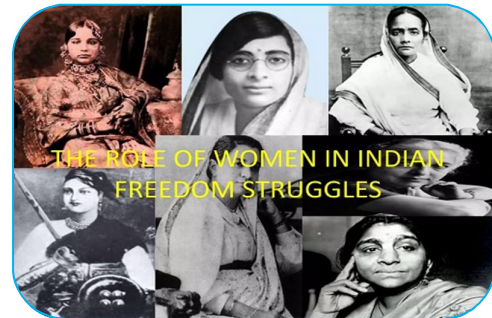




THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE INDIAN NATIONAL MOVEMENT**Dr. Basanta. Nagindrappa Sagar****Associate Professor, Department of Political Science,
Government College Autonomous Kalaburagi, Karnataka.****ABSTRACT:**

The Indian National Movement (c. 1857-1947) was not only of men; women participated across its ideological, organisational, and militant strands, reshaping both the struggle for independence and contemporaneous notions of gender. Present research article analysed historiography of women's involvement, analyses their contributions in distinct phases— the 1857 Revolt, early nationalist organisations, the Gandhian era, revolutionary terrorism, and the final push for freedom— and evaluates the short- and long-term impacts of their activism on political participation, legal reforms, and post-colonial nation building. Drawing on primary sources (speeches, memoirs, colonial reports) and secondary scholarship, the study argues that women's agency was pivotal in expanding the movement's social base, legitimising non-violent protest, and laying the groundwork for women's suffrage and legislative representation in independent India.



KEYWORDS: *Indian National Movement, Women's Activism, Gandhian Politics, Post-colonial Gender Politics.*

INTRODUCTION:

The historiography of India's struggle for independence has traditionally foregrounded male leaders—Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose—while relegating women's contributions to footnotes or celebratory anecdotes (Basu, 1990). Recent scholarship, however, demonstrates that women were not peripheral actors but active agents who shaped strategies, mobilised masses, and redefined the boundaries of public politics (Forbes, 1999; Sarkar, 2001). This paper provides a comprehensive, postgraduate level examination of women's roles across the chronological and ideological spectrum of the Indian National Movement, employing an interdisciplinary approach that blends political history, gender studies, and sociology of social movements.

The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How did women's participation evolve from the 1857 Revolt to the Quit India Movement (1942)?
2. What organisational forms and ideological frameworks did women adopt or create within the nationalist struggle?
3. In what ways did women's activism influence nationalist tactics, legislative reforms, and post-independence gender policies?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE:**(i) Early Narratives:**

Early nationalist histories (e.g., Majumdar, 1950) portrayed women chiefly as symbols of motherhood and sacrifice, exemplified by the legend of Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi. Such narratives emphasized emotive valour but obscured organisational agency (Basu, 1990).

(ii) Feminist Revisions:

The 1980s 1990s witnessed a feminist turn. Scholars such as Chakravarti (2002) and Kumar (2005) highlighted women's participation in the Swadeshi movement, the Non-Cooperation Movement, and the Civil Disobedience Campaign, arguing that gendered notions of shakti (power) were harnessed to legitimise protest. Forbes (1999) provided a comparative analysis of women's roles in the Indian and Irish nationalist movements, underscoring transnational patterns of mobilisation.

(iii) Subaltern and Postcolonial Perspectives:

Subaltern studies (Guha, 1982; Spivak, 1988) critiqued elite nationalist narratives for marginalising peasant and lower caste women, whose contributions often appeared in oral histories rather than official records. More recent work (Rao, 2016; Sen, 2019) employs intersectional lenses to examine how class, caste, religion, and region mediated women's nationalist engagement.

(iv) Gaps and Contributions:

While extant literature maps women's involvement in specific phases (e.g., Gandhi's era), few studies integrate the entire timeline from 1857 to 1947 within a single analytical framework, nor do they systematically assess the movement's impact on women's legal and political rights. This paper addresses these gaps by offering a longitudinal, thematic synthesis and by evaluating the causal linkages between women's activism and post-colonial gender reforms.

