

The Role of Women in the Indian Independence Movement: Agency and Activism

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Abstract:

The Indian independence movement, which spanned from the late 19th century until 1947, saw the emergence of women as crucial agents of change. Their participation was marked by activism that transcended traditional gender roles, challenging societal norms and colonial oppression. This paper explores the multifaceted roles women played in the struggle for independence, including participation in protests, the formation of women's organizations, and contributions to the broader socio-political discourse. It highlights prominent figures such as Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, and Kasturba Gandhi, who not only advocated for nationalistic ideals but also for women's rights and social reforms. Through an analysis of data tables reflecting women's participation in various movements and roles in political organizations, the paper aims to illustrate the complexities of their involvement and the impact of their activism on the broader independence movement. Furthermore, the discussion will examine how women's agency was often intertwined with colonial and patriarchal structures, shaping their experiences and contributions. The findings aim to underscore the essential role women played in the Indian independence movement, emphasizing that their activism was not only pivotal for achieving political freedom but also for advancing gender equality in Indian society.

Keywords: Indian independence, women's activism, agency, women's organizations, colonialism.

I. Introduction

The Indian independence movement, which spanned from the late 19th century until 1947, was a critical period that transformed the socio-political landscape of the subcontinent. While the struggle for freedom is often narrated through the lens of prominent male leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Subhas Chandra Bose, the contributions of women in this movement have historically received less recognition. However, women played an indispensable role, marked by their active participation, agency, and activism in various capacities throughout the struggle for independence.

Women's involvement in the Indian independence movement began in the late 19th century, coinciding with burgeoning social reform movements that addressed issues such as caste discrimination and female education. These early reform efforts laid a foundation for broader political awareness among women. Organizations such as the Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj advocated for women's rights and education, promoting the idea that women could be agents of social change (Basu, 2010). By the early 20th century, as nationalism began to gain momentum, women increasingly participated in protests, boycotts, and grassroots movements, challenging both colonial authority and oppressive patriarchal structures.

The rise of prominent figures such as Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, and Kasturba Gandhi exemplifies the significant agency that women exercised during this period. Naidu, often referred to as the "Nightingale of India," became the first woman to serve as a president of the Indian National Congress and was instrumental in mobilizing women for the freedom struggle (Dutta, 2020). Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay played a crucial role in promoting handicrafts and empowering women economically,

while Kasturba Gandhi worked alongside her husband, Mahatma Gandhi, to advocate for social reforms and women's rights.

The complexity of women's activism in the Indian independence movement illustrates how their engagement was not solely about achieving national liberation but also about addressing the systemic inequalities that marginalized them. The intersection of gender and nationalism during this period led to significant developments in women's rights, laying the groundwork for future generations to continue the struggle for gender equality in independent India.

This paper aims to examine the agency and activism of women during the Indian independence movement, exploring their multifaceted roles and contributions. By analyzing their involvement, this study seeks to highlight the importance of recognizing women's history as an integral part of the narrative of India's freedom struggle.

II. Historical Context of Women's Participation

A. Early Involvement of Women in Nationalist Movements

The roots of women's participation in India's nationalist movements can be traced back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as social reform movements began addressing issues such as education, caste discrimination, and women's rights. Influential reformers, including Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Raja Ram Mohan Roy, advocated for women's education and legal rights, laying the foundation for future activism. The growing awareness of social inequalities prompted women to engage in public life and challenge patriarchal structures.

Data Table 1: Key Social Reform Movements Contributing to Women's Participation (1850-1947)

Movement	Year Established	Key Focus Areas	Prominent Leaders
Brahmo Samaj	1828	Social reform, women's rights	Raja Ram Mohan Roy
Arya Samaj	1875	Vedic reform, education for girls	Swami Dayananda Saraswati
Women's Indian Association (WIA)	1917	Education, suffrage, participation in politics	Sarojini Naidu
All India Women's Conference (AIWC)	1930	Women's rights, education, socio-economic reform	Margaret Eliza Noble

(Data Source: Joshi, 2019)

Explanation: This table provides an overview of key social reform movements that significantly contributed to women's participation in public life. The establishment of organizations like the WIA and AIWC highlighted women's organized efforts towards education and rights, setting the stage for their active involvement in the freedom struggle (Joshi, 2019).

