
Diverse And Significant Contribution of Indian Women Freedom Fighters

Swati Sharma

PG Student, Department of History, University of Allahabad

Abstract:

Women's participation in Indian struggle has been immense yet invisible. During freedom struggle their efforts in and outside the confines of their homes was tremendous. Their efforts are however not depicted as they deserved to be. In their own different way, limited by social constraints their ways of contributing towards the freedom struggle were different and even unnoticed in many ways. Whether it was Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement or Quit India Movement they presence increased as we went through different phases of freedom struggle. There are various factors which are responsible for their little or insignificant mention in historical narratives. This might be due to various reasons such as their limited number in open revolt or resistance, societal constraints on their public life or them playing a subordinate role in the struggle. The huge research gap in this field provides ample scope for study and exploration. The present research paper aims to bridge this gap through a study of various available resources like published scholarly articles, books, journal papers, archival material and other relevant data. The research paper will primarily focus on collective efforts of women freedom fighters and their diverse ways of expressing nationalistic sentiments.

Keywords: freedom struggle, women, Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, Quit India Movement

Most mass movement leaders have paid similar tributes to women's greater capacity for suffering and faith. Throughout the freedom movement, Gandhi Ji encouraged and exhorted women to be in the forefront of various mass actions, including picketing, because he believed that women's presence in sufficient numbers would help keep the movement disciplined and non-violent. But it was not his intention that men begin to use women as a shield against repression and beatings. It was to avoid this kind of abdication of responsibility by men that he was against taking women on the Dandi march, since he expected the government to react with violence to this agitation.¹

Gandhi's fight against caste, inequality, child marriage, and promotion of women's education had empowered and motivated women. They inspire a great deal of participation from the women. Unprecedented levels of female activism are seen in the non-cooperation movement, particularly among educated and middle-class women. Aruna Asaf, Sarla Devi, Amrit Kaur, and Muthul Laxmi Reddy became well-known leaders. Even after Gandhi's arrest, Sarojini

¹ Nature of Women's Mobilisation in Rural India: An Exploratory Essay, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 23, No. 52/53 (Dec. 24-31, 1988), pp. 2754-2763

Naidu, motivated by Gandhi's principles, organized a nonviolent demonstration against the salt law and tariffs at Dharsana Salt Works during the civil disobedience movement. She campaigned for the right to vote and became the first Indian woman to be elected to the Indian National Congress presidency. Aruna Asaf Ali's underground involvement during the Quit India campaign, spearheaded by Usha Mehta, was essential to keeping the movement going.³

Women's involvement in nationalist movements began with the Bengali Swadeshi Movement. Women in various parts of India were interested in the Swadeshi Movement and the movement against the partition of Bengal. Propaganda, popular mobilization, and revivalist consciousness all helped to enhance women's involvement in public affairs during this time (1905–11). The Swadeshi Movement placed a strong emphasis on raising education levels, promoting cultural heritage, and boycotting foreign products. Several women's organizations were founded during this time. During this Swadeshi period, a few women's associations were established. In 1910, Sarala Devi organized the women's movement and established Bharat Stri Maha Mandal in Lahore. This society has sections established in Calcutta and Allahabad. This society's objective was to bring women together on the basis of equality and a declaration of faith based on their financial excitement for the betterment and material growth of Indian women. Kanchi Mahila Parishad was founded by Parvati Devi, the headmistress of a Hindu girls' school in Kanchi, a Madras government residential neighbourhood, to provide Kanchi women with the skills necessary to voice their opinions publicly on pressing national issues. The process of women being associated with the freedom struggle was quickened by Annie Besant's introduction into Indian politics in 1914.

Annie Besant spearheaded the emancipation movement and advanced the demand for women's political rights when they were first created. Her leadership offered the women of the land courage, support, and inspiration to engage in the national life of the nation and to join the national movement in greater numbers. The influence of Madame Blavatsky led her to become a member of the Theosophical Society. In 1916, Annie Besant was a key figure in the Home Rule Movement. She was the editor of the weekly publication *Common Will* and the daily newspaper *New India*. She was taken into custody and imprisoned. Annie Besant and Margaret Cousins made every effort to get franchise for Indian women. As the inaugural President of the Indian Women's Association, she played a significant role in advocating for women's political rights. Men and women over the age of eighteen were eligible to join her Home Rule League. Annie Besant was the first female president of the Indian National Congress, having been elected in 1917.

