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Women and the Struggle for Indian Freedom: An Analytical Study

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Abstract
The Indian freedom struggle constituted not only a political struggle against British colonial rule but also a transformative social movement, wherein women emerged as pivotal actors shaping both its direction and impact. Women across India actively participated in different stages of the movement by taking part in protests, boycotts, swadeshi, mass movements, revolutionary activities, and civil disobedience campaigns. Prominent leaders such as Rani Lakshmi Bai, Sarojini Naidu, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Sucheta Kriplani, Usha Mehta, Aruna Asaf Ali, Vijayalakshmi Pandit and others inspired widespread public participation through their bravery, determination, and leadership. Women also made vital contributions by organizing movements, spreading nationalist ideas, and assisting underground resistance efforts. Their active involvement brought about meaningful changes in Indian society by questioning traditional gender roles, encouraging women's education and political awareness, and laying the groundwork for women's empowerment in post-independence India. However, women faced several challenges, including social constraints, lack of educational opportunities, economic dependence, and strict repression by British authorities. Many women suffered imprisonment, physical abuse, and the added burden of managing both public activism and domestic responsibilities.

Keywords: Women, Freedom, Struggle, Colonial Rule, Participation.

Introduction

Indian freedom struggle represents one of the most prolonged and consequential movements for independence in world history. The struggle sought to emancipate India from British colonial rule, which begun in the mid-eighteenth century with the rise and expansion of the 'British East India Company'. The roots of the Indian freedom movement lie in this period, as the company progressively established control over vast Indian territories through military aggression, political subjugation, and systematic economic exploitation. In 19th and 20th century the status of women was not satisfactory because of the male dominated society. Women were subjected to a range of deeply entrenched social evils and superstitions including sati, child marriage, female infanticide, dowry system, purdah, polygamy, restrictions on widow remarriage, and the belief in spells and charms. The traditions are that the women only work within four walls, take care of family and household works which was pre-planned or devoted. Besides of it, they were not allowed to do anything. They could not express or share her views in front of males. Though the overcoming of numerous challenges, substantial social and religious reforms were firmly established in Indian society.

In 1802, Lord Wellesley introduced a ban on female infanticide. The persistent efforts of Raja Ram Mohan

Roy played a deceive role in the abolition of the sati system in 1829 (Bhattacharya, et al., 2021). Likewise, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar persistent advocacy resulted in the legalization of widow remarriage, with the first such marriage taking place in Kolkata in 1856. The upliftment of women was further strengthened by the contributions of the Phule couple and Swami Dayanand Saraswati. These reform movements brought about noticeable changes in Indian society, as women increasingly gained access to education, participated in social affairs, and played a vital role in India's freedom struggle. By the mid-nineteenth century, British rule had effectively ended Mughal sovereignty and transformed the princely states into instruments of colonial administration. Colonial economic policies systematically eroded indigenous industries and traditional livelihoods, while institutionalized racial discrimination exacerbated Indian resentment. Collectively, these developments generated widespread discontent and created the conditions necessary for organized resistance against colonial authority.

The rise of Indian nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries represented a transformative and deceive force in the struggle for independence. This phase witnessed the expansion of political consciousness and an increasing demand for self-governance among the Indian people. Nationalist leaders, social reformers, and intellectuals played a pivotal role in mobilizing the masses and shaping the ideological foundations of the movement. Notably, women historically confined to domestic spheres began to enter the public and political domain in growing numbers, marking a significant transformation in the nature of the struggle. The twentieth century, particularly under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, constituted a transformative period that significantly expanded and reshaped women's participation in the freedom struggle of India, highlighted their evolving role as both political actors and social reformers.

The Gandhian movements played a crucial role in the politicization of ordinary women, including peasants and urban working class women, thereby transforming the freedom struggle into a genuinely mass-based movement. Gandhi's inclusive philosophy of non-violent resistance actively encouraged women to engage in protests, boycotts, and civil disobedience campaigns. He viewed women as equal collaborators in the national struggle, thereby inspiring numerous female freedom fighters who organized demonstrations, mobilized women's collectives, and participated in revolutionary activities. Women thus emerged not merely as supporters but as leaders who challenged entrenched social conventions as well as the authority of the British colonial regime. In essence, the Indian freedom movement transcended the pursuit of political independence and encompassed broader aspirations for social reform, economic justice, and equality. These foundational ideals have continued to shape India's political and social development in the post-independence era.

Objectives

This paper aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the role of women in the Indian freedom struggle.
2. To assess the challenges faced by women in the course of India's struggle for freedom.
3. To analyze the impact of the freedom movement on the socio-political transformation of women.

Methodology

The study draws primarily on secondary sources- including books, journals, newspapers, magazines, and online resources. It employs historical, descriptive and analytical method.