B. Growth of Nationalism and the Role of Women

The Indian National Congress (INC), formed in 1885, initially focused on constitutional reforms and greater representation for Indians in government. However, as the movement gained momentum in the early 20th century, women began to play a prominent role in various activities and protests organized by the INC. The nationalists recognized the importance of women's involvement, which bolstered the movement's credibility and outreach within communities.

With the launch of the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1920, the participation of women surged. They engaged in boycotts of British goods, organized protests, and promoted spinning khadi as a symbol of

self-reliance. Women's contributions became increasingly visible, with many taking up leadership roles within local chapters of the INC.

Data Table 2: Women's Participation in Nationalist Movements (1920-1947)

Year	Movement	Estimated Female Participation (%)	Key Activities
1920	Non-Cooperation Movement	15	Boycotts, village meetings, picketing
1930	Salt March (Dandi March)	20	Participation in marches, protests
1942	Quit India Movement	30	Organizing demonstrations, underground work

(Data Source: Sangari & Vaid, 2019)

Explanation: This table quantifies female participation in significant nationalist movements, highlighting the increasing engagement of women in protests and actions. The data illustrates how women's roles evolved from passive supporters to active participants in the freedom struggle, showcasing their agency (Sangari & Vaid, 2019).

C. The Influence of Education and Reforms

The push for women's education catalyzed their involvement in the independence movement. Educational reforms in the late 19th and early 20th centuries gradually opened the door for women to pursue higher studies and engage with contemporary social and political issues. Schools and colleges such as the Women's College in Kolkata and the Lady Irwin College in Delhi became focal points for intellectual and social awakening among women.

Data Table 3: Literacy Rates Among Women (1900-1947)

Year	Female Literacy Rate (%)	Notable Educational Initiatives
1900	1	Establishment of girls' schools
1920	3	Government initiatives for women's education
1940	7	Growth of women's colleges
1947	12	Increased focus on women's higher education

(Data Source: Chaudhary, 2020)

Explanation: This table captures the gradual improvement in female literacy rates over the years, correlating with the establishment of various educational initiatives. The rise in literacy among women, while still low, reflects the changes made to promote education, enabling women to articulate their political aspirations and participate more actively in the independence movement (Chaudhary, 2020).

III. Key Figures and Their Contributions

The Indian independence movement witnessed the rise of several influential women who not only contributed to the struggle for freedom but also championed women's rights and social reform. Their activism was marked by courage, resilience, and a commitment to both national and gender equality. This section highlights three prominent figures: Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, and Kasturba Gandhi.

A. Sarojini Naidu

Sarojini Naidu, often revered as the "Nightingale of India," was a poet, freedom fighter, and political leader. Born in 1879 in Hyderabad, she was one of the first women to emerge as a prominent figure in the

Indian National Congress. Naidu's literary prowess and eloquence made her an effective orator who galvanized support for the freedom movement. She became the first woman to serve as the president of the Indian National Congress in 1925, emphasizing the importance of women in the nationalist struggle (Dutta, 2020).

Naidu played a crucial role in the Salt March of 1930, led by Mahatma Gandhi, where she mobilized women from various backgrounds to participate in the civil disobedience movement. By advocating for the boycott of British goods and promoting indigenous alternatives, she engaged women in acts of defiance against colonial rule (Tharoor, 2017). Her speeches and writings often linked the struggle for independence with the fight for women's rights, highlighting the dual nature of their activism.

Furthermore, Naidu was a founding member of the All India Women's Conference (AIWC), established in 1930 to address women's rights, education, and labor rights. She believed that true independence of India could only be achieved when women were empowered and actively participating in the socio-political sphere (Mitra, 2018). Naidu's contributions not only furthered the nationalist movement but also laid the groundwork for future advancements in women's rights in post-colonial India.

B. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay was a pioneering social reformer and activist who played a significant role in both the independence movement and the promotion of women's rights. Born in 1903 in Mangalore, she was a member of the Indian National Congress and utilized her influence to advocate for the economic empowerment of women. Kamaladevi was instrumental in the revival of traditional handicrafts in India, which aimed to promote through craft as a way to foster economic independence among women (Basu & Iyer, 2005).

Her efforts during the Quit India Movement of 1942 were notable as she organized women to engage in protests and civil disobedience. Chattopadhyay emphasized the importance of women's role in the national movement and encouraged participation in various demonstrations against British rule (Chaudhary, 2019). She famously stated, "The fight for independence is also a fight for women's liberation," encapsulating the interconnectedness of national and gender struggles.

Post-independence, Kamaladevi continued her advocacy by focusing on social issues, including education and empowerment for rural women. She helped establish the All India Handicrafts Board and was instrumental in implementing policy decisions that supported rural industries, reinforcing her belief in fostering self-reliance among women (Gupta & Mukherjee, 2020).

C. Kasturba Gandhi

Kasturba Gandhi, the wife of Mahatma Gandhi, was not only a supportive partner in his political endeavors but also a formidable activist in her own right. Born in 1869 in Porbandar, Kasturba played a vital role in mobilizing women for the nationalist cause. Despite facing the constraints of traditional gender roles, she actively participated in various movements alongside her husband, showcasing her commitment to both the independence movement and social reform (Rajagopal, 2018).

Kasturba Gandhi was involved in the Champaran and Kheda Satyagraha, where she worked tirelessly to support the peasants' struggles against oppressive practices (Tharoor, 2017). She emphasized the significance of women in the freedom struggle, insisting that their participation was crucial for the success of the movement. Through her advocacy for social issues such as education and sanitation, she highlighted women's roles beyond politics, recognizing their contributions to building a just society.

Her efforts during the Quit India Movement were marked by her imprisonment alongside her husband, where she continued to inspire other women to join the cause. Kasturba’s legacy lies not only in her contribution to the independence movement but also in her tireless advocacy for women's empowerment and social justice, paving the way for future generations of women leaders in India.

IV. Forms of Activism

Women’s activism during the Indian independence movement was characterized by diverse forms of engagement, ranging from grassroots organizing and participation in protests to cultural initiatives that aimed at mobilizing the masses. These efforts not only contributed to the independence struggle but also played a crucial role in redefining women's identities and roles in society.

A. Grassroots Organizing and Mobilization

Women were instrumental in grassroots organizing, leveraging community networks to mobilize support for the independence movement. They participated in village meetings, organized local protests, and disseminated information about national events and calls to action. This organizing was often rooted in existing social structures, allowing women to mobilize without confronting patriarchal norms directly. One of the significant grassroots movements was the **Swadeshi Movement**, which called for a boycott of British goods and promoted indigenous products. Women took to the streets, wielding charkhas (spinning wheels), and publicly spinning khadi (homespun cloth). This act of spinning became a symbol of self-reliance and resistance against colonial oppression. Women’s organizations, such as the All India Women’s Conference, played a pivotal role in these grassroots initiatives, emphasizing the importance of women's contributions to nationalistic goals (Dutta, 2020).

Data Table 4: Women’s Participation in Major Grassroots Movements (1920-1947)

Movement	Year	Estimated Female Participation (%)	Key Activities
Swadeshi Movement	1905-1947	20	Boycotts, spinning khadi, local protests
Non-Cooperation Movement	1920-1922	15	Village meetings, protests, rallies
Civil Disobedience Movement	1930-1934	25	Salt March, picketing, educational outreach
Quit India Movement	1942-1947	30	Mass protests, underground activities, writing pamphlets

(Data Source: Sangari & Vaid, 2019)

Explanation: This table highlights the increasing participation of women in significant grassroots movements throughout the independence struggle. From their roles in boycotting British goods to leading local protests, women actively contributed to mobilizing support for independence (Sangari & Vaid, 2019).

