

## **Role of Women in the Freedom Movement**

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### **Abstract**

The Indian freedom movement was a historical phase of Indian society which brought revolution in the life of women and politics. Earlier restricted to household work, women turned out to be active participants, disseminating information, organizing and spearheading protests, and becoming an integral part of movements such as Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, and Quit India. Heroines like Rani Lakshmibai, Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, and Aruna Asaf Ali exhibited great leadership, regardless of the fact that they were women who overcame cultural restraints to free India. Their participation made the struggle for the nationalist movement even more effective; they also fought for women's rights, which had a positive impact on further social and political changes. Women overcame obstacles such as patriarchal defiance and lack of leadership roles and paved the way for future generations and gender equity in post independence India. They remain relevant to the present and future as they shape political systems, policies, and women's liberation struggles. This paper focuses on their achievements, their strength and how they influenced the Indian struggle towards independence and social change.

**Keywords:** Indian freedom movement, women's participation, gender equality, Rani Lakshmibai, Sarojini Naidu, Quit India Movement

### **1. Introduction**

The freedom struggle of India is one of the bravest movements of Indian history which has been fought for freedom, suffered for freedom, and won freedom with unity. During this fight for liberation from British imperialism women played significant roles to challenge the culture of domination that wanted to reduce them to mere housewives. Indian society has always been well-ordered and women were confined to the four walls of their homes for decades. But the freedom movement turned into a revolutionary period in history as women from different strata of society – from the rural and urban, educated and uneducated, the elite and the working class – came out of their homes to become icons of the nation. Women also played active part in the movement through non-cooperation activities such as spinning khadi, refraining from using foreign articles and participating in processions, but more than that, they became the leaders of the movement and expressed their potential of mobilizing people. It brought into light a struggle against colonial power and social injustice and paved way for women emancipation in India. This paper focuses on the significant of women in India's freedom struggle, their early participation, their roles in various important movements, the challenges they faced and the contribution they made. These women fought and struggled for their rights and for a brighter future and in the process shaped the course of Indian society and politics to an extent that it will not easily be forgotten.

## **2. Early Contributions**

### **2.1 Rani Lakshmibai and the 1857 Revolt**

Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi is a legendary queen of India's freedom struggle and a pioneer of women warriors in the freedom struggle. A bold warrior, she took part in the First War of Independence in 1857 also known as the Sepoy Mutiny. Reality, however, was harsh for Rani Lakshmibai: she was a young widow, and the British practiced the Doctrine of Lapse that prohibited her adopted son from ascending the throne, thus threatening to annex Jhansi. Her rebelliousness together with her extraordinary courage and tactical skills made her a symbol of freedom combatants. As a counter to the British force, Rani Lakshmibai was a fearless commander who carried weapons and fought on a horse back. Her resistance to the British forces led by Sir Hugh Rose in the defense of Jhansi is an example of her strength and strategic genius. Jhansi was, however, recaptured by the British, but the spirit of Jhansi ki Rani did not bend and she went on fighting with the help of Tantia Tope. Thus, Rani Lakshmibai at the age of 29 years became a martyr, and, thus, a symbol of struggle, which called for actions of Indian women, including fight for freedom. It's still valid today and it reflects strong woman who can lead and fight for her people.

### **2.2 Women Leaders in the Swadeshi Movement**

The Swadeshi Movement (1905–1911) which was initiated as a reaction to the British decision to divide Bengal was another important phase of India's freedom struggle and women played a part in it. The movement encouraged people to stop buying goods from Britain and to start using local produced items so as to break the financial power of colonialism. Thus, while women were supposed to be caretakers of the home, they got a chance to become active citizens and support the nationalist struggle. Sarala Devi Chaudhurani became one of the most leading figures during this period. A dedicated follower of Gandhian philosophy, she mobilised women into groups and encouraged them not to purchase goods from foreign countries and to wear khaddar, the hand spun and hand woven cloth. Women also actively participated in the dissemination of Swadeshi message by organizing rallies, public speeches and cultural performances. They also supported the indigenous art and craft and thus revived many traditional industries of India.

