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## ROLE OF WOMEN IN INDIA'S STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM



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Muthulaxmi Reddy



#### ABSTRACT:

*"When the history of India's fight for independence comes to be written, the sacrifice made by women of India will occupy the foremost place."*

- Mahatma Gandhi

Women have been known to participate in national liberation movements throughout the world. Although they have not been found to be politically very conscious or involved in day-to-day political issues, women have mobilised themselves during crisis situations. In India, women have participated in the National Freedom Struggle. The history of the freedom struggle of India would be incomplete without recognizing the role of women.

#### KEYWORDS

*national liberation, National Freedom Struggle, women in India's struggle.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Women came forward in the freedom struggle with true spirit, undaunted courage and wisdom. Women in a big number have gone down in history for their dedication and undying devotion to the service of India's freedom struggle. Role of women in India's struggle for freedom is unforgettable. The entire history of India's struggle for independence from colonial rule is replete with the story of bravery, courage, sacrifice and political sagacity of the freedom fighters of the country. We all are very much familiar with names and deeds of such great personalities as Mahatma Gandhi, Subhash Chandra Bose, Lala Lajpat Rai, Jawahar Lal Nehru, Abul Kalam Azad, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, C. Rajgopalachari, Bhagat Singh and so on. Their number and stature often give us an erroneous impression that it was only man's movement, but it is not so. Many women played a significant role in the freedom struggle of India.

There are very few comprehensive studies on women's participation in the freedom struggle. Studies published between 1968 to 1988 do touch upon various aspects and dimensions of women's participation. Some date has also been generated, some factual accounts made such as most standard histories of the National Movement mention women's participation and in the Civil Disobedience Movement. Women in revolutionary terrorism have also been described. Some accounts of contemporaries who participated in the movement refer to the strength and broad base acquired by it as a whole though women's participation. However, information on women in the writings prior to 1975 have been mainly on women on elite sections of society. Large majority of women have not figured in these accounts, and their role has remained unexplored and marginalized. Except some autobiographical accounts by some elite women participants, not much is known about the lives or the social background of the mass of women, who entered the movement from different regions of the country. But in last few years some work is in progress in this area and historians as well as feminist writers are recognizing and analyzing the role of women in the freedom struggle of India. Women from different sections of the society including thousands of housewives, directly or indirectly supported the freedom fighters by shouldering family responsibilities.

The participation of women in the struggle for freedom in India began as early as 1817. Bhima Bai Holkar fought bravely against the British Colonel Malcolm and defeated him in guerrilla warfare. At a very critical time for our motherland when the British East India Company was expanding its empire in India rapidly, when Tipu Sultan has been eliminated (1799), the proud Marathas has been humbled (1815), Chanamma 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. Holkar fought against the British army with great devotion upto remarkable success.

Rani of Jhansi Rani Lakshmi Bai was one of the most leading personalities of the first war of India's independence that started in 1857. Her courage, heroism and superb leadership created an outstanding example for all future generations of women freedom fighters. She got married to Maharaja of Jhansi, Raja Gangadhar Rao Niwalkar and further she was given the name Rani Lakshmi Bai. She was not allowed to adopt a successor after his death by the British, and Jhansi was annexed. With the outbreak of the revolt she became determined to fight back. Remarkable of her beauty, cleverness and preserverance, she was the most courageous of all the rebel leaders. Holding the reins of their horse in her mouth she used the sword with both hands. Under her leadership the Rani's troops showed marvellous courage. Considered by the British as the best military leader of rebels this sparkling essence of courage died a hero's death in the battlefield. Dressed in the men's clothes, she led her soldiers to wear against the British. She fought valiantly and although beaten she refused to surrender and fell as a warrior should, fighting the enemy to the last. She inspired many men and women in India to rise against the foreign rule and became immortal. Her courageous life history is very motivational that she

preferred to sacrifice her own life at the very young age in battle. Such an extraordinary devotion, that Rani Lakshmi Bai tied her son on her back while fighting in the battlefield, will not be found in the history of the world. Her brave death definitely inspired the patriots of future generations.