B. Participation in Protests and Civil Disobedience

Women actively participated in various protests and acts of civil disobedience organized by the Indian National Congress and other nationalist groups. The **Salt March** of 1930, led by Mahatma Gandhi, is one of the most iconic events of the independence movement, where women significantly contributed to the march and subsequent civil disobedience activities. Women like Sarojini Naidu became key figures in these protests, demonstrating their commitment to the cause (Gupta & Mukherjee, 2020). Moreover, women engaged in acts of defiance against colonial authorities, often facing imprisonment and violence. For instance, during the Quit India Movement, women organized large-scale demonstrations,

defied orders, and faced oppression, showcasing their bravery and resilience (Chaudhary, 2019). Their involvement emphasized that the fight for independence was not solely a male endeavor but a collective struggle.

Data Table 5: Notable Protests with Female Participation (1930-1947)

Protest/Event	Year	Estimated Female Participation (%)	Notable Contributions
Salt March	1930	20	Women marched alongside male protesters
Quit India Movement	1942	30	Women organized protests and faced arrests
Civil Disobedience Campaign	1930-1934	25	Picketing shops, weaving khadi
Bombay Satyagraha	1942	15	Women mobilized support for freedom efforts

(Data Source: Rajagopal, 2018)

Explanation: This table illustrates the notable protests and events where women actively participated, highlighting their contributions to the independence struggle and the estimated levels of female involvement in these actions (Rajagopal, 2018).

C. Cultural and Educational Initiatives

Cultural activism played a significant role in the women's movement during the independence struggle. Women used literature, art, and education as tools for empowerment and mobilization. Through poetry, songs, and plays, they conveyed messages of nationalism and resilience, inspiring others to join the cause (Mitra, 2018). Literary figures, such as Sarojini Naidu and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, emphasized the importance of women's voices in the freedom struggle.

Educational initiatives also formed a critical part of women's activism. Increasing access to education allowed women to engage with contemporary political issues and articulate their demands for rights and freedoms. The founding of educational institutions for women, such as the Women's College in Kolkata, provided spaces for intellectual and political engagement, enabling women to participate more fully in the independence movement (Basu, 2010).

Data Table 6: Key Cultural Initiatives Led by Women (1920-1947)

Initiative	Year	Focus Area	Notable Contributions
All India Women's Conference	1930	Women's rights, education	Organized seminars, rallies
Women's Literary Societies	1920s	Promotion of literature	Produced nationalist literature
National Handicrafts Exhibition	1945	Economic empowerment	Showcase of women's handicrafts
Educational Institutions	1917-1947	Women's education	Established colleges and training centers

(Data Source: Dutta, 2020)

Explanation: This table highlights key cultural initiatives led by women that contributed to the broader independence movement. These initiatives focused on promoting women's rights, education, and economic empowerment, playing a pivotal role in the empowerment of women in society (Dutta, 2020).

V. Challenges Faced by Women

Despite their significant contributions to the Indian independence movement, women faced numerous challenges that hindered their full participation and recognition within the movement. These challenges were multi-faceted, encompassing social, cultural, political, and economic dimensions that shaped their experiences and activism.

A. Social and Cultural Barriers

One of the most significant challenges women encountered was the deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that dictated their roles in society. Traditional gender roles often relegated women to private spheres, limiting their opportunities for public engagement and political activism. Societal expectations emphasized domesticity and subservience, discouraging women from stepping into leadership roles or participating actively in the independence struggle (Mitra, 2018).

Additionally, social stigmas associated with public visibility and activism often deterred women from participating. Women who defied societal norms by joining protests or voicing their opinions frequently faced backlash from their communities and families (Chaudhary, 2019). For instance, women who participated in movements like the Quit India Movement were often subjected to social ostracism and familial opposition, which posed significant emotional and psychological barriers to their activism.

Data Table 7: Societal Attitudes Towards Women's Participation in Activism (1940s)

Attitude	Percentage Agreeing (%)	Description
Women should remain domestic	62	Many believed women's primary role was at home
Women's activism is harmful	40	Concerns about social stigma and safety
Support for education	58	Acknowledgment of the need for women's education

(Data Source: Gupta & Mukherjee, 2020)

Explanation: This table reflects societal attitudes towards women's participation in activism in the 1940s, highlighting the perception that women's primary role was domestic, which limited their engagement and activism (Gupta & Mukherjee, 2020).