METHODOLOGY:

This research adopts a qualitative, historical analytical design. It is based on primary sources such as speeches and writings of women leaders such as Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, etc., the reports such as Report of the Disorders Inquiry Committee, 1919-1920, Memoirs and autobiographies of different leaders and few of the newspaper archives.

Secondary sources comprise peer reviewed books, journal articles, and dissertations published between 1990 and 2024. Data were organised chronologically and thematically, coded for: (a) type of participation (organisational, militant, symbolic, reformist); (b) ideological orientation (moderate, extremist, Gandhian, socialist); (c) social base (elite, middle class, peasant, tribal). Triangulation of sources ensured reliability, while reflexive notes addressed potential biases inherent in colonial archives. Ethical considerations were minimal given the historical nature of the data; however, care was taken to avoid anachronistic interpretations and to honour the voices of marginalised women whose records are sparse.

The Early Indian Revolt, 1857:

The Indian Rebellion of 1857, often termed the First War of Independence, witnessed limited but significant female involvement. While official British accounts downplayed women's roles, indigenous oral traditions and later nationalist narratives highlighted figures such as Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi, Rani Chennamma of Kittur, Begum Hazrat Mahal of Awadh, and Rani Avantibai Lodhi (Basu, 1990).

These women exercised political authority in the absence or death of male rulers, leading troops, negotiating with rebel leaders, and symbolising resistance. Their participation was largely symbolic and regal, reinforcing the notion that sovereignty could be embodied by women. However, their actions did not translate into a sustained organisational presence for women in the nascent

nationalist consciousness, largely due to the revolt's rapid suppression and the subsequent reinforcement of patriarchal colonial rule (Chakravarti, 2002).

Rise of Nationalist Organisations (1885 1905): From Social Reform to Political Awakening:

The formation of the Indian National Congress (INC) in 1885 opened a political space, yet women's formal membership remained negligible until the early 20th century. Instead, women's engagement manifested through social reform movements that intersected with nationalist sentiments.

- Pandita Ramabai (1858 1922) advocated for women's education and widow remarriage, linking emancipation to national progress (Kumar, 2005).
- Annie Besant, though British born, became a prominent figure in the Theosophical Society and later the Home Rule League, advocating for Self-Rule while promoting women's education (Forbes, 1999).

Women participated in Swadeshi (1905-1908) protests against the Partition of Bengal, boycotting foreign goods and promoting indigenous crafts. The Bengal Provincial Conference of 1906 recorded a women's section, marking the first formal inclusion of women's voices in Congress proceedings (Sarkar, 2001).

These early efforts laid an ideological foundation: the belief that national regeneration required the upliftment of women. Yet, organisational structures remained male dominated, and women's participation was often confined to auxiliary roles (fund raising, propaganda).

The Gandhian Era (1915 1947):

Mahatma Gandhi's arrival transformed the nationalist struggle, explicitly inviting women into the public sphere through non-violent civil disobedience. Gandhi's conceptualisation of women as Sadhvis (virtuous beings) and Shaktis (sources of power) provided a moral framework that resonated with existing cultural ideals while expanding women's legitimate public presence (Basu, 1990).

(i) Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-1922):

Women participated in boycotts of British institutions, picketing liquor shops, and promoting khadi (hand spun cloth). Notable figures include Sarojini Naidu, who mobilised women across provinces, and Kasturba Gandhi, whose grassroots work in Champaran and Kheda exemplified women's capacity for organisational leadership (Kumar, 2005).

(ii) Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-1934):

The Salt March catalysed nationwide women's involvement. Women manufactured salt, led processions, and faced arrest. The Dandi March saw thousands of women, including Kamala Nehru and Vijayalakshmi Pandit, courting arrest (Forbes, 1999). Colonial reports noted that women's arrests constituted over 30% of total detainees in certain regions, challenging the stereotype of female passivity (Report of the Disorders Inquiry Committee, 1931).