Relevance of the Study

This study is significant because it recognizes and evaluates their sacrifice, leadership and active roles in the freedom struggle against colonial rule. It also helps us understand gender equality, women's empowerment, and their contribution to nation-building. Furthermore, it elucidates the factors influencing women's socio-political roles and the hurdles they confronted during the freedom struggle, thereby inspiring future generations and fostering a more inclusive historical narrative.

Women's Role in the Struggle for Indian Freedom

The Indian freedom struggle was a transformative force that significantly redefined the social, political, and cultural status of women. Participation in the national movement provided women with opportunities to step out of their traditional domestic roles and engage actively in public and political sphere. National leaders actively encouraged women's participation, recognizing their role in the broader process of social transformation. Even before the emergence of a unified national freedom movement, women across various regions actively resisted colonial expansion and foreign dominance. Their participation extended far beyond symbolic involvement and encompassed leadership, armed resistance, political organization and mass mobilization. As political leaders and sovereign rulers, women such as Rani Velu Nachiyar of Sivaganga, Rani Chennamma of Kittur, and Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi exercised independent authority by rejecting British administrative control. They governed their territories autonomously, formed alliances with indigenous powers, and openly challenged colonial policies such as the doctrine of lapse, subsidiary alliance and divide and rule.

As military strategists and combat leaders, women organized and led armed resistance, provided weapons training to both men and women, exercised effective command over troops in battle, and employed guerrilla tactics specifically adapted to local conditions. Women's participation in the freedom struggle also extended into both international and regional spheres. Under the leadership of Subhas Chandra Bose, the Indian National Army established the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, an exclusively women's combat unit commanded by Captain Lakshmi Sahgal. This regiment represented a significant departure from conventional gender roles, symbolizing women's direct engagement in armed struggle and their commitment to the pursuit of national liberation. In exceptional cases, such as Kuyili, women made the ultimate sacrifice by destroying British military resources. In tribal and peasant uprisings across eastern, central, and northern India- particularly among the Santhal, Kol, Bhil, and Munda movements- women emerged as frontline fighters wielding traditional weapons. They also served as scouts, spies, and messengers, sustaining communication networks vital to the continuation of rebellion.

Beyond participation in armed struggle, women played a pivotal role as organizers and mobilisers, fostering mass involvement through folk songs, religious practices, and oral traditions. These cultural forms reinforced collective identity and sustain resistance against exploitative revenue systems, forced labour, and cultural suppression. Women provided essential logistical support by arranging food, shelter, medical assistance, and safe routes for fighters, often at great personal risk. Through these diverse roles- political leadership, military engagement, intelligence gathering, cultural preservation, and community mobilization-women ensured the resilience and continuity of regional resistance movements. These reformist and nationalist efforts were instrumental in laying the foundations of India's national movement during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With the expansion of women's education in the early twentieth century, their participation in public and political life increased significantly. Educated women actively engaged in political organizations, participated in sessions of the Indian National Congress, and contributed to both political discourse and social reform alongside the movement for

national independence. During the Swadeshi Movement of 1907, numerous associations emerged in towns and cities. Organizations such as the 'Mahila Shilpa Samiti' organized exhibitions of Swadeshi goods, while the 'Women's Indian Association', founded in Madras in 1917 by Annie Besant, Margaret Cousins, and others, worked for women's rights by promoting education, advocating inheritance rights, challenging the Devadasi system, and facilitating employment through literacy initiatives (Desai, 1977), Women from diverse social backgrounds played a critical and transformative role in India's freedom struggle, emerging as active political participants across major nationalist movements. Their sustained involvement in the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Civil Disobedience Movement, various satyagrahas, and the Quit India Movement not only broadened the social base of the nationalist movement but also redefined the nature of political participation in colonial India.

Women organized and led processions, picketed foreign cloth and liquor shops, defied colonial laws, endured imprisonment, and mobilized rural women for collective action. Influenced by Gandhian ideals, Sarojini Naidu entered the nationalist movement during the protests against the partition of Bengal in 1905 (Kasturi, et al., 1994). She went on to lead non-violent demonstrations at the Dharasana salt works in protest against the salt tax following Mahatma Gandhi's arrest, accompanied him to England for the Second Round Table Conference. She also became the first Indian woman to serve as President of the Indian National Congress. Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay was a distinguished social reformer and freedom fighter who played an active role in the Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience Movements, making significant contributions to India's struggle for independence. She also promoted handicrafts, handlooms, and theatre as part of her efforts to revive India's cultural heritage. Annie Besant was a committed advocate of both Irish and Indian Home Rule. She founded the All India Home Rule League in 1916 at Madras, which sought greater self-governance for India. She became the first woman President of the Indian National Congress in 1917.