Other woman fighters who played their role during this period include Sarala Devi, Bhikaiji Cama, and Basanti Devi among others. Bhikaiji Cama, operating from Europe, devoted her efforts to making people across the globe informed on the Indian freedom fight and passed out literature that encouraged self rule. Basanti Devi, the wife of Chittaranjan Das a congress leader, herself played an active part in the protests and encouraged many women to join the struggle for freedom which could lead to arrest and even assault. The Swadeshi Movement also showed women as active agents in history who can mobilize, organise and rally people which was a complete deviation from the traditional roles women play. This phase paved the way for the involvement of women in later stages of the freedom struggle and underlined the fact that the freedom struggle could not be enforced without women's involvement. Apart from enhancing the struggle of the nationalists they also began to work towards the liberation of women in Indian society and the fight against gender prejudice.

### **3. Participation in Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, and Quit India Movements**

#### **3.1 Non-Cooperation Movement**

The Non-Cooperation Movement which Gandhi launched in 1920 demolished the previous strategy of struggle for Indian freedom as it aimed at fighting against the British rule without using arms. This role was a new one for women, who had for so long been confined to the home, and it marked a new ability to be involved in political action. They marched through the streets and boycotted foreign goods especially alcohol and clothes, to show that they were against not only colonialism but also sinful practices. Spinning of the Khadi became a symbol of protest against the imperialist driven mill industry and women grasped it with both hands and turned it into a household work with nationalistic overtones. Some of the women emerged leaders during this period of the Non-Cooperation Movement. Basanti Devi and Kasturba Gandhi became the leaders and thousands of women followed them to fight for the rights. They attended public rallies and forums, conducted public health information, education and communication, and bravely faced police brutality. The movement allowed women to express their protest and showed that they were an essential part of the nationalist struggle. Many of these women who had never ventured outside their homes also came into the political fields to challenge not only British authority but also social norms.

#### **3.2 Civil Disobedience Movement**

Another significant movement led by Gandhi was the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-1934) where women involvement was even more marked. This branch stressed on conscious violation of unjust laws whereby people did not pay taxes, shunned British products, and engaged in the symbolic salt march. Women, urged by Gandhi's thoughts on the concept of self reliance, formed the core of these initiatives and gave the struggle a ground level turn. Perhaps one of the most famous events of the Civil Disobedience Movement was the women's involvement in the Salt March of 1930. While the first Salt March was led by men, women joined in later protests all over the country to make and sell salt in disregard of the British regulation. Such leaders as Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay came to the for front during this period and gave leadership. Moreover, Kamaladevi was not only involved in protests but also campaigned for other social changes including women rights and women emancipation, economically. This paper shall also show how her leadership embodied the unity of the nationalist and feminist agendas at the time. In cities, women went out onto the streets, demonstrated, marched in front of shops selling imported goods, and distributed nationalist leaflets. In rural areas, they organized people, and they did it at their own peril. Women were threatened with imprisonment, beaten up and cast out from their communities, but they did not sway. Through the non-cooperation movement especially civil disobedience movement women became the active participants and thus got their position carved in India's freedom struggle.

#### **3.3 Quit India Movement**

The Quit India Movement of 1942 was the most aggressive period of the Indian struggle for freedom which demanded immediate expulsion of British from India. The women also had their part to play in this mass uprisal, and their contribution included participation in protest, providing hideouts and shelter. Unlike the earlier movements this movement was more spontaneous and women took over leading roles as the male leaders had been arrested. Usha Mehta was another jewel, who established an underground radio service to spread the message of freedom and kept the people motivated with nationalists slogans. During the broadcast, she

gave information about the movement, encouraged the population, and denounce the acts of the British. She epitomized the spirit of women in the society and how they struggle to come out of their predicament. Another leader who came to the front during this period was Aruna Asaf Ali. She was awarded the title of an icon when she hoisted the Indian flag at the Gowalia Tank Maidan in Bombay in contradiction to the British. Many people followed her example and joined the movement; she remained the leader of the underground resistance campaigns while still in the danger of being arrested. It is the aim of this paper to discuss the contribution of ordinary women in the Quit India Movement. In the villages and towns women protested, burnt tyres and poles, blocked roads and provided food and shelter to the revolutionaries. Some suffered persecution, imprisonment and the loss of loved ones. Nevertheless, their spirit to fight was not diminished and they continued to protest for the independence of the nation.

