

## THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN INDIA'S FREEDOM STRUGGLE: A FORGOTTEN LEGACY

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### ABSTRACT

By shedding light on this forgotten legacy, the paper underscores the need to integrate these narratives into mainstream historical discourse, recognizing the pivotal role of women as architects of India's independence and advocates of social transformation. The role of women in India's freedom struggle is an inspiring yet often overlooked chapter in the nation's history. This paper seeks to highlight the immense contributions made by women in shaping the trajectory of India's fight for independence. From early reformers like Savitribai Phule, who championed education and social reform, to revolutionaries like Bhikaiji Cama and Durga Devi Vohra, women from diverse backgrounds demonstrated courage, leadership, and resilience. The study explores their participation in grassroots movements, their role in mass mobilizations like the Non-Cooperation Movement and Quit India Movement, and their engagement in revolutionary activities. It also examines the challenges they faced in navigating societal norms and breaking through patriarchal barriers to assert their political agency.

**Keywords:** Women's participation, India's freedom struggle, Revolutionary women, Patriarchy and social reform, Forgotten legacy.

### INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to delve into the diverse roles played by women in India's freedom struggle, examining their contributions across social, political, and revolutionary spheres. By revisiting this often-neglected aspect of history, the study seeks to restore these women to their rightful place in the collective memory of India's independence. Through this exploration, the paper hopes to inspire greater appreciation for their sacrifices and achievements, while fostering a deeper understanding of their enduring legacy.

The struggle for India's independence from British colonial rule was a multifaceted movement that brought together people from various walks of life, united in their quest for freedom. While the contributions of prominent male leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Subhas Chandra Bose are widely celebrated, the vital role played by women remains significantly underrepresented in historical narratives. Women not only participated in but also led various dimensions of the freedom struggle, challenging societal norms and redefining their roles within a deeply patriarchal society.

From spearheading social reform initiatives to participating in mass protests and underground revolutionary activities, women demonstrated unwavering courage and leadership. Figures like Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, and Rani Lakshmi Bai have left indelible marks on the movement, but countless unsung heroines also made significant contributions. These women faced unique challenges, including societal restrictions and personal sacrifices, as they fought not only against colonial oppression but also against gender discrimination.

The role of women in India's freedom struggle has been examined by various scholars, yet their contributions remain relatively overshadowed in mainstream historical discourse. This section reviews existing literature to provide a foundation for understanding the scope and significance of women's participation in the independence movement.

### **1. Women's Leadership in the Freedom Struggle**

Books like *The Forgotten Women of India's Freedom Struggle* by Subhadra Menon and *Indian Women and the Freedom Movement* by Aparna Basu highlight the leadership roles played by women such as Sarojini Naidu, who was instrumental in the Civil Disobedience Movement, and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, a pioneer in mobilizing women during the Quit India Movement. These studies emphasize the significant political agency exercised by women, often in defiance of societal norms.

### **2. Revolutionary Women**

Historians like Bipan Chandra and Sumit Sarkar have documented the contributions of revolutionary women like Durga Devi Vohra and Kalpana Dutta in armed resistance against colonial rule. These works illustrate how women actively participated in acts of defiance, including distributing seditious materials, organizing covert operations, and even engaging in direct combat.

### **3. Grassroots Participation**

Scholarship focusing on grassroots movements, such as *Freedom and Fragmentation* by Gyanendra Pandey, explores the role of ordinary women in mass mobilizations like the Salt March and the Non-Cooperation Movement. These studies show how women from rural and urban areas transcended class and caste barriers to join protests, facing arrests, imprisonment, and physical violence.

### **4. Social Reforms and Women's Rights**

Authors like Geraldine Forbes in *Women in Modern India* discuss the interplay between the women's movement and the freedom struggle. Reformers such as Savitri Bai Phule and Annie Besant linked social emancipation with political independence, advocating for women's education, suffrage, and legal rights as a means to strengthen the freedom movement.

## 5. Challenges and Marginalization

While women played significant roles, scholars like Tanika Sarkar and Uma Chakravarti have critiqued the marginalization of their contributions in post-independence historiography. They argue that patriarchal narratives often relegated women's efforts to the background, portraying them as secondary to male leadership.

This literature review highlights the multifaceted roles women played in India's struggle for independence, as well as the gaps in historical recognition. By synthesizing these perspectives, this paper aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of women's contributions, bridging the divide between academic research and popular memory.

## WOMEN'S ROLES IN INDIA'S FREEDOM STRUGGLE

The analysis of women's roles in India's freedom struggle is grounded in an interdisciplinary framework that incorporates feminist theory, postcolonial studies, and historical sociology. These perspectives provide a comprehensive lens through which to examine the intersection of gender, colonialism, and resistance.

