



# ROLE OF WOMEN IN INDIAN FREEDOM MOVEMENT

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## **Abstract:**

The history of Indian freedom struggle would be incomplete without mentioning the contribution of women. The sacrifice made by the women of India newline will occupy the foremost place. The history of freedom struggle is replete with the saga of sacrifice, selflessness, bravery of women. Many of us don't know that there were hundreds of women who fought side by side with their male counterparts. They fought with true spirit and undismayed courage. The Indian women broke away from various restrictions and got out of their traditional home-oriented roles and responsibilities. So, the participation of women in the freedom struggle and National awakening is simply incredible and praiseworthy. However, it is not easy for women to fight as warrior's in the male dominating society. Even though females tried to change the perception of such orthodox people who thought women are meant to do only household chores. Moreover, females not only sacrifice their lives but also combat such issues. Rani Laxmi Bhai was one of such women who fought against British role by mitigating all odds, hence this paper entitles to highlight the legacy that women showed in the history by showing their fierce nature.

**Keywords:** *Indian, Women, Freedom movement, Role, Society*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the pre-independence period, the status of women within the country was in a deprived state. The major cause of this was, there was a prevalence of male dominance. The major responsibilities of the women were dedicated towards the implementation of household responsibilities and they were not allowed to participate in the implementation of other tasks and activities, no where they allowed to express their ideas and viewpoints. During this period, number of systems, were put into operation, which imposed unfavorable effects upon women. These include child marriages, restraints were imposed upon widow remarriage, female foeticide, female infanticide, purdah system, sati and polygamy. During the period of the East India Company, many social reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Rai, Ishwar Chander Vidya Sagar and Jyotiba Phule had undergone numerous challenges that were associated with bringing about changes in the status of women within the Indian society. During this period there were many ladies, who mastered the art of martial arts. Rani Laxmi Bhai fought for the Independence of the country. Women participation in India's freedom struggle began as early 1817 when Bhima Bai Holkar fought against Britishers. Madam Bhikaji Cama, the first Indian women socialist who fought for her motherland's freedom after the 1857 uprising. There is no doubt that women participation in Indian anti-imperialist struggle in large number.

## **Objective of my Paper**

1. To study the freedom movement in India in general.
2. To explore the role played by women freedom fighter in freedom movement in India.
3. To create awareness about different women freedom fighter.
4. To show the social economic emancipation of Indian women.

- To highlight their sufferings and sacrifices of Indian women.

### Research Methodology

To write this paper, the data has mainly concentrated on textual approach, books written by eminent scholars and articles, papers written on various National and International Journals has been considered to do the framework of this paper. Thus, secondary data has been used to write this paper.

**Review of Literature:** There are number of puranic work on “The role of women in freedom movement” some of the important books and articles are under as under:

- Manmohan Kaur (1985)<sup>1</sup>: This book covers women of India in freedom struggle from 1857 to 1947 a period of 90 years. It begins with 1857 when the first attempt of freedom was made and end with 1947.
- P.N Chopra (1975)<sup>2</sup>: This book highlights the heroic role played by Indian women in India struggle for freedom and also explain their saga of sacrifice, selflessness, bravery. They fought with true spirit and undismayed courage.
- Suruchi Thaper (2006)<sup>3</sup>: She has done excellent work on freedom movement in India. This book significantly focuses on the nationalist participation of ordinary middle-class women in India’s freedom movement, especially in the united provinces. The author highlights the prominent women leaders such as Sarojini Naidu, Vijaylaxmi Pandit, Sucheta kiripalani and Annie Beasant.
- O.P Ralhan (1995)<sup>4</sup>: This book covers the social economic condition by Indian women who played a most significant role in the evolution of our society, author also highlight the role of Indian women from ancient period to modern times. The great contribution of these ladies should be brought to the knowledge of the present generation.
- M.G Agarwal: This multivolume illuminate the role played by the freedom fighters during the freedom struggle. The book highlights the contribution of people from all sections of society in the freedom movement during India freedom. This is an attempt to draw upon their remembrance of the freedom struggle. Efforts have been made to include freedom fighters from various regions and also explain about those women who participate in the freedom struggle and made rich contribution in various ways.
- Judith Brown (1972)<sup>5</sup>: The book describes the participation of women in the movement as a political nuisance.
- Tarachand: It tries to examine role of women in the social process, perception of their own lives, the broader social reality, the roots etc. He also enlists some efforts to overcome such problems.

