

Scotopia: A multidisciplinary biannual e-journal

ISSN: 2455-5975

Website: <https://scotopia.in/>

**Women's contribution in History of Indian Nationalist Movement up to Independence: A brief analysis**

Dr. Sreyasi Ghosh

Assistant Professor

Department of History

Hiralal Mazumdar Memorial College for Women,

Dakshineswar, Kolkata- 700035.

Email- sreyasighosh@yahoo.com

**Abstract**

Awakening of Indian women in colonial period occurred as a result of many socio- cultural factors namely spread of western education and emergence of Indian Renaissance, impact of feminist movement of the west etc. Indian nationalism flourished in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of 19<sup>th</sup> century when our anti- colonial leadership comprehended the potentiality of woman power. The chaste woman worshipped in nationalist ideology was undoubtedly accorded a coveted position of cultural superiority to the women , influenced by westernization , and was praised as guardians of moral and spiritual qualities within home. Sita, Damayanti and Sabitri were their ultimate idols . During the Swadeshi Movement of 1905 , women of Bengal crossed boundaries of their homes and actively participated in political movements. Gandhiji always acknowledged spiritual strength of Indian women and even fallen womenfolk did not hesitate to participate in his mass movements such as the Khilafat- Non Cooperation , Civil Obedience and Quit India Movements. Sarojini Naidu and Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay were significant names of the Gandhian Salt- Satyagraha . But it was very true that women participated in the nationalist movement upto independence along the lines dictated by patriarchal guardians of male- dominated society and women's special problems such as education , inheritance , marriage and employment etc. were mainly neglected. But women's spirit was undaunted and they took part courageously in anti- British rebellion of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and became prominent pillars of his INA to achieve their motherland India's independence from the barbaric clutches of the imperialist administration.

**Keywords** :- Colonial rule , Empowerment , Independence , Indian Women , Nationalism .

Scotopia: A multidisciplinary biannual e-journal

ISSN: 2455-5975

Website: <https://scotopia.in/>

### **Synoptic overview of women's enormous contribution in Indian anti- colonial independence movement:**

Partha Chatterjee in his famous article entitled *The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question* had rightly opined that the relation between nationalism and the women's question was problematical. The model of patriarchy promoted in Hindu cultural nationalism and established as a dominant construct through anti- colonial discourse separated itself not only from the occidental culture but also from the mass of the indigenous population . The outer world was a symbol of endless pursuit of material interests where male dominance is always supreme factor but the home was not at all controlled by the profane spirit of the external world. Indigenous women were perfect representations of home where oppression and humiliation inflicted by colonial rulers did not get entry at all. Bharati Ray also stated in her edited book entitled *From the Seams of History* that the nationalist appeal was not to a foreign model of womanhood , but was to the indigenous concept of our ideal womanhood as the embodiment and transmitter of tradition.

Indian women actually fought against foreign aggression from the 16<sup>th</sup> century . Rani Abbakka Chowta was the first courageous Tuluva queen of Ullal who showed determination and steadfastness while fighting the onslaught of the Portuguese power in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Portuguese power tried their level best to capture Ullal but Abbakka defeated them for over four decades. The brave queen was called as Abhaya Rani and had been regarded sometimes as the first woman freedom fighter of our motherland. Another valiant woman Bhima Bai Holkar, daughter of Yashwant Rao Holkar , Maharaja of Indore , was engaged in battle against the British Colonel Malcolm in 1817 and successfully utilised strategy of guerrilla warfare. At the warfare of Mahidpur , she led a brigade of 2500 cavalry against the British force and many people believed that her battle against the East India Company became a source of inspiration for Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi during the Mutiny of 1857. Rani Chennamma , ruler of Kittur , a former princely state in modern Karnataka , was brave leader of an armed resistance against the British East India Company in 1824 . She was successful to get victory against the Company in the first revolt , but had to die as a prisoner of war after the second rebellion. Her legacy and glory of first victory are still commemorated in Kittur , during

Scotopia: A multidisciplinary biannual e-journal

ISSN: 2455-5975

Website: <https://scotopia.in/>

the Kittur Utsava held on October 22-24 in each and every year. Rani Avantibai Lodhi, queen of Ramgarh in Madhya Pradesh, was a staunch opponent of the British East India Company during the historically famous Mutiny of 1857. She accepted the strategy of guerrilla warfare against the British army and initially obtained some success. But later she had to sacrifice own life on the verge of defeat in March 1858 and Ramgarh came under the British control. Begum Hazrat Mahal or Begum of Awadh like Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi, was one of India's first female freedom fighters and embodiment of empowerment of women, leading the battle in the famous Mutiny entitled the First Indian War of Independence in 1857.