Bhikaji Cama was a prominent nationalist leader and one of the earliest figures to unfurl the Indian national flag in Germany in 1907. She played a significant and sustained role in the Indian independence struggle. Ramadevi Chaudhary mobilized women for the freedom struggle in 1937 and actively participated in the Quit India movement, as well as the Non-Cooperation Movements and the Civil Disobedience Movements. Vijayalakshmi Pandit became the first woman to hold a Cabinet position in 1937. She was active during the mass movements such as the Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, and Quit India Movement. She also led processions and picketed liquor and foreign cloth shops during the Salt Satyagraha alongside her sister (Dash, 2010). Durgabai Deshmukh led a group of salt law breakers at 'Marina Beach' in Madras and played a key role in establish the 'Andhra Mahila Sabha' and the 'Hindi Balika Pathshala' at a young age.

Sucheta Kriplani participated in the individual satyagraha at Faizabad, endured two years of imprisonment, and later worked underground to organize anti-British resistance. Inspired by Gandhian principles, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur actively joined the Indian National Congress during the Salt Satyagraha, demonstrating her commitment to non-violent resistance against colonial rule. Her arrest in Bombay for defying British laws underscored her personal courage and dedication to the nationalist cause. Subsequently, she played a transformative role in promoting women's leadership, social reform, and political participation, linking the struggle for independence with broader social emancipation. Matangini Hazra actively participated in the Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience Movements, joining the freedom struggle in 1932 and being imprisoned for her participation in the Salt Satyagraha.

Aruna Asaf Ali emerged as a key figure in India's independence struggle, most notably for hoisting the Indian national flag at the Gwalior Tank maidan during the Quit India Movement in 1942. Her act of rebellion symbolized popular resistance against colonial authority, and her lifelong commitment to the nationalist struggle earned her recognition as the "Grand Old Lady" of India's freedom movement, reflecting both her courage and enduring influence on India's path to independence (Rashid, et al., 2023). Simultaneously, revolutionary women such as 'Kalpana Dutt, Pritilata Waddedar, Bina Das, Durgabai Deshmukh', and Usha Mehta played a pivotal role in Indian freedom struggle through armed resistance, underground networks, and clandestine communications. Pritilata Waddedar distinguished herself by leading an armed attack on the 'Pahartali European Club' in 1932, illustrating resistance against colonial authority. Kalpana Dutt actively participated in the 'Chittagong Armoury Raid of 1930' and later joined the Chhatri Sangha, making significant contributions to the nationalist struggle. Usha Mehta took part in protests against the 'Simon Commission' and in 1942, collaborated with fellow activists to establish the secret congress radio, which was instrumental in disseminating nationalist messages and coordinating resistance during the Quit India Movement.

Collectively, the efforts of these women were crucial in advancing the revolutionary dimension of the independence movement and challenging the colonial state. Beyond direct political action, women served as organizers, couriers, messengers, and cultural activists. They sustained communication networks, supported imprisoned and underground revolutionaries, and employed songs, poetry, and theatre to inspire collective resistance. Through their leadership, sacrifice, and mass participation, women not only strengthened the struggle for independence but also reshaped India's political culture. Women who gained political experience during the freedom movement played influential roles in the Constituent Assembly and the early governance structures, ensuring that women's concerns were meaningfully incorporated into constitutional deliberations and nation-building processes. Their contributions ensured that the struggle for national liberation remained inseparably linked with the ideals of equality, justice, and women's rights.

Challenges

Women's participation in India's freedom struggle involved confronting complex and deeply entrenched challenges rooted in colonial oppression and rigid social structures, making their engagement a remarkable act of courage and resilience. Foremost among these challenges was the pervasive patriarchal order within Indian society, which restricted women to domestic spheres and deemed political engagement both inappropriate or socially unacceptable. Women frequently faced systematic resistance from their families and communities, expressed through social exclusion, moral criticism, and persistent emotional coercion, all designed to discourage their participation in public life.

The lack of educational opportunities and political exposure substantially limited women's participation, especially among rural, economically marginalized, and lower-caste groups, strengthening existing social and structural inequalities. These structural disadvantages significantly hindered their ability to attain leadership positions or effectively articulate political demands. Simultaneously, women faced several colonial repressions, including arrest, prolonged incarceration, physical abuse, constant surveillance, and, in some instances, death often without adequate legal safeguards or public recognition. Prison conditions for women were especially harsh, marked by inadequate sanitation, insufficient medical care, and systemic neglect.