### MILESTONES IN INDIA’S FREEDOM STRUGGLE

- The first war of Independence (1857-58)
- Partition of Bengal, Swadeshi Movement (1905)
- Jallianwala Bagh Massacre (1919)
- Non-cooperation movement (1920)
- Poorna Swaraj declaration by the congress; Meerut conspiracy case (1929)
- Civil disobedience: The Dandi March (1930)
- The Quit India Movement (1942)

### WOMEN LEADERS OF THE NATIONAL MOVEMENT

There is no doubt that women participated in the Indian anti-imperialist struggle in large numbers. If we were to recall the names of women leaders in our national movement, we will find that the list is a very long one. Starting with Sarojini Naidu, Rani Laxmi Bai, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Mridula Sarabhai at the national level, we may go on to provincial level leaders like Annie Mascarene and A.V. Kuttimaluamma in Kerala, Durgabai Deshmukh in Madras Presidency, Rameshwari Nehru and Bi Amman in U.P., Satyawati Devi and Subhadra Joshi in Delhi, Hansa Mehta and Usha Mehta in Bombay and several others. In fact, such is the nature of our nationalist movement that it is very difficult to distinguish between regional level and all-India level leaders. Many women began at the local level and went on to become players in the nationalist centre stage. Besides all

<sup>1</sup> Manmohan Kaur; *Women in India freedom struggle*, Sterling Publishers, New Delhi, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> P.N Chopra; *Women in India freedom struggle*, Published by Ministry of Education and social welfare, Govt. of India, New Delhi, 1975.

<sup>3</sup> Suruchi Thaper; *Women in the Indian National Movement: Unseen faces and unheard voices, 1930-42*, BJorkert, 2006

<sup>4</sup> O.P Ralhan; *Indian women through ages Vol 5, Eminent Indian women in politics*, Anmol Publications, New Delhi, 1995

<sup>5</sup> Judith Brown; *Gandhi and the Civil disobedience movement*, Cambridge University Press, 1972

these Indian women, there were also Irish women like Annie Besant and Margaret Cousins, who brought their own knowledge of the Irish experience of British exploitation to bear on India.

### Women freedom fighter of India:

It is very difficult task to list out all women freedom fighters and equally difficult to segregate a few amongst them.

➤ **Sarojini Naidu:** She emerged as prominent Nationalist around 1917. She was second women to become the president of INC in 1925. She joined the national movement during the protest against the partition of Bengal in 1905. During Salt satyagraha, she was one of the women protesters at the Dharsana salt work. She played a leading role during Civil disobedience and was jailed. In 1942, she was arrested during “Quit India movement”. She travelled across India and delivered lecture on women’s empowerment and nationalist. She was also closely associated with the formation of women’s India Association and accompanied the women’s voting rights delegation to London.

➤ **Rani Laxmi Bai:** Indian history has not yet witnessed a women warrior as brave and powerful as Rani Laxmi Bai. She is a glorious example of patriotism and national pride. She is an inspiration and an admiration for a lot of people. Her name is thus written in golden letters in the history of India.

➤ **Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay:** In 1930’s she participated in Salt Satyagraha. She promoted handicrafts, handlooms and theatre. The Government of India conferred on her the Padma Bhushan in 1955 and Padma Vibhushan in 1987.

➤ **Annie Besant:** She became the first president of Indian National Congress in 1917. Her associate Margaret Cousins drafted the Indian women’s voting rights bill and launched the “Women’s Indian Association”.