During the Anti- Partition Movement (1905) of Bengal, women took active part in revolutionary activities. Nani Bala Devi, a member of the *Yugantar* group, was the first woman state prisoner in British Bengal. In 1915, when Ramchandra Majumdar, a convict in the Messrs R B Rodda & Company's arms looting case, was kept in the Presidency Jail, widow Nanibala met him in the jail identifying herself as his wife with suitable dress of a married Hindu lady. Her courageous activity was unthinkable for a Brahmin widow of her contemporary period and she upheld her valiant nature even while facing brutal torture in Varanasi jail and Presidency jail. Dukari Bala Devi, was one of the most significant members of the armed freedom struggle against the colonial administration and was convicted under the infamous Arms Act. She had to withstand merciless torture in the prison but nothing could make her utter any relevant information about the revolutionary activities.

Sarala Devi Chaudhurani was an eminent political activist who established Bharat Stree Mahamandal in Allahabad in 1910. This was undoubtedly the first national-level women's organization in India. Mahatma Gandhi deeply admired Sarala Devi. She, like Sister Nivedita, maintained close links with the revolutionaries and extended heartfelt support to a good number of secret societies namely Anushilan Samiti in Dhaka, Suhridd Samiti in Mymensingh and several others in Calcutta. She started various events in Bengal namely Pratapaditya Utsav, Udayaditya Utsav and Birashtami Utsav to preach militant nationalism.

Sushila Mohan popularly known as Sushila Didi, born in Punjab of colonial India, was a prominent figure in India's revolutionary independence movement. She joined the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association to serve our motherland. When Bhagat Singh and

Scotopia: A multidisciplinary biannual e-journal

ISSN: 2455-5975

Website: <https://scotopia.in/>

Batukeshwar Dutt had been captured after the adventurous act of throwing a bomb on the Assembly, Sushila with Durga Bhabhi tried their level best to help other revolutionaries to escape imprisonment. Smt. Purnima Devi, an eminent Arya Samaj worker of Hisar, toured several districts of Punjab and was brave champion of the cause of Swadeshi. Agyavati of Delhi was also a significant freedom fighter. She gave all her efforts to establish a Vidhwa Ashram where widows and other women had gone through political training and were taught to preach without prejudice (the distinction of caste and creed).

The Indian Ladies' Magazine, launched in 1901 under the editorship of Kamala Sathianadhan, gradually evolved into a platform where the future of New Indian womanhood was fiercely debated and it became an excellent platform for advocating social reform. Kamala was active in Indian independence movement. Renowned ladies such as Sarojini Naidu, Begum Rokeya, Annie Besant and Pandita Ramabai contributed in her magazine.

Bi Amman was a prominent voice in our freedom struggle. She was included in history of the first Muslim women who enthusiastically took part in politics and her sons, Maulana Mohammad Ali and Maulana Shaukat Ali became stalwarts of the Khilafat Movement. She, with Begum Hasrat Mohani, Basanti Devi, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and also Sarojini Naidu many times spoke before the audience of women-only gatherings and requested ladies to extend support to the Tilak Swaraj Fund which was established by Bal Gangadhar Tilak for the national independence struggle.

Madame Cama was called the 'Mother of Indian Revolution' because she was the first freedom fighter to hoist the Indian flag in a foreign land on August 22, 1907. She had done this victoriously in the International Socialist Conference in Stuttgart, Germany. *The Bande Mataram* (founded by Madam Bhikaji Cama) had been an Indian nationalist publication from Paris which started its journey from Paris in September 1909 by the Paris Indian Society.

Yesubai Ganesh Savarkar, born in Maharashtra, adopted Swadeshi Vrata and was active in Atmanishtha Yuvati Sangh. She was an ardent supporter of her husband Ganesh Pant Savarkar (Baba Rao) in all anti-British activities. As the glass of the bangles used to come from abroad, she rejected glass bangles and practised wearing bangles made of black beads in the rope.

