraladevi Chaudhurani opened 'Lakshmi Bhandar' selling only indigenous articles, gave up use of foreign articles and use of foreign cloth and smashed their foreign bangles. Another eminent lady was Kumudini Mitra (daughter of Krishna Kumar Mitra, a renowned nationalist) also organized a group of educated ladies in order to make a liaison among different revolutionaries. It also propagated and preached the cause of the revolutionaries through Suprabhat, a Bengali magazine. In my respect of India Freedom Struggle Movement of Women i highlight some of Bengali Women who fight for Indian Freedom struggle movement specially for Bengal.

- Bina Das (1911-1986)
- Pritilata Waddedar (1911-1932)
- Kalpana Datta (1913-1995)
- Suhasini Ganguly (1909-1965).
- Sarojini Naidu (born: Chattopadhyay) (1879-1949).
- Matangini Hazra (1870-1942)

Bina Das

Bina Das was the daughter of Beni Madhab Das (a teacher), and Sarala Devi (a social worker). After completing school she became a part of the Chattri Sangha, which trained young women revolutionaries in arms and driving. These trainees lived in an ashram run by Bina's mother Sarala devi, where weapons and bombs would be hidden to avoid police inspection. Carrying a gun supplied to her by Kamala Das Gupta, this 21-year-old girl on 6th February 1932 walked into the Calcutta University during a convocation program and fired shots at the Governor Stanley Jackson. As Jackson managed to avoid the shots, the VC Hassan Suhrawardy jumped into action and overpowered her, but she kept firing shots as long as her ammunition lasted. Bina Das was caught, interrogated where she revealed no name sofer accomplices, and sentenced to 9 years of rigorous imprisonment. Even after her release she did not lose her resolve and took part in the Quit India movement, and her fight against the British continued until Indian independence. Unfortunately for India this firebrand revolutionary died an ignominious death.

Pritilata Waddedar

Agni Kanya, who was born in Dhalghat village (now in Bangladesh), was the head mistress of a school when she first made contact with Surya Sen, the renowned Bengali liberation warrior known as Master da. Pritilata became one of the key conspirators of the well-known Chittagong heist after being admitted into the underground force. Master Da and his party were able to successfully raid the Chittagong police armory and flee while the British watched helplessly thanks to Pritilata's expert preparation. But the British soldiers swiftly retaliated, and the independence fighters, who were found in the Jalalabad hills close to Chittagong, faced a severe backlash. Twelve of the independence fighters—mostly teenagers—were killed in the gunfight, while others, including Masterda, managed to flee despite the deployment of several thousand-armed British soldiers. Once more, Pritilata was in charge of providing the rebels with weapons during this brutal gunfight. Because the Paharatoli European Club had a sign that said, "Dogs and Indians are not allowed," Master da and Pritilata decided to burn it down in 1932 as payback for the Jalalabad massacre. The British quickly retaliated after the club was set on fire, and Pritilata and her party were surrounded following a fierce pursuit.

Kalpana Datta

A member of the Chattri Sangha and a part of the Pritilata Waddedar's Chittagong uprising, Kalpana Datta was another member of Master Da's revolutionary team who decided to carry on the work of Pritilata who had given up her life. She was a part of both the armoury loot, and the first attempt at torching the Pahartoli club, which led to the death of Pritilata. As she and Masterda made a second attempt, they failed as the British were better prepared this time. Kalpana managed to escape, and even when the British finally managed to capture Master Da in 1933, Kalpana escaped initially but was arrested three months later and sentenced to life for taking part in the Chittagong Armoury loot. She was released six years later, and after independence preferred quiet existence with her family. She died in 1995.

The nationalist movement of the 19th century opened up a new dimension for the Indian women who had previously remain secluded performing their traditional roles as mothers and wives. Patriotism and

Politics combined together provided the women a chance to take active part in the freedom fight and also work for various social reforms. The women, long isolated and living under patriarchal norms in most cases, finally broke the shackles and came out in large numbers to work collectively for a British free India .

Suhasini Ganguly

While staying in Kolkata, she got in touch with Kalyani Das and Kamala Dasgupta. They introduced her to the Jugantar Party. She became a member of Chhatri Sangha. Under Kalyani Das and Kamala Dasgupta's management. She was associated to Bina Das, who attempted to assassinate the Bengal Governor Stanley Jackson in 1932. Under the Bengal Criminal Law Amendment (BCLA) Act, Ganguly was held captive in Hijli Detention Camp from 1932 to 1938 and after her release, she participated in India's Communist movement. She was attached to the women's front of the Communist Part of India. Although she did not participate in the Quit India Movement as the Communist Party of India did not participate, but she helped her Congress colleagues. She was again detained in jail between 1942 and 1945 as she gave shelter to Hemanta Tarafdar, an activist of the Quit India Movement. She was imprisoned for several months in 1948 and 1949 under the West Bengal Security Act of 1948 for her attachments to communism.