➤ **Vijayalakshmi Pandit:** Mrs. Pandit was jailed for her nationalistic activities thrice in 1932, 1940 and 1942. During the Salt Satyagraha she led processions and picketed the liquor and foreign cloth selling shops along with her sister and her baby daughters. She has fought many battles and broken many barriers for the women in India.<sup>6</sup>

➤ **Durgabai Deshmukh:** She was imprisoned for three years for participating in the Salt Satyagraha. During this Satyagraha when leaders like Rajaji and T. Prakasam in south were busy in organising other facts of the movement, it was Durgabai who led a group of salt law breakers to Marina Beach at Madras. She was instrumental in initiating ‘Andhra Mahila Sabha’ and ‘Hindi Balika Patasala’ at a very young age.

➤ **Mridula Sarabai:** During Partition she fought at great personal risk to save girls abducted by mobs and to prevent refugees, both Hindu and Muslim from being hurt or killed. In 1934 she was elected to the All Indian Congress Committee as a delegate from Gujarat.

➤ **Basanti Das:** She was an Indian Independence activist during the British rule in India. She took an active part in various political and social movements. She herself took active part in freedom activities and was arrested during non-cooperation movement. She received Padma Vibhushan in 1973.

➤ **Sucheta Kriplani:** In 1932, she entered public life as a social worker and in 1939 entered politics and joined the Indian National Congress. In 1940, she offered individual satyagraha at Faizabad and was imprisoned for two years. During the Quit India Movement, she went underground and rendered remarkable service of secretly organizing anti-British resistance.

➤ **Kamla Das Gupta:** She has been a brilliant luminary among the Indian women freedom fighters. She belongs to the militant section and was an active member of the ‘Jugantar Party’. In 1942, she was arrested in connection with the Quit-India movement and lodged in the Presidency jail.

➤ **Dr. S. Muthulakshmi Reddy:** She was the first Indian women who for her merit and services in the field of social service and medicine was nominated to the Madras Legislative Assembly in 1926. As a protest against torturing women and use of repressive measures against female agitators during Salt Satyagraha and Non-cooperation Movement, she resigned her offices and jumped into the freedom struggle.

➤ **Margaret Cousins:** An Irish woman crusader, after fighting for the voting right for women in Ireland, arrived in India along with her husband and advocate the same causes for Indian women. She joined hand with Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu and helped in the founding of many women association to bring about an awakening among them.

➤ **Raj kumari Amrit Kaur:** She belong to the ruling house of Kapurthala. She was inspired by Gandhi and joined Congress during the Salt Satyagraha. She was arrested in Bombay for violating the Salt law, when she went to the North west frontier province to advocate the causes of freedom struggle, she was arrested and convicted on a charge of sedition. She was the President of All India Women conference for seven years.<sup>7</sup>

➤ **Matangini Hazra:** The Gandhi Burhi (Gandhian old women) of West Bengal is that freedom fighter and martyr who shall be remembered for her heroic act. She joined the freedom movement in 1932. During Salt

<sup>6</sup> Siddhartha Dash; *Role of women in India’s struggle for freedom*, New Delhi, 2010 pp 75-76

<sup>7</sup> Thomas weber, *Going Native; Gandhi Relationship with western women*, Roli Books, Delhi, 2011 pp.12

Satyagraha, she was jailed. In 1933, she successfully led a black flag demonstration where governor of Bengal was addressing police cordoned gathering. This time she was arrested and sentenced to six months rigorous imprisonment.<sup>8</sup>

➤ **Indira Gandhi:** A most remarkable women in modern India. She became the member of Indian National Congress in 1938. Her public activity entered a new phase with India Independence in 1947. She took over the responsibility of running the Prime minister's house. She worked tirelessly for the social and economic advancement of the minorities. She had a vision of a modern self-reliant and dynamic economy. She fought boldly and vigorously against communalism, revivalism and religious fundamentalism of all types. She became the indomitable symbol of India self-confidence.

#### **Mahila-samitis (Women's Association)**

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century also witnessed the emergence of many city and town-based women associations:

➤ In light of the Swadeshi agitation women's association like the Mahila Shilpa Samiti and Lakshmir Bhandar were setup by nieces of Rabindranath Tagore and Sarla Devi. The Hitashini Sabha, a women's group organized a exhibition of Swadeshi goods in 1907.