Scotopia: A multidisciplinary biannual e-journal

ISSN: 2455-5975

Website: <https://scotopia.in/>

Sugar also used to come from abroad so she discarded consuming sugar. She supported several members of the revolutionary organization Mitra Mela ( Abhinav Bharat) many times.

Annie Besant started the Home Rule League in Madras in September 1916. In colonial India the Home Rule Movement prepared the path for re- entry of militant nationalist leaders into Congress.

Sarala Devi was a political activist , feminist and writer. She was the first Odia woman to participate in the anti- colonial activities of the Indian National Congress . She maintained close proximity with well- reputed people namely Mahatma Gandhi , Jawaharlal Nehru , Durgabai Deshmukh , Acharyya Kripalani and Sarojini Naidu.

Aruna Asaf Ali became an active participant in our freedom movement as member of Indian National Congress and participated in the movement related to Salt Satyagraha . In 1932 , she was imprisoned in Tihar Jail where she launched protest against ill- treatment towards political prisoners through weapon of hunger- strike. During the Quit India Movement of 1942, she was quite active in the underground movement. Her property was seized and sold. She edited *Inquilab* , a monthly magazine of Indian National Congress , with Ram Manohar Lohia.

Kasturba Gandhi , wife of Mahatma Gandhi , was engaged in political life in South Africa with her husband and founded the Phoenix Settlement near Durban . In India , she participated in non- violent Satyagraha of Gujarat during the Non Co- Operation Movement of 1920s and after participating in many anti- British protests during the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930s , she faced imprisonment on several occasions. She also engaged herself in the Quit India Movement and during confinement , due to health problems , she breathed her last at the detention camp in Pune.

Swarup Rani Nehru , ardent nationalist wife of Motilal Nehru and proud mother of Jawaharlal Nehru , was active enough in the Civil Disobedience Movement launched by Gandhiji and encouraged womenfolk to make salt . When her husband and only son were imprisoned , she rejoiced because her near and dear ones had been capable of sacrificing themselves for the sake of motherland. Her granddaughter Nayantara Sahgal , depicted skilfully how Swarup Rani had in her widowhood played a soldier's role in the national movement.

Scotopia: A multidisciplinary biannual e-journal

ISSN: 2455-5975

Website: <https://scotopia.in/>

Lado Rani Zutshi was a prominent woman freedom fighter of Punjab. She took part in the Gandhian non-violent Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930s and used to distribute seditious literature among common people. She with her daughters courageously and enthusiastically started picketing in the shops of foreign clothing, before courts and sometimes quarters of members of the Legislative Assembly. She withstood imprisonment during the Civil Disobedience Movement.

Basanti Devi, wife of Chittaranjan Das, became the President of Bengal Provincial Congress in 1921-22 and while travelling around India, she extended her heartfelt support for development of indigenous arts to continue cultural battle against colonialism. Like her husband, she was sympathetic enough towards political activities of Subhas Chandra Bose and militant revolutionary leaders.

Sarojini Naidu was elected as the first indigenous woman President of the Indian National Congress Party in 1925 and was an active leader of Gandhian Salt-Satyagraha. She was remembered for her significant role as a proponent of civil rights, women's emancipation and anti-colonial nationalist ideology.

Popularly known as 'iron lady', Durgabai Deshmukh, was a key factor in organising women satyagrahis for the Civil Disobedience Movement and faced wrath of the colonial Government which imprisoned her three times between 1930 and 1933.

Usha Mehta was an eminent Gandhian freedom fighter who was famous for becoming a pillar of organizing the Congress Radio, also entitled as the Secret Congress Radio, an underground radio station, which operated temporarily during the Quit India Movement of 1942.

Matangini Hazra, popularly known as Gandhi Buri, was a renowned revolutionary who was murdered by the police force of the colonial government before the Tamluk Police Station on 29 September 1942. Earlier in 1932, she participated in the Non-Cooperation Movement and was captured for breaking the Salt Act. She was a quite active member of the Indian National Congress. Matangini, who was 72 years old, gave leadership to a large gathering of six thousand supporters, mostly women volunteers, for taking control over the Tamluk police station. The procession was ordered to disband immediately under Section 144 of the

Scotopia: A multidisciplinary biannual e-journal

ISSN: 2455-5975

Website: <https://scotopia.in/>

Indian Penal Code by the police force of the British government but Matangini stepped forward even after commencement of firing. She continued marching in spite of being injured in the forehead and both hands and ultimately breathed her last with the motherland's National Flag held high and chanting *Vande Mataram* .

