



The Role of Women in India's Freedom Struggle: A Historical Perspective

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Submission: 30.01.2026. Accepted: 13.04. 2026. Publication: 18.06.2026

Abstract

the significant yet often underrepresented role of women in India's freedom struggle, highlighting their contributions across different phases of the nationalist movement. It argues that women were not merely passive participants but active agents who challenged both colonial rule and traditional gender norms. Their involvement extended beyond symbolic participation to include leadership, mobilization, and direct action in political movements. Women's participation from early resistance efforts to mass movements such as the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, and Quit India Movement. Prominent figures like Rani Lakshmibai, Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, and Aruna Asaf Ali played crucial roles in organizing protests, leading campaigns, and inspiring public participation. At the same time, countless ordinary women from rural and urban backgrounds contributed through boycotts, picketing, and grassroots activism. How participation in the freedom struggle enabled women to assert their political and social agency, challenging patriarchal restrictions and redefining their roles in society. Women's involvement in nationalist movements contributed to the emergence of a broader discourse on gender equality and rights in modern India.

Keywords Women in Freedom Struggle, Indian National Movement, Gender and Nationalism

Introduction

The Indian freedom struggle was a mass movement that brought together people from diverse social, economic, and cultural backgrounds in the fight against colonial rule. Among these participants, women played a crucial yet often underrecognized role in shaping the course of the nationalist movement. Their involvement not only strengthened the struggle for independence but also challenged prevailing social norms that restricted women's participation in public and political life. In the early phases of resistance, women's participation was limited and often confined to supportive roles within the household or community. However, as the movement gained momentum, particularly under the leadership of national figures, women began to emerge as active participants in protests, demonstrations, and political campaigns. The influence of leaders like Mahatma Gandhi encouraged women to step into the public sphere, emphasizing their role in non-violent resistance and mass mobilization. Prominent figures such as Rani Lakshmibai, who resisted British rule during the Revolt of 1857, and later leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, and Aruna Asaf Ali played vital roles in organizing movements, leading protests, and inspiring widespread participation. Beyond these



well-known leaders, countless ordinary women from both urban and rural areas contributed through activities such as boycotting foreign goods, participating in marches, and supporting underground resistance efforts. Women's participation in the freedom struggle also had broader social implications. It challenged traditional gender roles and opened new opportunities for women to engage in political and public life. The experience of activism and leadership during this period contributed to the emergence of a stronger voice for women's rights and equality in post-independence India. The role of women in India's freedom struggle from a historical perspective, analyzing their contributions, challenges, and impact on both the nationalist movement and societal transformation. By doing so, it seeks to present a more inclusive understanding of India's path to independence.

Role of Women in the Indian National Movement

The Indian National Movement witnessed a significant transformation with the active participation of women, who emerged as vital contributors to the struggle against colonial rule. Their involvement marked a departure from traditional gender roles, as women stepped into the public sphere and took part in political activities, protests, and organizational work. This participation not only strengthened the nationalist movement but also laid the foundation for women's empowerment in modern India.

The leadership of Mahatma Gandhi played a crucial role in mobilizing women on a large scale. Gandhi emphasized non-violence and mass participation, which created space for women to engage in activities such as picketing liquor shops, boycotting foreign goods, and participating in marches and demonstrations. Women from diverse backgrounds—urban and rural, educated and uneducated—joined the movement, making it more inclusive and widespread.

Prominent leaders such as Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, and Annie Besant played key roles in organizing campaigns, addressing public gatherings, and leading protests. Sarojini Naidu, for instance, was actively involved in the Civil Disobedience Movement and became one of the first women to preside over the Indian National Congress. Kasturba Gandhi participated in various satyagraha movements and worked closely with Gandhi in mobilizing women at the grassroots level.

Women also contributed significantly at the grassroots level, often working behind the scenes to support nationalist activities. They organized local meetings, spread awareness, and provided logistical support to activists. Many women courted arrest and endured imprisonment, demonstrating their commitment and courage. Their participation was not limited to urban centers but extended to rural areas, where they played an important role in mobilizing communities.

In addition to non-violent movements, some women were involved in revolutionary activities. Figures like Kalpana Dutt and Pritilata Waddedar took part in armed resistance against British rule, highlighting the diverse forms of women's participation in the freedom struggle.

The involvement of women in the Indian National Movement had far-reaching social implications. It challenged existing patriarchal norms and expanded the role of women in public and political life. Participation in the movement provided women with a platform to assert their identity, demand rights, and contribute to nation-building. Women played a crucial



and multifaceted role in the Indian National Movement. Their contributions, both at leadership and grassroots levels, were instrumental in strengthening the struggle for independence and reshaping societal attitudes toward gender roles. Recognizing their role is essential for a comprehensive understanding of India's freedom struggle.

Women in the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22)

The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22), led by Mahatma Gandhi, marked a turning point in the Indian freedom struggle by transforming it into a mass-based movement. One of its most significant features was the large-scale participation of women, who stepped beyond traditional domestic roles to actively engage in political activities. Their involvement not only strengthened the movement but also contributed to a broader process of social change and women's empowerment.

