

# Role of Women in India's Struggle For Freedom

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The entire history of the freedom movement is replete with the saga of bravery, sacrifice and political sagacity of hundreds and thousands of women of our country. Their participation in the struggle began as early as 1817 when Bhima Bai Holkar fought against the British Colonel Malcolm and defeated him in guerilla warfare. At a very critical time for our mother land when the British East India Company was fast expanding its empire in India, when Tipu Sultan had been eliminated (1799), the proud Marathas had been humbled (1815), Chennamma the widowed queen of Raja Malla Sarja frustrated the machinations of British to annex her kingdom Kittore, a tiny principality in the present Belgaum District of Karnataka. She fought against the mighty British army and scored initial success.

No other woman warrior in the history of India has made such a powerful

impact on the minds of the Indian people as the Rani of Jhansi, Lakshmi Bai. She was the second wife of the ruler of Jhansi Raja Gangadhar Rao who protested against the 'Doctrine of Lapse'. She refused to surrender Jhansi and fought bravely attired as a male during the Revolt of 1857 and died in the battle field fighting the British forces. Her courage inspired many Indians to rise against the alien rule.

Another woman whom we remember in this context was Hazrat Mahal Begum. She was the wife of the deposed ruler of Lucknow who actively took part in the revolt of 1857 against the Doctrine of Lapse under which Dalhousie wanted her to surrender Lucknow. She gave stiff resistance. But after the fall of Lucknow she escaped to Kathmandu.

Kasturba, the wife of Mahatma Gandhi, was one of the foremost supporters of the Gandhi's programmes. One of the first women to be imprisoned in Transvaal, she took part in the Quit India Movement (1942) and was arrested. She died while imprisoned in Poona.

Many women of Nehru family joined the freedom movement. The mother of Jawaharlal Nehru, Swarup Rani Nehru cheerfully gave her husband and children to the country's cause and she herself,

old and frail, entered the fray at its thickest. Kamala Nehru, married to Jawaharlal Nehru in 1916, participated in various movements, led the Civil Disobedience Movement. She played a prominent part in organizing the No Tax Campaign in the United Provinces (Now Uttar Pradesh). Jawaharlal Nehru's sister Vijay Laxmi Pandit entered the Non-Cooperation Movement. She was imprisoned thrice in connection with the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1932, 1941 and 1942. In 1937 she was elected to the provincial legislature of the United Provinces and was designated minister of local self government and public health. She played an important role as India's representative in San Francisco during the first meeting of the UN where she challenged the might of the British. She was the first woman to become the President of the United Nations General Assembly. When she was just 13 years old, Indira Gandhi organized a 'Monkey Army' (Vanar Sena) comprising of young teenagers which proved her intention to fight for the independence of her country. She joined Congress in 1938 and was imprisoned for 13 months in 1942 by the British. She was India's first and only female prime minister. Four generations of dedication to public causes by the Nehru family stands out as unique in the annals of history.

Sarojini Naidu holds pride of place among women freedom fighters of India. She was responsible for awakening the women of India. She was first woman President of the Indian National Congress in 1925 at the Kanpur Session. In 1928, she came to the USA with the message of the non-violence movement from Gandhiji. When in 1930, Gandhi was arrested for a protest, Sarojini took the helms of his movement. In 1931, she participated in the Round Table Summit, along with Gandhiji and Pundit Malavyaji. She was also the acting President of the Congress in 1932. In 1942, she was arrested during the 'Quit India' protest and stayed in jail for 21 months. She was a gifted poet of the English language and was popularly known as the Nightingale of India. After independence, she became the first ever woman Governor of an Indian State (Uttar Pradesh).

Aruna Asaf Ali played a leading role during the Quit Indian Movement. Her moment of reckoning came in 1942 during the Quit India Movement and she rose to occasion. She unfurled the National Flag at the Gowalia Tank maidan in Bombay to signify the commencement of the Quit India Movement and became a legend for thousands of youth that rose to emulate her. She became a full time activist in the Quit India

Movement and went underground to evade arrest. She edited 'Inquilab' a monthly journal of the Indian National Congress. She was awarded India's highest civilian award, the Bharat Ratna.

Madam Bhikaji Cama was influenced by Dadabhai Naoroji and was a source of inspiration for Indian youth in the UK. She unfurled the first National Flag at the International Socialist Conference in Stuttgart (Germany) in 1907, organized Free India Society and began the journal 'Bande Mataram' to spread her revolutionary thought. She travelled a lot and spoke to people about Indians Struggling for Independence. She could aptly be called "Mother India's first cultural representative of USA".