Economic dependence significantly intensified these challenges. Participation in protests, boycotts, or underground activities frequently resulted in loss of livelihood, the seizure of property, and acute financial

insecurity, particularly for widows and women lacking male support. Moreover, women activists were subjected to character assassination and intrusive moral policing. Both colonial authorities and conservative social groups questioned women's virtue and respectability as a deliberate strategy to delegitimize and discourage their political engagement. Even within the nationalist movement, women encountered gender-based discrimination and marginalization.

Additionally, decision-making structures remained predominantly male-dominated, with women largely confined to supportive or symbolic roles, thereby their participation in positions of leadership and authority. Balancing domestic responsibilities with political activism posed an additional and persistent challenge, as women were expected to fulfill household duties, childcare obligations, and societal expectations while simultaneously participating in demanding and often perilous national activities. Despite these severe barriers, women continued to persevere with exceptional determination and resilience. Their involvement transformed into a dual struggle against colonial rule and gender inequality, thereby laying the groundwork for later movements promoting women's rights, social justice, and equality in post-independence India.

Impact of the Freedom Struggle on Women

The Indian freedom struggle had a profound and lasting impact on the social, political, and ideological position of women in Indian society. Before the emergence of the nationalist movement, women were largely excluded from the public sphere due to entrenched patriarchal structures, limited access to education, and restrictive socio-cultural norms. The freedom struggle created unprecedented opportunities for women's participation in public life, as nationalist leaders and movements increasingly recognized them as essential contributors to the moral and political advancement of the nation. They challenged deep-rooted patriarchal norms by abolishing the notion that women were confined solely to the domestic sphere. Women's active involvement in protests, leadership roles, underground activities, and acts of sacrifice decisively demonstrated their competence and agency in public and political life.

The freedom movement fostered political consciousness and self-confidence among women, motivating them to transcend traditional household responsibilities and engage actively with national issues, governance, and the discourse on rights and citizenship. Women's participation contributed to the expansion of education and social reform. Nationalist leaders increasingly emphasized women's education as vital to nation-building, resulting in improved literacy levels and increased social awareness among women. Women's engagement in mass movements profoundly reshaped societal perceptions of their roles, both within the domestic sphere and in public life. Moreover, their active involvement in these movements also inspired future generations to engage in political activism (Boruah, 2024). The freedom struggles also paved the way for legal and constitutional empowerment.

Women who had contributed to the nationalist movement asserted their demand for equality, which culminated in constitutional provisions such as universal adult franchise, equality before the law, and safeguards against discrimination in independent India. Their involvement in the freedom struggle empowered them to challenge oppressive customs such as child marriage, purdah, and enforced social seclusion, while simultaneously fostering a gradual transformation in societal attitudes toward women's autonomy and capabilities. Collective engagement in national movements nurtured solidarity among women across class, caste, and regional divisions, strengthening their ability to articulate shared political and social demands within the democratic framework of independent India. Their sustained participation in the nationalist movement reinforced claims to equal political rights and citizenship, significantly

influencing the adoption of universal adult franchise, equality before the law, and gender-neutral fundamental rights in the Indian Constitution. Finally, the sacrifices made by women during the freedom struggle earned them increased social recognition and respect, contributing to a gradual transformation in societal attitudes. This transformation provided a robust foundation for women's active engagement in politics, administration roles, and public service in post-independence India. Thus, the freedom struggles not only secured India's liberation from colonial rule but also served as a transformative force in redefining women's status, dignity, and role in Indian society.

Findings

Women played a substantial and multifaceted role in the Indian freedom struggle, engaging actively in mass movements, revolutionary activities, social reform initiatives, and nationalist campaigns across various regions of the country. The study indicates that women's involvement in the freedom struggle had a profound transformative effect on societal attitudes by contesting entrenched gender norms and cultivating increased political awareness among women. Additionally, the study also highlights the persistent challenges faced by women freedom fighters, including deeply rooted patriarchal structures, restricted access to leadership and decision-making roles, and systematic repression by colonial authorities. Despite these constraints, women exhibited remarkable resilience and political agency, making enduring contributions that influenced both the trajectory of the freedom movement and post-independence debates on the rights, equality, and empowerment of women.

Concluding Remarks

The struggle for India's freedom was not merely led by prominent male leaders but was equally shaped and sustained by the substantial contribution of women across diverse regions, social classes, and ideological backgrounds. Women played a profoundly transformative role in challenging colonial authority, reshaping gender norms, and establishing the foundations for political participation and social reform in independent India. Their enduring legacy continues to be integral to the democratic and social fabric of the nation. Their sacrifices and contributions not only facilitated the attainment of independence but also significantly advanced gender equality and social reform in India. Despite facing entrenched patriarchal barriers, social restrictions, gender-based discrimination, limited political representation, and colonial repression, women displayed remarkable courage and determination. Consequently, the freedom struggles not only achieved political independence but also laid a strong foundation for women's empowerment and social equality in India.

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