Women participated in various forms of protest and resistance during this period. They played a crucial role in boycotting foreign goods, especially British textiles, by promoting the use of *khadi* (hand-spun cloth). Many women took part in picketing shops selling foreign goods and liquor, encouraging people to adopt swadeshi practices. These activities were essential in mobilizing public opinion and weakening the economic foundations of colonial rule.

Prominent women leaders emerged during this movement, inspiring others to join the struggle. Sarojini Naidu was a leading figure who actively participated in political campaigns and mobilized women across the country. Annie Besant, though associated earlier with the Home Rule Movement, continued to influence nationalist activities and encourage women's participation. Kasturba Gandhi also played a significant role by supporting Gandhian initiatives and engaging with women at the grassroots level.

A notable aspect of women's participation in the Non-Cooperation Movement was its inclusivity. Women from different regions, classes, and communities joined the movement, making it more representative of Indian society. Many women organized meetings, spread nationalist ideas, and contributed to local campaigns. Their involvement helped expand the reach of the movement beyond urban centers into rural areas.

The movement also provided women with opportunities to develop leadership skills and political awareness. By participating in public demonstrations and facing the risk of arrest, women challenged existing social norms that confined them to private spaces. This experience fostered a sense of confidence and agency, encouraging greater involvement in subsequent nationalist movements.

However, women's participation was not without challenges. Social restrictions, lack of education, and limited access to resources posed obstacles to their full involvement. Despite these barriers, their contributions were significant and demonstrated resilience and determination. Women played a vital role in the Non-Cooperation Movement by actively participating in protests, mobilizing communities, and supporting nationalist initiatives. Their involvement not only strengthened the movement against colonial rule but also marked an important step toward the transformation of women's roles in Indian society.



Women in the Quit India Movement (1942)

The Quit India Movement of 1942 marked one of the most intense phases of the Indian freedom struggle, characterized by widespread mass participation and strong resistance against British rule. Women played a crucial and often heroic role in this movement, stepping forward not only as supporters but also as leaders and active participants in both organized and underground activities. Their involvement demonstrated courage, resilience, and a growing sense of political agency.

With the arrest of major leaders, including Mahatma Gandhi and other Congress members, the movement took a decentralized and spontaneous form. In this context, many women assumed leadership roles and ensured the continuation of resistance. One of the most prominent figures was Aruna Asaf Ali, who famously hoisted the Indian National Congress flag at the Gowalia Tank Maidan in Bombay, symbolizing defiance against British authority. Her leadership inspired many others to participate actively in the movement.

Women were also deeply involved in underground activities, which became a key feature of the Quit India Movement. Usha Mehta played a vital role by establishing the Secret Congress Radio, which broadcast messages, news, and instructions to sustain the movement despite censorship and repression. Such efforts were crucial in maintaining communication and morale among freedom fighters.

At the grassroots level, women participated in protests, demonstrations, and acts of civil disobedience. Many courted arrest, faced imprisonment, and endured harsh treatment by colonial authorities. Rural women, in particular, contributed significantly by organizing local resistance, providing shelter to activists, and spreading nationalist ideas. Their participation reflected the widespread reach of the movement across different regions and communities.

The Quit India Movement also saw women engaging in acts of direct resistance, including strikes, sabotage of communication lines, and defiance of colonial laws. Figures like Matangini Hazra became symbols of sacrifice; she was martyred while leading a procession, holding the national flag. Such acts highlighted the fearless commitment of women to the cause of independence.

Despite facing social constraints and limited resources, women's participation in the Quit India Movement was extensive and impactful. Their involvement challenged traditional gender roles and demonstrated their capability to contribute equally in political struggles. The movement provided a platform for women to assert their identity and claim a place in the national narrative. Women played a decisive role in the Quit India Movement, contributing through leadership, grassroots mobilization, and acts of resistance. Their participation not only strengthened the struggle for independence but also marked a significant step toward gender equality and empowerment in India.

Conclusion

The role of women in India's freedom struggle represents a vital yet historically underappreciated dimension of the nationalist movement. From early resistance efforts to mass movements such as Non-Cooperation and Quit India, women actively participated at multiple levels—ranging from leadership and organization to grassroots mobilization and direct action.



Their involvement not only strengthened the struggle against colonial rule but also reshaped the social and political landscape of India. The study highlights that women were not passive supporters but dynamic agents of change. Prominent leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Aruna Asaf Ali, and Kasturba Gandhi played key roles in guiding movements and inspiring participation, while countless ordinary women contributed through protests, boycotts, and underground activities. Their collective efforts made the nationalist movement more inclusive and widespread. Participation in the freedom struggle also had significant social implications. It challenged traditional gender roles and provided women with opportunities to engage in public and political life. This experience contributed to the growth of political awareness and laid the foundation for women's rights and empowerment in independent India. The movement thus served as both a political and social turning point for women. Despite facing numerous challenges, including social restrictions, limited access to education, and colonial repression, women demonstrated resilience and determination. Their sacrifices and contributions were instrumental in achieving independence and in shaping the ideals of equality and justice in modern India. The role of women in India's freedom struggle was transformative, influencing both the success of the nationalist movement and the evolution of women's status in society. Recognizing and acknowledging their contributions is essential for developing a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of India's history.

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