Kanaklata Barua , popularly known as Birbala , was a prominent participant of the Indian nationalist movement and she was shot dead by the brutal police force of the British Raj when she was leading a big procession with the National Flag during the Quit India Movement of 1942. During that famous Gandhian Movement , she took part in the activities of the Mrityu Bahini , a death squad of young revolutionaries from the Gohpur sub- division in Assam , and on 20 September , 1942 , she was shot dead while leading a procession of unarmed villagers for hoisting the national flag at the local police station . Kanaklata was only 17 years old at the time of her heroic death.

Strength of Indian women inspired Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose a lot also while he was engaged in organizing the INA during the World War II.

**Analysis of Salient features of women's participation in nationalist movements before and after Gandhiji's arrival in mainstream politics: -**

Indian women were active in mainstream nationalist politics of Indian National Congress before arrival of Mahatma Gandhi. In 1890, Swarnakumari Ghosal, a novelist , and Kadambini Ganguly , a renowned name among India's first female doctors , attended annual meeting of the INC as delegates. From this time , women used to attend each and every meeting of the INC with their male guardians sometimes as delegates , but often as ornamental observers. According to Geraldine Forbes, author of the book entitled *Women in Modern India* , women of Bengal played a prominent role in the Anti- Partition Movement of 1905 by supporting revolutionary organizations –

*“Women hid weapons , sheltered fugitives , and encouraged the men , their domestic roles providing cover for these subversive and revolutionary acts. The activities of these Bengali women sympathetic to the swadeshi movement were quite different from their representative roles in the INC . ”*

Scotopia: A multidisciplinary biannual e-journal

ISSN: 2455-5975

Website: <https://scotopia.in/>

After obtaining success in the South African struggle, Gandhi returned to India and gave thrust on utmost necessity of pure, firm and self-controlled women leaders. He upheld images of Sita, Damayanti and Draupadi as models of indigenous womanhood. According to him, ancient women suffered for male atrocities but survived maintaining dignity. Gandhi declared confidently that modern Indian women can understand value of right to freedom when they would learn to appreciate power of ancient heroines. During the Rowlatt Satyagraha of 1919, he asked womenfolk irrespective of all classes and communities to participate in the peaceful resistance movements against the colonial government. He compared the British rulers to the notorious demon Ravana who captured the noble king Ram's wife Sita, embodiment of bravery, faithfulness and chaste womanhood. Gandhi also was conscious that his statement of Ramarajya would not attract support of Muslim women and so he propagated that British Raj was Satan's rule and so Muslim ladies should discard foreign clothes to save Islam. Sucheta Kripalani had stated that Gandhiji's personality was capable of generating confidence not only among women, but also in their male guardians.

During the Non Co-Operation Movement, Rashtriya Stree Sangha was established. Role of Muslim women was prominent and its example was Bi Amma, mother of the famous Ali brothers, who requested women for participating in picketing as Congress volunteers in the All – Indian Ladies Conference in Ahmedabad. Even devadasis contributed for the anti-colonial movement in South India. Prostitutes collected funds for Congress in Bengal. Gandhi advised affluent women to try their best to learn about the conditions of rustic and impoverished womenfolk.

During the Civil Disobedience Movement Bombay women's activities earned enough limelight. The Rashtriya Stree Sangha continued its journey for goals related to India's independence and emancipation of women under the able leadership of Sarojini Naidu with Goshiben Naoroji Captain and Avantikabai Gokhale as vice-presidents. Gandhi appealed to rural women for serving their motherland through weapons of picketing liquor and toddy shops, path of boycotting taxed salt, spinning and wearing khaddar. He praised women's patience and natural avoidance of violence because through these qualities they became extremely suitable for constructive works.



Scotopia: A multidisciplinary biannual e-journal

ISSN: 2455-5975

Website: <https://scotopia.in/>

Often leaders of Desh Sevika Sangha / DSS made it clear that they wanted to recruit only from respectable women . Goshiben Captain believed that women from good classes would earn respect from the common people. So Geraldine Forbes stated that many times politically active ladies chose respectability or class barrier over solidarity with the so- called undesirable women.