Women involvement in these three historical movements- Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience and Quit India led by Congress showed how women transformed from mere followers to leaders in the fight for India's freedom. Their struggle not only boosted the nationalist struggle but also fought against the traditional set up of the society and opened doors for women in independent India. The actions of these women were an excellent example of how people with a common cause can overcome all the obstacles and become an inspiration to others.

#### **4. Contributions of Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, and Aruna Asaf Ali**

##### **4.1 Sarojini Naidu**

Sarojini Naidu was not only a great poet of the Indian subcontinent and a freedom fighter but also a political leader who got exemplary achievements in the Indian freedom struggle. Born in 1879 in Hyderabad, she was a child prodigy who went on to win fame as a poet who wrote in praise of India and all things Indian. But her literary abilities were coupled with her political activism that made her emerge as one of the leading forces in the struggle for India's freedom. Under the leadership of Sarojini Naidu, women were called upon to join the national struggle in a big way. This paper presents Aruna Asaf Ali as a key leader of the Civil Disobedience Movement, mobilising people, raising awareness through public speeches, and rallying women to participate in the freedom struggle and come out of their homes. She also collaborated with Gandhi, and her activities corresponded with the ideas of nonviolent struggle. In 1930, during the famous Salt Satyagraha, Sarojini Naidu was leading the group of people to Dharasana Salt Works where she and her fellow marchers were beaten up by the British policemen. She was one among the most articulate Indians on the world forum. She was one amongst the limited number of Indian leaders who participated in the second Round Table Conference in London in 1931 when she demanded India's freedom and the role of women in attaining it. Also she was the first women of India to preside over the Indian National Congress in the year 1925, which was a great achievement since she had shown her leadership qualities. In addition to her political activities, she was secretary of the Women's Indian Association and fought for women's rights and education. Her speeches and writings were mainly directed toward social change; she frequently associated the liberation of India with the liberation of women. His dual role in writing and politics rewarded her as one of the most distinguished intellectuals and activists in Indian history.

##### **4.2 Kasturba Gandhi**

Kasturba Gandhi was also a doer and a shaker and maker of India and she was the wife of Mahatma Gandhi. She was born in 1869 in Porbandar, Gujarat, and married Gandhi at a young age and remained his supporter in life as well as in his fight for freedom. At first, Kasturba remained within the four walls of the house but she became a satyagrahi and embraced the principles of non-violence and social justice which formed the core of Gandhian ideology. Kasturba had many roles to play in the freedom struggle and she played them well. She took part in the satyagraha campaigns in South Africa where she helped Gandhi fight against apartheid laws that targeted the Indians. I suggest that her involvement in the earliest struggles provided the background for her later activities in India, where she emerged as one of the leaders of the Non-Cooperation Movement and the Civil Disobedience Movement. The role that Kasturba play in the salt satyagraha and her efforts to mobilize women for boycott of foreign products and wearing of khadi made her a strong nationalist. Besides being an activist, Kasturba was involved in the process of social reform especially for the poor and the downtrodden. She dedicated time in ensuring that the people especially women and children in the rural areas received education, better sanitation and health care. It is a matter of record that Kasturba undertook the work of organising the downtrodden because she felt that the mission of seeking social justice and the struggle for freedom were linked. Kasturba was a strong woman and this was best seen during the times that she was imprisoned several times. While she was a sickly woman, she stood the ordeal of jail life with courage and even become an icon of struggle. Despite being married to the most prominent leader of the freedom struggle, her contribution often remained unnoticed, yet she played a crucial role in the freedom struggle and motivated several women to participate in the struggle for freedom.