(iii) Quit India Movement (1942):

During the Quit India call, women operated underground networks, disseminated pamphlets, and provided safe houses for fugitive leaders. Aruna Asaf Ali famously hoisted the Indian National Congress flag at the Gowalia Tank Maidan in Bombay, symbolising defiance (Sen, 2019). Women's participation in this phase was marked by clandestine militancy, complementing the overt non-violent strategy.

CONSTRUCTIVE PROGRAMME AND SOCIAL REFORM:

Gandhi's Constructive Programme encouraged women to engage in education, sanitation, and temperance work, linking political freedom with social transformation. Women's organisations such as the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC), founded in 1927 under the leadership of Margaret Cousins and later Sarojini Naidu, advocated for suffrage, education reform, and the eradication of child marriage

(Kumar, 2005). The AIWC's lobbying contributed significantly to the inclusion of women's suffrage in the Government of India Act 1935.

Ideological Diversity within Gandhian Framework:

While Gandhi's leadership provided a unifying platform, ideological currents diverged:

- ❖ Socialist feminists (e.g., Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay) linked women's emancipation to class struggle, advocating for labour rights alongside political freedom (Chakravarti, 2002).
- ❖ Communist women (e.g., Shanti Ghosh) participated in peasant movements, integrating gender with anti-landlord struggles (Rao, 2016).

These strands illustrate that women's activism was not monolithic; rather, they negotiated multiple identities within the nationalist discourse.

Revolutionary and Extremist Struggles: Women in Armed Resistance

Although the Gandhian strand dominated mainstream historiography, revolutionary movements also witnessed women's participation, challenging the binary of non-violence versus violence.

- ✓ Bina Das (1911-1986) attempted to assassinate the Governor of Bengal in 1932, reflecting the appeal of militant nationalism among educated youth (Sarkar, 2001).
- ✓ Pritilata Waddadar (1911-1932) led an attack on the Pahartali European Club in Chittagong, ultimately sacrificing her life (Basu, 1990).
- ✓ Lakshmi Sahgal (later Captain Lakshmi) commanded the Rani of Jhansi Regiment of the Indian National Army (INA) under Subhas Chandra Bose, embodying the fusion of militant nationalism and women's combat roles (Forbes, 1999).

These actions underscored that women could adopt both non-violent and militant strategies, selecting tactics based on political context, personal conviction, and organisational opportunities. Their involvement also compelled colonial authorities to recognise women as legitimate security threats, prompting gendered surveillance and repression.

Legacy and Post Independence Trajectory:

The nationalist era bequeathed a dual legacy to post-colonial India:

- Institutionalised Political Participation – Women's suffrage, reserved seats (later replaced by general franchise), and the presence of women in parliament, judiciary, and bureaucracy trace their origins to nationalist mobilisation.
- Ideological Templates – The fusion of swaraj (self-rule) with samata (equality) inspired subsequent movements for women's rights, environmental activism (e.g., Chipko), and peasant struggles.

Nevertheless, challenges persisted. Partition violence, patriarchal resurgence in early state policies, and the marginalisation of radical feminist voices indicate that the nationalist promise of gender equality was only partially realised (Sen, 2019). Contemporary scholarship calls for a re-examination of the nationalist canon to integrate the experiences of Dalit, Adivasi, and Muslim women, whose contributions remain under documented (Rao, 2016).

CONCLUSION:

From the regal defiance of Rani Lakshmibai to the clandestine daring of Aruna Asaf Ali, women were integral to every phase of the Indian National Movement. Their participation evolved from symbolic leadership in 1857 to mass mobilisation under Gandhi, to militant action in revolutionary factions, and finally to institutional advocacy that shaped the nascent republic's legal framework. By analysing women's roles through a longitudinal, interdisciplinary lens, this paper demonstrates that the nationalist struggle was not merely a political contest against colonial rule but also a transformative social process that expanded the public sphere for women and sowed the seeds of gender justice legislation in independent India.

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