

Women Participation In Indian Freedom Struggle

There was very little or no participation of women in the early days of the freedom struggle. Even within the congress 1880s, women were very uncommon. The participation increased to some extent during the partition of Bengal, i.e. swadeshi movement. They invoked the religious and familiar sentiment to the partition and also took the lead by tying rakhi and keeping fasts.

The movement showed a spike with the arrival of Gandhi, and more and more participation occurred during the NCM. The mother of Ali brothers, Bi Amma, surrendered the veil and addressed 6000 women to join men in picketing. A valiant Durgabai in Andhra Pradesh collected thousands of devadasi for the same.

It can be seen that:

- Women participated in the movement despite social evils like the purdah system etc
- They came out to the streets not compromising their domestic values
- They took care of the family when other members went on to participate
- They started a constructive program like spinning Khadi
- They supported and became the strength for activists
- They volunteered for marches, picketing etc

Lately, Gandhi saw women in a supportive role, but they got impatient. They demanded a more active role. It was although seen as a healthy sign due to his belief that nonviolence is the inherent capacity, it can play a much wider role in picketing and agitation. The activism was really very visible during the civil disobedience, salt satyagraha and Quit India movement. Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Gandhi, Kamal Devi lead several salt marches upfront. Usha Mehta started an underground radio for proper information dissemination and mobilizing citizens.

Meanwhile, the role of women in revolutionary groups was increasing. We can see the likes of Durgavati Devi in HSRA, Suniti Choudhary of Chittagong Republican Army and also in the Rani Laxmi Bai regiment in INA.

Examples of several women freedom fighters:

1. **Kamini Roy** – She was the first woman to graduate with honours in British India. She took an active part in Ilbert bill agitation. Abala Bose, one of the social workers, inspired her to join the women's suffrage movement in Bengal. She, along with Kumudini Mitra and Mrinalini Sen formed the Bangiya Nari Samaj to fight for Women Liberation. She was also a member of the Female labour investigation commission from 1922-23 which worked with the government to oversee the conditions of women.
2. Poetess like Subhadra Kumari Chauhan, Sarojini Naidu and Mahadevi Verma wrote nationalist poems to instigate the feelings of nationalism within the masses. Sarojini Naidu, in 1917, led the delegation to meet Mr Montagu for women's suffrage. She also participated against the Rowlatt act in 1919 and against the visit of Prince Charles in 1921. She was the first Indian woman to preside over the session of INC in 1925, Kanpur.
3. **Kadambini Ganguly** – She became the first woman to address the Indian National Congress and be on the dais.
4. **Kamladevi Chattopadhyay** – She returned from London in the 1920s to join the Seva Dal. She organized trained and recruited services for the organization. She became the first woman to contest the provincial

assembly election in British India, although she lost the election. She was among the 7-member team created by Gandhiji to lead salt satyagraha at Bombay Beach front.

5. **Annie Besant** – She was although an Irish nationalist but hugely influenced by Indian culture and traditions. Her role was very prominent in mobilizing and unity of all women. She became the first woman to preside over the INC session in 1917, Calcutta. Alongside Tilak, she started the Home rule league movement, which became the foundation for the future course of action to be taken by Mahatma Gandhi for the national movement.

Women Organizations

1. **Bharat Stree Mahamandal** – As a result of the differences with the male leadership of the National Social Conference, it was formed by Sarala Devi Choudhurani in 1901. It became the first permanent association of and Indian Women to further their common interests. Along with social evils, it helped in galvanizing women's interest in politics and promoted leadership among them. However, the association remained mostly elite and comprised of upper urban class women only. Bharat Mahila Parishad was an earlier organization, as a part of the National social conference.
2. **Women Indian Association** was formed in Madras in 1915 to take up the political cause of women. It was founded by D. Jinarajadasa. He was of Irish origin. The membership of the organization was open to both Indians and Europeans. They believed that the enfranchisement of women was necessary to remove the social evils through legislation. This was among the most vigorous organization. It increased its scope beyond fundraising and social service to influence the policies of the government.
3. **Arya Mahila Samaj** was formed by Pandita Ramabai, wife of Justice Ranade. It was an association to provide support and networking to educate women.
4. **National council of women for India**, founded in 1925 by Mehribai Tata, wife of industrialist Dorab Tata. It was affiliated with the international council of women. The organization, however, failed to reach the width and breadth of the country due to its elitist nature and hence couldn't grow.
5. **All India Women's Conference** – With the efforts of Margaret Cousins and other women belonging to WIA, the first conference was held in 1927 in Pune. The conference took up the vital social issues related to women. It started publishing a journal under the name of Roshni. The organization's foundation coincided with the appointment of the first woman legislature of the country, Muthulakshmi Reddy to the Madras Legislative Council in 1927.

We can see many efforts made by women in getting the country independent. They were not only followers but also leaders in many cases. However, their contribution still remains undermined, and they deserve a due place in history.