Activities of women from Bengal were more radical and full of the spirit of violent revolutionary upsurge than those of Bombay ladies. The Mahila Rashtriya Sangha/ MRS started its journey from 1928 and it was a formal organization for mobilizing women to participate in political works. The Chattri Sangha was important for Congress Party for recruits because its girls were already extremely active in public life by arranging interesting study classes, organizing athletic centres , swimming clubs , cooperative stores , enriched libraries and a youth hostel . Bina Das and Pritilata Waddedar were prominent examples of rebellious spirit of women of Bengal. Saraladevi expressed necessity of more empowerment of women and lamented that Congress assigned to women the position of law- breakers only and not law-makers.

Womenfolk of Madras never participated in the revolutionary movement , nor were they victims of excessive police brutality like women of Bengal.

In North India , large public demonstrations with unveiled women of respectable families occurred in Allahabad , Lucknow , Delhi and Lahore. Bimla Luthra depicted the magical impact of speeches of Jawaharlal Nehru who gave thrust on making salt and picketing on foreign clothes as well as liquor shops. In Delhi, Satyavati Devi , the brave granddaughter of Swami Shraddhanand , was imprisoned for her inflammatory speeches before women. Feminist issues could not capture central stage during that era of anti- colonial movements. Kamala Nehru acknowledged the fact of degraded condition of women's rights in contemporary period.

The Rani of Jhansi Regiment had been the eminent women's Regiment of the Indian National Army of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose during the Second World War . Its leader was Captain Lakshmi Sahgal. This all-woman unit was brainchild of Netaji himself.

Scotopia: A multidisciplinary biannual e-journal

ISSN: 2455-5975

Website: <https://scotopia.in/>

**Conclusion** :- Participation of Indian women in large numbers in the arena of nationalist movement thwarted the agenda of the British Raj which always claimed moral superiority over the indigenous people on the issue that they performed role of the guardians of women as part of their civilizing mission entitled as white man's burden. The colonial rulers had shown through their own activities such as brutal police violence and gang-rape of rural women that they were not at all protectors but rather perpetrators of torture / violence on women eager for independence of their motherland. Women's rights and feminist consciousness could not become key factors due to social conservatism and respectable ladies were not able to build solidarity with their fallen sisters and women from lower classes . Geraldine Forbes rightly opined that male guardianship maintained its hegemonic control . Women were allowed to participate in the outer world because the home was under attack . The patriarchal traditionalist expectation was that once the problem of foreign tyranny could be obliterated , women ought to go back in their inner space to perform their conventional duties prescribed for them .

In spite of limitations , women earned respect for their socio- political activities. After the Civil Disobedience Movement , many women took part in the professional life and some men accepted them as equals . The pattern of family law was reviewed and endeavours to restructure it was undertaken gradually.

More and more research was necessary for highlighting women's participation in our nationalist movement.

### **References**

Geraldine Forbes- Women in Modern India (Cambridge University Press, New York, USA, 2000).

Geraldine Forbes- Women in Colonial India (Chronicle Books, New Delhi, 2005).

Bharati Ray (edited)- From the Seams of History (OUP, New Delhi, 2001)

Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (edited)- Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History (Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1999).

Scotopia: A multidisciplinary biannual e-journal

ISSN: 2455-5975

Website: <https://scotopia.in/>

Subodh Kumar Mukhopadhyay – An Advanced History of Modern India (Mitram, Kolkata, 2018).

Suranjan Chatterjee and Siddhartha Guha Ray- History of Modern India: 1707- 1964 (Progressive Publishers, Kolkata- 2015).

Anuradha Chanda, Mahua Sarkar and Kunal Chattopadhyay – Women in History (Progressive Publishers with Jadavpur University, Kolkata, April 2003).

Sheila Lahiri Choudhury edited- Reading the Nineteenth Century (Calcutta, 1996).

Vijay Agnew – Elite Women in Indian Politics (New Delhi: Vikas, 1979).

B.R. Nanda edited – Indian Women: From Purdah to Modernity (New Delhi: Vikas, 1976).

Sumit Sarkar – The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903- 1908 (New Delhi: People’s Pub. House, 1973).

Partha Chatterjee – Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World (Delhi: OUP, 1986).

Saraladebi Choudhurani – Jibaner Jharapata (Calcutta, 1382)

Indrani Sen- Woman and Empire (Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 2008)