Kalpna Dutta was another prominent woman revolutionary leader who was influenced by the revolutionary idea of Surya Sen. She joined the Chittagong armoury raids. Later she joined the Communist Party of India.

Rani Gaidineliu was a prominent Naga nationalist woman leader from Manipur who took over the movement of Naga nationalists against the British. Her movement was active during the Civil Disobedience Movement to oust the foreigners from Manipur. For her remarkable

patriotism, she received praise from the nationalist leaders. She was arrested in 1932 and released after Indian Independence. "Rani of the Nagas" the popular title was bestowed upon her by Jawaharlal Nehru for her influence and work for the Nagas.

Sarojini Naidu's daughter Padmaja Naidu devoted herself to the cause of the nation like her mother. At the age of 21, she entered the national scene and became the joint founder of the Indian National Congress of Hyderabad. She spread the message of Khadi and inspired people to boycott foreign goods. She was jailed for taking part in the "Quit India" movement in 1942. After Independence, Padmaja became the Governor of West Bengal. During her public life spanning over half a century, she was associated with the Red Cross. Her service to the nation and especially her humanitarian approach to solve problems, will long be remembered.

Sucheta Kriplani was an ardent nationalist with socialistic orientation. She was a close associate of Jai Prakash Narayany who actively participated in Quit India Movement. This St Stephen's educated politician sang Vande Mataram in the independence session of the Constituent Assembly on August 15, 1947.

She was a member of Constituent Assembly in 1946. She was general secretary of Indian National Congress from 1958 to 1960, and Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh from 1963 to 1967.

Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur was a close follower of Gandhiji from 1919 onwards. A Congress member, she actively participated in the 1930 Salt Satyagraha and the Quit India Movement. She became the first Health Minister in Post-Independent India. She was the founder – President of Indian Council of Child Welfare and the founder-member of All India Women's Conference.

Smt Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay was elected President of the Youth Congress in December 1929 and appealed to the National Congress leaders to declare Poorna Swaraj as their goal. On January 26, 1930, Kamaladevi captured the imagination of the entire nation when in a scuffle, she clung to the Tricolor in order to protect it. Blows rained on her as she stood like a rock to protect the flag, bleeding profusely. She galvanized the All India Women's Conference into a dynamic movement.

Beside the hundreds and thousands of Indian women who dedicated their lives for India's freedom, there were many foreign women who saw in India a hope for the

redemption of the world. A famous disciple of Swami Vivekananda, Sister Nivedita was an Irish lady named Miss Margaret Nobel who arrived in India in January, 1898 in search of truth. She propagated for the cause of India throughout America and Europe. She attended the Benares Congress Session in 1905 and supported the Swadeshi Movement.

Annie Besant, Irish by birth was a staunch supporter of India's struggle for freedom. She founded the Home Rule League in Madras in 1916. She also founded the Theosophical Society of India. She was the President (First Woman President) of Indian National Congress for one term at Calcutta in 1917. She also edited 'New India' and 'Commonwealth'. She had done ample work to formulate favorable opinion about the Indian question in outside world. Even today, India remembers with gratefulness Annie Besant's immeasurable work for the freedom struggle, educational advancement and social reforms.

Mira Alphonse, universally known as the 'Mother' was born in Paris in 1878. She came to India in 1914 and met Shri Aurobindo. She was the inspirer of Auroville, the international town near Pondicherry. She played an important role in motivating women like Annie Besant and Nellie Sen Gupta. The Mother

had also contributed to enrich India's age-old heritage and culture.

Meera Behn and Sarla Behn Mahatma Gandhi's two English daughters helped for the cause of freedom. Born as Madeliene Slade in England, she was named Mira Behn by Mahatma Gandhi. She was a close disciple and associate of Gandhiji. She accompanied Gandhiji to Round Table Conference. She did pioneering work for social reforms in rural areas.

Born as Katherine Mary Heilaman, she was named Sarla Behn by Mahatma Gandhi. She was a great social worker. She set up an Ashram at Kausali in the Kumaon Hills of Uttarakhand. She went from village to village helping the families of political prisoners. She authored a book entitled 'Reviving Our Dying Planet'.

On the auspicious occasion of the Independence Day of our country it will be most befitting on our part to pay our respectable homage to all those brave daughters of Mother India and to those noble and courageous foreign women who fought and contributed enormously to the success of our freedom struggle and all other nation building activities.

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