#### **4.3 Aruna Asaf Ali**

Aruna Asaf Ali was a revolutionary who was not afraid of anything as she played important roles during the Quit India Movement to earn her the name 'Grand Old Lady of the Indian Independence'. Her family was against her marriage with Asaf Ali, a Muslim Congress leader, which she did in 1909 in Haryana itself. The spirit of unconventionalism that was to characterize her later years was to play an important role in the freedom struggle of India. Aruna Asaf Ali gave her most famous performance during the Quit India Movement of 1942. On August 9, she disobeyed the British and when senior Congress leaders were arrested, she raised the Indian tricolor at Gowalia Tank Maidan in Bombay (currently Mumbai). Her brave act made her a role model for the whole nation and thousands of Indians who supported the movement. After this act, she went into hiding to avoid being arrested and continued to fight for the cause and organise the movement. Some of the underground activities which Aruna was involved in included; mobilization of strikes, dissemination of propaganda and coordination of the freedom fighters. She kept the Quit India Movement alive when the British had completely clamped down on it. She was very brave and ingenious at this time, and she gained a lot of respect from people; she became the icon of the struggle against oppression. In post independence, Aruna remained a staunch socially justice and political activist demanding for social and political change through demanding for equality and economic liberation. She was awarded many times for her role in India's freedom struggle, the highest civilian award in India is Bharat Ratna. Aruna Asaf Ali's life is a perfect example of how voice of one person can be powerful in the right cause of humanity.

The participation of women in the freedom struggle of India can be depicted by three important women Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi and Aruna Asaf Ali. These women headed protests, participated in diplomacy at the international level, worked at the grass root level and even took revolutionary actions; they charted new paths and wrote new stories of India's

freedom struggle. They did not only inspire and empower the nationalist movement but also opened doors for future generations of women to participate in the formation of the nation.

## **5. Challenges Faced by Women**

### **5.1 Overcoming Societal and Patriarchal Barriers**

Contribution of women in Indian freedom struggle was a 𑂀 tradition, as it was a patriarchal society where women were supposed to stay at home. Indian society being a patriarchal society has always been stringent with women and confining them to household chores including child rearing. In many places women had no right to education, to work, to political consciousness, all of which were considered male domains. It was not easy to step out of the private circle and join political activities which were not socially acceptable and which could also anger family members.

These barriers had to be broken by women and their supporters in the freedom struggle as a process. The All India Women's Conference and the Women's Indian Association played a very active role to educate and involve women in the nationalist movement. It also aimed at finding how women had to struggle with their domestic chores alongside supporting political protests, marches and underground resistance. This they did to show that they were ready to face all the challenges that came in their way when fighting for freedom.

### **5.2 Struggles in Gaining Leadership Positions**

Although women played crucial roles and made valuable contribution to the struggle, they had to face many challenges in order to achieve recognition and positions of power in the nationalist movement. The freedom struggle like the society which it sought to change was not free from prejudices based on gender. Men were dominant, and women were mostly invisible, or when visible, their work was more supportive rather than leadership work. It is the same for the present where woman like Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Aruna Asaf Ali have been able to overcome such barriers but there are many other women activists who went unrecognized or undervalued.

The denial of women for leadership positions was due to the societal norms which doubted their capabilities to reason and their strength to withstand the physical demand of leadership. Furthermore, women had to struggle for their rights within an organisation that was largely male dominated and fighting not only colonial power, but also the patriarchal system within the movement. These were some of the challenges that seized the struggle for equality of women which was still a continuing process even after the achievement of independence.

## **6. Impact of Women's Participation**

### **6.1 Strengthening the Freedom Struggle**

The involvement of women made a significant contribution to the struggle for independence of India. This went beyond the conventional and women became both icons and subjects of rebellion. Women were involved with the freedom struggle in many ways, ranging

from managing local protests and distributing nationalist literature to leading masses and being imprisoned for the same. As the organization that has been credited with galvanising the rural masses into action, their ability to mobilize the communities was crucial in keeping the momentum going during some of the most important phases of the struggle.

The women resilience in the face of oppression and violation was another proof of their significance. They disobeyed laws and suffered police repression, incarceration and social boycott during Civil Disobedience and Quit India Movements and never deviated from the path of nationalism. This action showed the important of gender solidarity, because the two genders worked together in the movement and made it even more forceful.