When Sarojini Naidu visited and spoke at the Muslim League Session in 1913, she made her political debut as the "Ambassador of Hindu Muslim Unity." In 1916, three years later, Sarojini Naidu gave a speech on self-government. He thereafter started to play a significant role in the political life of the nation. Sarojini Naidu worked for women's rights and self-government because she believed that serving the country brought happiness and salvation. December 1917 saw Sarojini Naidu head a delegation of influential women from the social and political spheres in the same year. This deputation was waiting on Montague to ensure that women could vote. When she went to the Congress special session in Bombay the following September, 1918, she helped to pass a resolution pertaining to women's suffrage, which stated that they would not be

denied the right to vote due to their gender. As part of the Home Rule League Deputation, Sarojini Naidu traveled to England in 1919 to testify before the Joint Parliamentary Committee. She also used this occasion to argue for women's franchise rights. Leading the charge in Bardoli was Sardar Patel, who started a nontax movement. The goal of this campaign was to address an economic injustice. From the beginning, the women of Bardoli participated in this movement, but they lacked leadership. The movement among Bombay's women was considerably bolstered by Mithuben Petit and Bhaktben Desai. Even though it required them to walk a considerable distance, the women showed up for the sessions.

The women of Bengal not only participated in Mahatma Gandhi's Civil Disobedience campaign but also in the revolutionary activities. They were encouraged to adopt the revolutionary creed by Subhas Chandra Bose. Several women's organizations were formed to mobilize women to participate in nationalist activities including processions, pickets, and charka spinning such as the Ladies Picketing Board, Nari Stayagraha Committee, and Mahila Rashtriya Sangh. The Satyagraha Movement was gaining momentum rapidly, snowballing into a nationwide crusade for freedom, which had committed leaders and participants in every corner of the country. In Madras the Salt Satyagraha movement had leaders such as T. Prakasan, Nageswara Rao Pantulu and the remarkable Duragabai. Rukmini Lakshmapati had the honors of being the first lady to be arrested in connection with the Salt Satyagraha. She was the President to the Tamilnadu Provincial Congress Committee. Another famous woman of this time was Durgabai Deshmukh who became the war dictator in the city of Madras and carried on the movement sponsored by the Congress till she was arrested. Among the scores of Karnataka, women who participated wholeheartedly in the struggle for freedom were Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, Umabai Kundapur, Krishnabai Panjekar, Ballari Siddama and even Gowamma and her co-workers to a lesser extent. In the North, Panjab, a massive procession of approximately five thousand like-minded women inaugurated the Civil Disobedience Movement. Prabhat-Pheries, picketing and meetings became the order of the day. Similar episodes of unprecedented courage and intense patriotic fervor were etched in blood and sweat on the vast topographical map of India. More than 80,000 people were arrested during the Salt Satyagraha and more than 17,000 of these were women.² during Quit India Movement, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur played a leading role in organization processions and protest meetings. Rajkumari came from the royal family of Kapurthala state.

Amrit Kaur was most active, during the Quit India Movement in 1942; she led processions day after day. One such procession was subjected to ruthless lathi charge in Shimla, the processions led by her from 9 to 16 August were subjected to lathi charge as many as fifteen times. Sucheta Kriplani was a lecturer in Banaras University. Individual Satyagraha launched by the Congress in 1940 and she was one of the chosen ones who was permitted to take part in this Satyagraha and she was arrested. She was again arrested in 1944. After her release in 1945, she engaged herself mostly in the social relief activities.

Aruna Asaf Ali was one of the most important figures of the Quit India Movement. The British Government desperately wanted to arrest her and the then princely sum of five thousand rupees

² Kaul, Vinita (2000). "Women and the Wind of Change", Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi

was announced as a reward for her capture. She published bulletins and edited with Ram Manohar Lohia the 'Inquilab'. Aruna Asaf Ali was an ardent soldier of the army of freedom fighters. She became prominent during the days of Salt Satyagraha, when she went around addressing meetings, preparing salt and leading processions. During the Quit India Movement in 1942, Usha Mehta was a student. She later became a broadcaster for Voice of India Underground Radio and led the Monkey Brigade, a group of young people who served as couriers for the Freedom Movement. Women played a crucial role in India's independence movement. They organized picketing of stores selling foreign goods and alcohol, arranged public gatherings, marketed Khadi, and took an active part in national movements. They fearlessly moved behind the iron bars and faced the policeman's baton.