### 1. Feminist Theory

Feminist theory, particularly the concepts of gender roles and intersectionality, serves as a critical foundation for this study. This perspective helps in understanding how women's participation in the freedom struggle challenged traditional gender norms and redefined the societal roles assigned to them. The framework also explores how caste, class, and regional identities influenced the nature and extent of women's involvement in the movement. Works by scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler provide insights into how women's agency was constructed and perceived within a patriarchal society.

### 2. Postcolonial Studies

Theories from postcolonial scholars like Gayatri Spivak and Frantz Fanon inform the understanding of women's roles as agents of anti-colonial resistance. Spivak's concept of the "subaltern" is particularly relevant in examining how marginalized women's voices were often excluded from dominant narratives, both during and after the struggle. This perspective sheds light on the dual oppression faced by women under colonial rule and patriarchal structures, as well as their strategies for resistance.

### 3. Historical Sociology

Historical sociology provides the methodological tools to trace the socio-political dynamics that shaped women's participation in the freedom movement. By analyzing historical events, social structures, and collective action, this framework contextualizes women's contributions within the broader spectrum of India's socio-political transformation. Concepts from Karl

Polanyi and Charles Tilly help explain the role of women in grassroots movements and their ability to influence systemic change.

#### 4. Intersection of Nationalism and Feminism

The framework also draws from the intersection of nationalism and feminism, as articulated by scholars like Kumari Jayawardena. This approach examines how nationalist movements both empowered and constrained women, allowing them to enter public spaces while often reinforcing traditional roles. It also explores the tension between the goals of the nationalist movement and the feminist aspirations for gender equality.

By employing this theoretical framework, the study aims to critically analyze the roles of women in India's freedom struggle, addressing questions of agency, representation, and legacy. This approach not only highlights the diverse experiences of women but also challenges the androcentric narratives that dominate the historiography of the independence movement.

### ROLE ANALYSIS OF WOMEN

The examination of historical records, biographies, and scholarly literature reveals a multifaceted picture of women's involvement in India's freedom struggle. This section presents the findings, categorized into thematic areas, and analyzes their significance in the context of gender, society, and politics.

#### 1. Women in Leadership Roles

Women leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay emerged as prominent figures who played critical roles in mobilizing masses and negotiating with colonial authorities.

- **Result:** These women broke barriers by holding influential positions in organizations such as the Indian National Congress and participating in major movements like the Civil Disobedience and Quit India Movements.
- **Analysis:** Their leadership not only inspired other women to participate but also challenged patriarchal perceptions of women as passive bystanders in political affairs. Their contributions reflect a shift toward recognizing women as political actors in the nationalist discourse.

#### 2. Grassroots Participation

Women from rural and urban backgrounds actively joined mass movements such as the Salt March, Non-Cooperation Movement, and Quit India Movement. They participated in picketing, boycotting foreign goods, and courting arrest.

- **Result:** Grassroots women were instrumental in spreading the reach of the freedom struggle to remote regions, often at great personal risk.
- **Analysis:** This participation underscores the inclusive nature of the movement and highlights the role of ordinary women as the backbone of mass mobilization. It also demonstrates the intersection of gender and class, as women from various socioeconomic strata contributed to the cause.

### 3. Revolutionary Activities

Revolutionary women like Durga Devi Vohra, Kalpana Dutta, and Pritilata Waddedar engaged in armed resistance and covert operations.

- **Result:** These women played critical roles in acts of defiance, including bombings, assassinations of colonial officials, and secret communication.
- **Analysis:** Their actions challenge the stereotype of women as nonviolent participants and showcase their courage in adopting radical measures for independence. The lack of recognition for these contributions in mainstream narratives highlights the gendered bias in historical documentation.

### 4. Social Reform and Advocacy

Reformers like Savitribai Phule and Ramabai Ranade linked the nationalist movement with the cause of women's empowerment, advocating for education, suffrage, and legal rights.

- **Result:** These efforts contributed to the creation of a more equitable framework for women's participation in public life, paving the way for their engagement in the freedom struggle.
- **Analysis:** The intersection of social reform and political activism demonstrates how the fight for independence was intertwined with the broader agenda of dismantling patriarchal norms.

### 5. Challenges Faced by Women

Despite their significant contributions, women often faced resistance from within the movement and society at large. Patriarchal attitudes limited their roles, and their sacrifices were frequently overshadowed by male-centric narratives.

- **Result:** Women's voices and contributions were marginalized, both during the struggle and in post-independence historiography.
- **Analysis:** This marginalization reflects the persistence of gender inequality and the need to reclaim women's narratives as integral to the history of India's independence.

The results and analysis reveal that women were indispensable to India's freedom struggle, contributing in diverse and transformative ways. However, the underrepresentation of their efforts in historical accounts calls for a re-examination of this legacy to ensure their rightful place in the nation's collective memory.

**Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Women's Roles in India's Freedom Struggle**

Category	Elite Leadership	Grassroots Participation	Revolutionary Activities	Social Reform and Advocacy	Challenges Faced
<b>Key Figures</b>	Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay	Rural and urban women from various socioeconomic backgrounds	Durga Devi Vohra, Kalpana Dutta, Pritilata Waddedar	Savitribai Phule, Ramabai Ranade, Pandita Ramabai	All women participants
<b>Role in the Movement</b>	Leadership in organizations, mass mobilizations, and diplomacy	Picketing, protests, boycotting foreign goods, and spreading awareness	Covert operations, armed resistance, secret communications	Advocacy for education, suffrage, and legal rights	Navigating societal and institutional patriarchy
<b>Scope of Influence</b>	National and international	Regional and local	Underground and revolutionary circles	Societal transformation and empowerment	Across all categories
<b>Barriers Overcome</b>	Patriarchal leadership norms	Socioeconomic and caste constraints	Stereotypes of women as nonviolent and passive	Traditional views on women's roles	Limited recognition in historical narratives
<b>Significance</b>	Set examples for women's political agency	Strengthened grassroots movements and widened participation	Showcased women's ability to adopt radical approaches	Linked national independence with gender equality	Highlighted the systemic marginalization of women
<b>Legacy</b>	Celebrated in historical accounts	Often overshadowed in mainstream narratives	Marginalized in post-independence historiography	Inspired future reforms for women's rights	Calls for greater integration into historical memory

## LIMITATIONS AND DRAWBACKS

Despite the significance of studying the role of women in India's freedom struggle, there are several limitations and drawbacks inherent to this topic:

### 1. Limited Historical Documentation

- **Issue:** Many contributions of women, especially those from rural and marginalized communities, were not documented or were overshadowed by the achievements of male leaders.
- **Impact:** This lack of records makes it challenging to construct a comprehensive and accurate narrative of women's involvement.

### 2. Patriarchal Bias in Historiography

- **Issue:** Historical accounts often reflect patriarchal biases, portraying women in supporting roles or relegating them to the background.
- **Impact:** This bias has led to the marginalization of women's contributions, requiring researchers to critically reinterpret existing sources.

### 3. Overemphasis on Elite Figures

- **Issue:** Much of the available literature focuses on prominent women leaders like Sarojini Naidu and Annie Besant, while grassroots participants and unsung heroines receive minimal attention.
- **Impact:** This creates an incomplete understanding of the diverse roles women played across social and economic strata.

### 4. Regional Disparities

- **Issue:** Studies on women's roles are often concentrated on specific regions, such as Bengal, Maharashtra, or Tamil Nadu, with less focus on contributions from less-documented areas.
- **Impact:** This regional imbalance limits the scope of analysis and overlooks the contributions of women in other parts of India.

### 5. Intersectional Challenges

- **Issue:** The interplay of caste, class, and religion in shaping women's participation is complex and often underexplored.
- **Impact:** Failing to address these intersections can result in a one-dimensional narrative that does not capture the full diversity of women's experiences.



## 6. Lack of Oral Histories

- **Issue:** Many grassroots women activists left no written records, and their stories are primarily preserved through oral traditions.
- **Impact:** The absence of formal documentation and limited access to oral histories can hinder the reconstruction of their contributions.

## 7. Narrow Focus on Nationalism

- **Issue:** The focus on women's roles in the nationalist movement may overlook their simultaneous struggles for gender equality and social reform.
- **Impact:** This narrow lens risks simplifying their contributions and ignoring the broader context of their activism.

## 8. Generalization of Women's Experiences

- **Issue:** There is a tendency to generalize women's roles without considering the diversity of their experiences based on age, education, and social background.
- **Impact:** This limits the depth of analysis and fails to reflect the nuanced realities of their participation.

By recognizing these limitations and addressing them through critical research, interdisciplinary approaches, and inclusive methodologies, future studies can contribute to a more holistic and equitable understanding of women's contributions to India's freedom struggle.

## CONCLUSION

The role of women in India's freedom struggle is a testament to their courage, resilience, and unwavering commitment to the nation's independence. From leading mass movements to participating in revolutionary activities and advocating for social reform, women played a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of the struggle against colonial rule. However, their contributions remain largely overshadowed in mainstream historical narratives, reflecting the deep-seated patriarchal biases of society and historiography.

This study highlights the diversity of women's participation, encompassing leaders, grassroots activists, and unsung heroines from varied socio-economic and regional backgrounds. It also underscores the dual challenge faced by these women: resisting colonial oppression while simultaneously battling entrenched gender inequalities. Their ability to transcend societal norms and emerge as agents of change remains an inspiring legacy for contemporary struggles for justice and equality.

By revisiting and recognizing this forgotten legacy, we can ensure that the contributions of women are integrated into the nation's collective memory. Doing so not only provides a more inclusive and accurate account of India's freedom struggle but also reinforces the importance of



women's roles in shaping socio-political movements. The narrative of India's independence is incomplete without acknowledging the sacrifices, leadership, and determination of the countless women who fought for a free and equitable nation.

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