➤ Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, in her autobiography title *Inner recesses*, outer spaces, describe how in her hometown Mangalore, her own mother Girijabai set up a mahila sabha around 1911 to bring women together to discuss their problems and seek ways of resolving them.

➤ Rameshwari Nehru had also set up a women's journal at this time: *The Stree Darpan*, which was extremely popular. It had an interesting mix of political coverage of national and international issues.

➤ Women's journal like the Bharat Mahila were also becoming extremely popular which was related to women issues.<sup>9</sup>

➤ An outstanding women's organization in Gujarat, Jyoti Sangh, women conference (AIWC) was also established in 1927.<sup>10</sup>

#### **Mobilization of Women in Gandhian phase:**

Gandhi was undoubtedly the most authentic and celebrated representative of wisdom and culture of India in our times. His countrymen address him with respect as the mahatma. He was a social reformer, an economist, a political philosopher and a seeker of truth. He made the Indian National Congress a people's congress and the national movement a mass movement. He made people fearless and bold and taught them the non-violent method for fighting against injustice. The role of Mahatma Gandhi in Indian freedom struggle is considered the most significant as he single-handedly spearheaded the movement for Indian independence.<sup>11</sup> The peaceful and non-violent techniques of Gandhi formed the basis of freedom struggle against Britishers. The Indian independence movement came to a head between the years 1918 and 1922. A series of non-violence campaign of civil disobedience movement were launched by the INC under the leadership of Gandhi. The main focus was to weaken the British government through non-cooperation.

Gandhi says that full freedom of India is not possible unless our daughters stand side by side with the sons in the battle for freedom and this requires them to realize their own power.<sup>12</sup>

#### **Women under Gandhian leadership:**

➤ Gandhi had empowered and inspired women by waging a battle against cast, discrimination, child marriages and encouraging women education. They motivate the women to participate in huge numbers.

➤ Non-cooperation movement witness unprecedented women activism, specially of the educate and middle classes. Amrit Kaur, Aruna Asaf, Sarla Devi and Muthul Laxmi Reddy emerged as prominent leader.

➤ During the civil disobedient movement Sarojini Naidu inspired by Gandhian ideals led a peaceful protest at Dharsana Salt works against the Salt law, taxes even after the arrest of Gandhi. She fought for voting right and was elected as first Indian women president of Indian National Congress.

➤ In Quit India movement the underground activism led by Usha Mehta, Aruna Asaf Ali was crucial in sustaining the movement.

Mostly women participate in political scenario in 1920. During this period large number of women came forward.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Tara Chand; *History of the freedom movement in India Vol IV*, New Delhi 1983 pp 369-375

<sup>9</sup> The Indian ladies Magazine, February, 1904 pp.259

<sup>10</sup> Neera Desai; *Women in modern India*, Vora's loy, 1977 pp.125

<sup>11</sup> D.M Dutta; *The Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi*

<sup>12</sup> Gandhi speech at a public meeting in Paganeri, 27 Sept 1927, *The Hindu*, Sept 29, 1927.

<sup>13</sup> Leela Kasturi and Veena Mazumdar; *Women and Indian Nationalism*; Vikas Publication, New Delhi, 1994 pp.34

Thus, by breaking the barriers of socio-economic oppression Indian women have come together to realize the potential of collective action and laid the seats for women empowerment in Independent India.

## CONCLUSION

The story of women's participation in India freedom struggle is the story of making bold choices, finding themselves on streets, inside jail and in legislature. After so many efforts India achieved Independence on August 15, 1947. Thousands of Indian women dedicated their lives for obtaining freedom of their motherland. The non-violent movement that gained India her freedom not only took women along but was dependent for its success on the active participation of women. Perhaps for the first and the only time in world history, the power of a mighty global empire on which the sun never set had been challenged and overcome by the moral might of a people armed only with peace, ideas and courage.

In the end we can say that in the last fifty-year, women movement has matured and has progressively deepened its relationship with other movement like trader unions, environmental movements and other progressive movements which fight against all forms of oppression, injustice and degradation.

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