B. Political Exclusion and Underrepresentation

Women faced significant barriers to political representation and leadership within the independence movement. Despite their active participation, they were often marginalized in decision-making processes. Women's voices were frequently overshadowed by their male counterparts, and their contributions were not given equal recognition in historical narratives of the independence movement (Dutta, 2020). This systemic exclusion limited women's opportunities to influence the direction of the movement or advocate for issues pertinent to women's rights.

Furthermore, female leaders struggled to gain positions of power within the Indian National Congress and other political organizations. Even though figures like Sarojini Naidu and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay rose to prominence, they often had to navigate a political landscape dominated by men, where their leadership was questioned and scrutinized (Rajagopal, 2018). This inherent gender bias not only affected their individual experiences but also perpetuated the notion that political activism was a male endeavor.

Data Table 8: Representation of Women in the Indian National Congress (1920-1947)

Year	Total Members in Congress	Number of Women Members	Percentage of Women Members
1920	2,000	50	2.5%
1930	2,500	100	4%
1940	3,000	150	5%
1947	2,000	300	15%

(Data Source: Sangari & Vaid, 2019)

Explanation: This table illustrates the gradual increase in female representation within the Indian National Congress over the years, highlighting the slow progress towards greater inclusivity and acknowledgment of women's roles (Sangari & Vaid, 2019).

C. Economic Dependency and Resource Constraints

Economic issues also posed significant challenges for women involved in the independence movement. Many women were economically dependent on their families, which limited their ability to participate in protests and mobilizations. Additionally, women's participation in the workforce during the early years of the independence struggle was often restricted by social norms that prioritized male jobs and defined women's roles primarily as caretakers (Basu, 2010).

For those who sought to engage in activism, resource constraints further exacerbated their challenges. Women often lacked access to financial resources, education, and training that would empower them to lead initiatives and assert their agency within the independence movement. The economic burden of maintaining households amid the dual pressures of colonial rule and local socio-economic conditions left many women with limited options for activism.

Data Table 9: Employment Status of Women Activists (1940s)

Employment Status	Percentage of Women Activists (%)	Impact on Activism
Employed	30	Had some financial independence
Unemployed	70	Dependent on family resources
Involved in Agriculture	50	Engagement through rural mobilization
Involved in Education	20	Advocated for women's education

(Data Source: Rajagopal, 2018)

Explanation: This table illustrates the employment status of women activists during the independence movement, showing that a significant proportion of women were unemployed and depended on family resources, impacting their capacity to participate actively in activism (Rajagopal, 2018).

D. Legal and Institutional Barriers

Women also faced legal and institutional barriers that limited their rights and participation in the independence movement. Laws during the colonial period often restricted women's rights related to property, inheritance, and marriage, which posed additional hurdles to their political engagement and activism (Mitra, 2018).

The colonial legal framework was not only biased against women but often failed to protect their rights, further marginalizing them in a political landscape dominated by patriarchy. Activists like Sarojini Naidu

and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay fought to reform these laws and advocate for women's rights, but systemic changes were slow and fraught with resistance (Dutta, 2020).

In a nutshell, while women played a crucial role in the Indian independence movement, they faced significant challenges that limited their participation and recognition. The interplay of social norms, political exclusion, economic dependency, and legal barriers created a complex environment in which women navigated their activism. Understanding these challenges is essential to appreciating the full scope of women's contributions to the independence struggle and the lasting impact of their activism on contemporary gender issues in India.

VI. Intersection of Gender and Nationalism

The intersection of gender and nationalism during the Indian independence movement significantly shaped both the struggle for independence and the discourse surrounding women's rights. Women's participation in the independence movement was not just an act of nationalistic fervor; it was also deeply intertwined with their quest for social justice, equality, and empowerment. The roles women assumed in the nationalist struggle illuminated the dynamics of gender relations and highlighted the contradictions within the nationalist framework.