Sarojini Naidu (born-Chattopadhyay)

Sarojini Naidu was born in Hyderabad on 13 February, 1879. Her father, Aghorenath Chattopadhyay, was a Bengali Brahmin who was the principal of the Nizam's College in Hyderabad. She was educated in Madras, London and Cambridge. Following her time in England, where she worked as a suffragist, she was drawn to Indian National Congress' movement for India's independence from British rule. She became a part of the Indian nationalist movement and became a follower of Mahatma Gandhi and his idea of swaraj. She was arrested, along with other Congress leaders including Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Madan Mohan Malaviya for participating in 1930 Salt March. Sarojini was one of the major figures to have led the Civil Disobedience Movement and the Quit India Movement. She faced repeated arrestings by the

British authorities during the time and even spent over 21 months (1 year 9 months) in jail. She was appointed the President of the Indian National Congress in 1925 and later became the Governor of the United Provinces in 1947, becoming the first woman to hold the office of Governor in the Dominion of India. Her work as a poet earned her the sobriquet 'the Nightingale of India', or 'Bharat Kokila' by Mahatma Gandhi because of color, imagery and lyrical quality of her poetry. Naidu's poetry includes both children's poems and others written on more serious themes including patriotism, romance and tragedy. Published in 1912, 'In the Bazaars of Hyderabad' remains one of her most popular poems.

Matangini Hazra

Matangini's active interest in the freedom struggle spiralled in 1905, drawing inspiration from none other than Gandhi. As per the documents, the freedom struggle in Medinapore was characterized by the huge women participation. However, the turning point in her life came on January 26, 1932, known as Indian Independence Day in those days. The village men marched into an awareness procession about the then political scenario, and Hazra joined the group at 62. Since then, there was no looking back for her. There is no doubt that Matangini Hazra was an ardent Gandhi follower. She joined the freedom struggle after being inspired by Mahatma himself. Like him, she declined all foreign goods and spun her yarn. People often recalled her for the humanitarian work in the village. Her vigorous participation in Mahatma Gandhi's Civil Disobedience Movement made her infamous in the police barracks, especially her role in the Salt Satyagraha movement. She made salt in the Alinan salt-making factory. Alinan is her late's husband village. It led to her arrest, and people watched a fragile old woman walking several miles without a single frown on her face. She was promptly released. In 1942 August, the local Congress workers planned to protest near various police stations and government offices in the Medinapore district under the leadership of 73-year-old Matangini Hazra. On September 29, she led around six thousand protesters, mostly women, to besiege the Tamluk police station. The police tried to stop the procession, citing Sec. 144 of IPC. But the defiant Hazra stepped forward, appealing to the policemen not to open fire.

In return, she was shot at arm but kept moving forward with the flag held high. The next Bullet was fired, and it hit her in the forehead taking her life. Later her body was found lying in the pool of blood, holding the flag high, unsoiled.

II. CONCLUSION

In the history of anti-colonial resistance, women's involvement in India's freedom struggle with a particular emphasis on undivided Bengal from 1900 to 1942 marks a paradigm shift. Bengali women emerged as crucial architects of the nationalist movement, far from being only household support systems or passive onlookers. Through their involvement, the strict boundaries of purdah and traditional domesticity were broken, radically altering the public and political landscape of the area. Their involvement's trajectory reveals a distinct dualism. On the one hand, thousands of women mobilized throughout rural and urban Bengal throughout the Non-Cooperation, Salt Satyagraha, and Quit India Movements, drawing inspiration from Gandhian ideology. They persevered in their nonviolent resistance to harsh state repression. Bengal, on the other hand, distinguished itself as a leading testing ground for radical, revolutionary nationalism. By taking up arms, carrying out calculated raids, and bravely confronting martyrdom, trailblazers like Pritilata Waddadar, Kalpana Datta, Bina Das, and Matangini Hazra destroyed patriarchal norms. In addition to undermining British imperial rule, the widespread mobilization of women in Bengal sparked an internal social revolution. These women demonstrated that the struggle for Swaraj (self-rule) was intrinsically related to the emancipation and empowerment of women by taking to the front lines and laying the foundation for early Indian feminism. Their legacy continues to be a pivotal point in India's liberation process.

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