Begum Hazrat Mahal, also known as Begum of Awadh, was the first wife of Nawab Wajib Ali Shah, ruler of Lucknow. She rebelled against the British East India Company during the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and thus played a major role in India's First War of Independence. She led a band of rebellions against British East India Company and was even able to seize the control of Lucknow. She worked in close association with other leaders of the India's First War of Independence, including Nana Sahib. Begum was not only a strategist but also fought on the battlefield. When the forces under the command of the British recaptured Lucknow and most part of Awadh, she was forced to retreat. When her forces lost ground, she fled Awadh and organized soldiers again in their places. She turned down all offers of amnesty and allowances by the British rulers. Finally, she took refuge in an asylum in Nepal, where she died. To acknowledge her endless efforts in India's Freedom Struggle, the Government of India issued a stamp in 1984. She was the last free leader of the Mutiny.

The life of Sarojini Naidu, Nightingale of India, a distinguished poet, renowned freedom fighter, an intellectual social reformer is a proud for every man and women in the world. At the age of 12, she attracted national fame when she topped the matriculation examination in Madras University. At the age of 16, she travelled England to first study at King's College in London and later in Girton College in Cambridge. She was a great poet who started writing at her very early age. Many prominent Indian politicians like Gopal Krishna Gokhle and Jawahar Lal Nehru admired her poems and writings. Sarojini Naidu joined the Indian National Movement in the wake of the Bengal partition in 1905. At that time she came into contact with leaders like Gopal Krishna Gokhle, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Rabindra Nath Tagore, C.P. Ramaswami Iyer, Annie Besant, Jawahar Lal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi. During the time period from 1915 to 1918, Sarojini Naidu travelled to different regions in India delivering lectures on social welfare, women empowerment and nationalism. She created awareness among Indian women by bringing them out from their kitchens and consequently these women fought for the country. Sarojini Naidu campaigned for the Montague Chelmsford Reforms, the Khilafat issue, the draconian Rowlett Act and the Satyagraha. In the year 1925, she presided over the annual session of Indian National Congress in Kanpur. In the year 1929, she presided over the East African Indian Congress in South Africa. In the year 1930, she participated in the Round Table Conference with Mahatma Gandhi and Madan Mohan Malviya. In the year 1942, she was arrested during the Quit India Movement. She was a follower of Gandhi and always raised her voice for women emancipation and nationalism.

Madam Cama was a prominent personality of the Indian Nationalist Movement, who was born as Bhikaji Rustom Cama in a Parsi family, and later became a freedom fighter. Madam Cama always admired the personalities of the Nationalist Movement. She has always been actively involved in fighting for gender equality. On August 22, 1907, she raised the flag for India's independence at the International Socialist Conference in Stuttgart, Germany. She declared "The flag is of Indian Independence!. Behold it is born! It has been made sacred by the blood of young Indians who sacrificed their lives. I call upon you, gentlemen to rise and salute this flag of Indian Independence. In the name of this flag, I appeal to lovers of freedom all over the world to support this flag". Madam Cama spent her life in philanthropic activities and social work.

Kasturba was married to Mahatma Gandhi at the age of 13. Both the bride and bridegroom at that time were of same age. Brought up in a conservative style, Kasturba could not compromise with many of the progressive styles of Gandhi, but later she joined her husband in equal terms and became active politically. She fought for civil rights and Indian independence from the British. She was a leader of women's Satyagraha for which she was imprisoned. She helped her husband in the case of Indigo



workers in Champaran, Bihar and the No Tax Campaign in Khera, Gujarat. She was arrested twice for picketing liquor and foreign cloth shops, and in 1939 for participating in the Rajkot Satyagraha.

Annie Besant was a prominent British socialist, theosophist, women's rights activist, writer and orator and supporter of Irish and Indian self rule. As part of her theosophy related work she travelled India and in 1898 she helped establish the Central Hindu College. In 1922 she helped established the Hyderabad (Sind) National Collegiate Board in Mumbai in India. She also became involved in politics of India and joined the Indian National Congress. When World War - I broke out in 1914, she helped launch the Home Rule League to campaign for democracy in India and dominion status within the Empire. This led to her election as President of Indian National Congress in late 1917. After the war, she continued to campaign for Indian independence and for the causes of theosophy. She was a prolific writer and orator who remained a striking presence of speaker's platforms. She produced a torrent of letters and articles demanding independence.