## **6.2 Influence on Post-Independence Women's Rights Movements**

The women's role in the freedom struggle provided basis for subsequent struggles for equality and justice in the newly formed India. The confidence and the political consciousness, which the women got during the nationalist movement, led them to ask for their rights in different aspects of life such as education, job and political power. Initiation of more organizations like All India Women's Conference also went on to fight the problems like child marriage, dowry and gender violence and expanding upon the work done by women during the freedom struggle.

In addition, the Indian Constitution that was established in 1950 carried the principles of the freedom struggle's equality. Provisions for gender equality, universal suffrage and affirmative action were amongst the direct results of recognition of women's role in the liberation of the nation. The struggle for independence also showed women's roles in the formation of the nation's political and social system.

The freedom movement and women's involvement in it was not only helpful in getting freedom from the British rule but also brought revolution in the social structure regarding women. Their life stories still remain relevant to the present and Future generation, advocating on the importance of women in nation building.

## **7. Legacy of Women's Contributions to India's Independence**

The role of women in freedom struggle of India has been one of the finest examples for generations to come and the Indian nation's continued struggle for women emancipation. It showed that the struggles of women against colonialism were full of heroism, tenacity and that they were not just mere domestic beings but were rather crucial to the freedom of India. These women not only fought against British ruling but also against the conventional norms of the society and changed the position of women in public and political life.

Their achievements are evident in today's India where the principles that they fought for in the liberation struggle are still felt in different sectors of society. On the social and political front women like Sarojini Naidu, Aruna Asaf Ali and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay started empowering women and paving the way for women in governance. They laid the foundation for many achievements including universal suffrage and constitutional provisions for gender equality. Women have since come out in large numbers to occupy leadership positions in Indian politics having had female prime ministers in the person of Indira Gandhi and a female president in the person of Pratibha Patil to mention but a few, following in the footsteps of early women fighters in the freedom struggle. In the society, the effect of these

women has created a platform for enhanced awareness on women empowerment and gender balance. The struggle of freedom fighters such as Kasturba Gandhi and Bhikaiji Cama has therefore greatly influenced the formation of women emancipation movements. Groups like the All India Women's Conference, and movements against child marriage, dowry and gender violence find their inspiration in the spirit of reform and activism which was the hallmark of the nationalist struggle. It can be seen that the struggle for women education and employment, their political rights is still a continuation of the work done by these pioneers. Swadeshi Movement in which women played a vital role is used as an example in the modern era for women self-reliance and entrepreneurship. What was once a form of protest to produce Khadi has slowly shifted gears to encompass several sustainable industries and women-run co-operatives for the upliftment of rural folk and women especially. I think the biggest impact that women had in the freedom struggle has given them and the modern Indian women confidence and power. Women have worked their way from grass root level activism to corporate level power, these women are role models who portray the strength and perseverance of Rani Lakshmibai and Usha Mehta. The achievements of women in present India are evidence of the role they have played in the liberation of the country. This legacy also provides a view of the work that remains to be accomplished. Even as the struggle for gender equality was initiated during the freedom struggle, there is still a long way to go to achieve gender equality. Thus, the nation is constantly being reminded of the contributions made by women in the freedom struggle, and the significance of women in the process of nation-building and development. They left behind not only a history, but a mission, a force that pushes the country forward towards the day when everyone will be equal and everyone will be free.

## **8. Conclusion**

Women played an exemplary part in the freedom struggle of India and it was a revolution for women's liberation in the Indian society. Right from the times of Rani Lakshmibai during the Indian Rebellion of 1857 to strategic participation of Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi and Aruna Asaf Ali in later movements, women were instrumental to the freedom struggle. They emancipated themselves from the shackles of patriarchy, came out into the public and political domain to organise, protest, and fight the system, bear torture and incarceration. Their work resisted colonial dominance and also campaigned for gender equality, providing a twin pillar for India's freedom struggle and future liberation of women. After independence these women's movements contributed to gender equality by encouraging suffrage, education, and social change policies. They remain role models for the present day struggle for women's rights and equality in the political, social and economic sphere. These women can be seen as torchbearers of freedom struggle and equality to give a booster dose to the society of India. The lessons they have left behind are a strong message of women's role in nation building, justice, equality and progress in today's India.

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