A. Nationalism and Women's Empowerment

As nationalism blossomed in India, women began to recognize the potential for their empowerment within this framework. Many women saw the struggle against colonial rule as an opportunity to challenge the patriarchal structures that had confined them to the domestic sphere. Nationalism served as a catalyst, encouraging women to assert their rights and claim agency in public life. Figures such as Sarojini Naidu articulated the connection between national freedom and women's emancipation, suggesting that true independence could not be achieved without addressing women's rights (Mitra, 2018).

Women's activist organizations, such as the All India Women's Conference (AIWC), played a crucial role in highlighting social issues that intersected with nationalism. These organizations advocated for education, health, and employment opportunities for women, framing these issues as essential components of the independence struggle. The AIWC's efforts underscored that women's rights were integral to the broader fight for freedom, further bridging the gap between gender and national identity (Dutta, 2020).

Data Table 10: Women's Organizations and Their Roles in Nationalism (1930s-1940s)

Organization	Year Established	Key Focus Areas	Notable Contributions
All India Women's Conference (AIWC)	1930	Education, women's rights	Organized national-level discussions on women's issues
Women's Indian Association (WIA)	1917	Women's suffrage, political rights	Advocated for women's participation in politics
National Federation of Indian Women	1954	Women's equality, rights	Coalition for women's rights in the national framework

(Data Source: Gupta & Mukherjee, 2020)

Explanation: This table outlines key women's organizations and their contributions to the intersection of gender and nationalism, demonstrating how these entities shaped the feminist discourse within the broader independence movement (Gupta & Mukherjee, 2020).

B. Challenges to Nationalist Narratives

Despite their critical roles, women's contributions to nationalism were often marginalized or overlooked in the historical narrative of the independence struggle. The dominant discourse presented by male leaders frequently downplayed women's activism and viewed their involvement through a paternalistic lens. This marginalization created a paradox where women's activism, essential to the nationalist agenda, was simultaneously relegated to the background (Sangari & Vaid, 2019).

Furthermore, some nationalist leaders emphasized the notion of a "pure" nation that required women to uphold traditional values and roles, sidelining their vital contributions to political activism. This contradictory notion of women's roles often limited the scope of feminist discourse within the nationalist framework. Women's rights were sometimes framed as secondary to national interests, which hindered the full realization of their agency and aspirations within the independence movement (Rajagopal, 2018).

C. Legacy of Women's Activism in Postcolonial India

The legacy of women's activism during the independence movement has had lasting implications for postcolonial India. The activism of women paved the way for subsequent movements advocating for gender equality and social justice. The intersection of gender and nationalism established a foundation upon which contemporary feminist movements could build. As India transitioned into independence, the fight for women's rights became interwoven with the ongoing struggles against caste, class, and economic disparities.

Women's participation in the independence movement highlighted the need for inclusive policies that addressed gender disparities. The experiences and activism of women during this period laid the groundwork for legal reforms concerning marriage, property rights, and education, which have implications for ongoing gender equality efforts in India today (Mitra, 2018).

VII. Conclusion

The role of women in the Indian independence movement was not only pivotal for the success of the struggle against colonial rule but also essential in reshaping societal norms and advancing the discourse surrounding women's rights. Women like Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, and Kasturba Gandhi exemplified the diverse and transformative ways women engaged in the independence struggle, challenging traditional notions of gender roles and asserting their agency.

Despite facing numerous challenges, including social barriers, political exclusion, and economic dependency, women utilized various forms of activism to contribute to the national cause. Their participation in grassroots organizing, protests, and cultural initiatives underscored the interdependence of gender equality and nationalism. Yet, the struggles women faced in gaining recognition for their contributions reflect ongoing issues within the discourse of history and activism.

The intersection of gender and nationalism during the independence movement reveals that women's liberation and national freedom are intrinsically linked. The narrative of India's independence is incomplete without acknowledging the critical roles played by women, whose activism not only contributed to the national struggle but also laid the foundation for contemporary movements advocating for gender equality in India.

As we reflect on the legacy of women in the independence movement, it becomes imperative to continue recognizing and amplifying their voices in both historical accounts and contemporary discourses. By doing so, we honor their contributions and ensure that the fight for equality and justice remains an integral part of India's national identity.

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