Another woman freedom fighter was Ila Sen, a post graduate of Bengal University, who not only participated in the Anti Simon Commission demonstrations but also took active part in the salt Satyagraha in 1930 and was jailed for four months. She was one of the most educated revolutionary women, she encouraged the revolutionary activities and cooperated in her own way.

An intellectual, Smt. Subhadra Kumari Chouhan, emerged as a great source of inspiration during the freedom struggle in India. A nationalist poetess and the freedom fighter, not only actively participated in the non-cooperation and civil disobedience movements of 1922-23 and 1931-32 respectively but also made entering efforts to awaken the political consciousness among the masses through her nationalist and patriotic poems. She was also jailed during the Quit India Movements.

A radical nationalist Aruna Asaf Ali played an outstanding role in the historic Quit India Movement. She was a prominent leader of the underground movement. She published bulletins, went from place to place and even met Mahatma Gandhi avoiding arrest. She edited 'Inqulab' a monthly journal of the Indian National Congress.

Vijay Lakshmi Pandit was another woman stalwart of the Indian Freedom Struggle. She was the daughter of Pt. Moti Lal Nehru, a great freedom fighter and the sister of Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India. She entered the Non Cooperation Movement to fight against the British rule. She represented India in many of the Conference abroad. She challenged the British dominated delegate's rights to represent Indian therein. A stormy petrel of the Indian Freedom Struggle, she played a pivotal role in the country's political scenario for over six decades.

Sarla Devi Sarabhai, a great follower of Mahatma Gandhi belonged to the famous family of Gujarat. Under her leadership, women participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement and 'Dandi Yatra' during 'Salt Satyagraha'. She encouraged and inspired many women to actively participate in the various anti-British Movements launched by Mahatma Gandhi.

Kamla Nehru, wife of Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru, entered into the Indian Freedom Struggle inspired by her husband. She actively participated in the Salt Satyagraha and in the picketing at the shops of the foreign goods. In the Non Cooperation Movement, she organized groups of women in Allahabad, Nehru's home town, and propagated use of Khadi clothes. She had to go for a small period of imprisonment and was released on the grounds of keeping ill health.

Indira Gandhi, first woman Prime Minister of India, popularly known as 'Iron Lady', contributed significantly to the national movement. She was elected as the President of Indian National Congress in 1959. She had a vision of a modern self reliant and dynamic economy. She was arrested during the Quit India Movement. She became the indomitable symbol of India's self respect. She is known as the most powerful woman of the 20th Century.

In fact, there have been innumerable women who participated in the freedom struggle of India.

The Indian women participated in every political activity which ranged from liberal constitutionalism to revolutionary violence. The credit goes to Mahatma Gandhi who brought women in the open in substantial numbers during Civil Disobedience, Satyagraha and Quit India Movement. The participation of women gave a new turn to the Freedom Struggle of India which became unparalleled in history. There were many other women who devoted their lives for country's independence such as Rani Channamma of Kittur, Swarna Kumari Devi, Asu Bai Sawarkar, Sarla Devi Choudhary, Pt. Moti Lal Nehru's Wife Swarup Rani Nehru, Kamla Devi Chattopadhyaya, Charu Shila Devi, Parwati Devi from Punjab, Basanti Devi Chitranjandas, Shyama Kumar Nehru, Man Mohan Zutshi, Mani Ben, Mridula Ben Sarabhai, Beena Das, Satyawati, Kalpana Dutta, grand daughter of Dada Bhai Naoroji - Khursheed Ben Naoroji, Guidallo Rani, Durga Bai Deshmukh, Sucheta Kriplani etc. Therefore, the role of women in the freedom struggle of India is remarkable. Thousands of women of all classes, caste and regions contributed directly or indirectly in India's freedom struggle, with a great feel of courage and sacrifice. After a century of revolutions and sacrifices, India finally got independence in 1947. The brave sons and daughters of India fought selflessly for the independence of India.

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