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Role of Women in India's Freedom Struggle

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ABSTRACT: The history of Indian Freedom Struggle would be incomplete without mentioning the contributions of women. The sacrifice made by the women of India will occupy the foremost place. They fought with true spirit and undaunted courage and faced various tortures, exploitations and hardships to earn us freedom. When most of the men freedom fighters were in prison the women came forward and took charge of the struggle. The list of great women whose names have gone down in history for their dedication and undying devotion to the service of India is a long one. Woman's participation in India's freedom struggle began as early as in 1817. Bhima Bai Holkar fought bravely against the British colonel Malcolm and defeated him in guerilla warfare. Many women including Rani Channama of Kittur, Rani Begam Hazrat Mahal of Avadh fought against British East India company in the 19th century; 30 years before the "First War of Independence 1857". The role played by women in the War of Independence (the Great Revolt) of 1857 was creditable and invited the admiration even leaders of the Revolt. Rani of Ramgarh, Rani Jindan Kaur, Rani Tace Bai, Baiza Bai, Chauhan Rani, Tapasvini Maharani daringly led their troops into the battlefield. Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi whose heroism and superb leadership laid an outstanding example of real patriotism. Indian women who joined the national movement belonged to educated and liberal families, as well as those from the rural areas and from all walk of life, all castes, religions and communities. Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, Vijayalakmi Pundit and Annie Beasant in the 20th century are the names which are remembered even today for their singular contribution both in battlefield and in political field. Let us elucidate the role of Indian women who participated in the freedom struggle against British East India Company and British Empire and made great and rich contributions in various ways.

KEYWORDS: India, freedom, struggle, women, castes, british, 20th century, independence, battlefield

I. INTRODUCTION

The First War of Independence (1857-58) It was the first general agitation against the rule of the British East India Company. The Doctrine of Lapse, issue of cartridges greased with cow and pig fat to Indian soldiers at Meerut 'triggered the fire'. Further, the introduction of British system of education and a number of social reforms had infuriated a very wide section of the Indian people, soon became a widespread agitation and posed a grave challenge to the British rule.¹

As a result of this agitation the East India Company was brought under the direct rule of the British Crown. Even though the British succeeded in crushing it within a year, it was certainly a popular revolt in which the Indian rulers, the masses and the militia participated so enthusiastically that it came to be regarded as the First War of Indian Independence. Rani Lakshmi Bai was the great heroine of the First war of India Freedom. She showed the embodiment of patriotism, self-respect and heroism. She was the queen of a small state, but the empress of a limitless empire of glory.

General Dyer's Jalianwala Bagh massacre followed the strike wave, when an unarmed crowd of 10,000 Baisakhi celebrators was mercilessly attacked with over 1600 rounds of ammunition. Yet, Gandhi continued to advocate

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cooperation with the British in December 1919, even as the resistance of ordinary Indians continued². The first six months of 1920 saw an even greater level of mass resistance, with no less than 200 strikes taking place involving 1.5 million workers. It was in response to this rising mass revolutionary tide that the leadership of the Congress was forced to confront its conservatism and give a somewhat more militant face to its program. The "non-violent non-cooperation" movement was thus launched under the stewardship of leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Lajpat Rai and Motilal Nehru. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi returned to India from South Africa in 1915 and took up the demand for self-rule and non-cooperation movement. Sarla Devi, Muthulaxmi Reddy, Susheela Nair, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Sucheta Kripalani and Aruna Asaf Ali are some the women who participated in the non-violent movement. Kasturba Gandhi, the wife of Mahatma Gandhi, and the women of the Nehru family, Kamla Nehru, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit and Swarup Rani, also participated in the National Movement. Lado Rani Zutshi and her daughters Manmohini, Shyama and Janak led the movement in Lahore. Gandhiji inaugurated the Civil Disobedience Movement by conducting the historic Dandi Salt March,³ where he broke the Salt Laws imposed by the British Government. Followed by an entourage of seventy nine ashram inmates, Gandhi embarked on his march from his Sabarmati Ashram on a 200 mile trek to the remote village Dandi that is located on the shores of the Arabian Sea. On 6th April 1930, Gandhi with the accompaniment of seventy nine satyagrahis, violated the Salt Law by picking up a fistful of salt lying on the sea shore. The Civil Disobedience Movement was an important milestone in the history of Indian Independence. The aim of this movement was a complete disobedience of the orders of the British Government. During this movement it was decided that India would celebrate 26th January as Independence Day all over the country.⁴ On 26th January 1930, meetings were held all over the country and the Congress tri- colour flag was hoisted. The British Government tried to repress the movement and resorted to brutal firing, killing hundreds of people. Thousands were arrested along with Gandhiji and Jawaharlal Nehru. But the movement spread to all the four corners of the country.

In August 1942, the Quit India movement was launched. "I want freedom immediately, this very night before dawn if it can be had. We shall free India or die in the attempt, we shall not live to see the perpetuation of our slavery", declared the Mahatma, as the British resorted to brutal repression against non-violent satyagrahis. The Quit India resolution, taken against British, directly addressed women "as disciplined soldiers of Indian freedom", required to sustain the flame of war.⁵

Usha Mehta, a committed patriot set up a radio transmitter, called The "Voice of Freedom" to disseminate the "mantra" of freedom-war. News of protest and arrests, deeds of young nationalists, and Gandhi's famous "Do or Die" message for the Quit India movement were circulated amongst the masses. Usha Mehta and her brother persisted with their task of broadcasting until their arrest.

These acts proved that the British could maintain the empire only at enormous cost due to wide spread agitation.⁶

II. DISCUSSION

To call women the weaker sex is a libel, it is men's injustice to women. If by strength is meant moral power, then women is immeasurably man's superior. Has she not greater intuition, is she not more self sacrificing ...has she not greater powers of endurance, has she got greater courage? Without her man could not be. If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with woman. I have nursed this thought now for years." (Mahatma Gandhi) Whenever the history of India's freedom struggle is written, the sacrifices made by Indian Women will surely find the most prominent place in it. It was disgraceful to call women a weaker section, it was an injustice committed to them by men. If they meant moral courage, women had it many times more than men. If she had not had more inner strength, self sacrifice and tolerance than men and mankind would not have survived. If man was governed by nonviolence,

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the future belongs to women. When most of the men folk were in prison, a wonderful thing happened. Our women jumped into the arena of freedom struggle.⁷ They had always been contributing in the freedom struggle, but the wave of their unprecedented enthusiasm had surprised the British Government. The Home Secretary of the British govt. had to confess that nothing had disturbed him more than the great awakening among the Indian Women and the part played by them in Indian politics. The consciousness of the women in the whole of India took a unique shape and the women of Bengal did not lag behind. The participation of the Bengali women in resistance movement had its origins and background in the social reforms of the 19th century. It may be recalled that during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries protestant missionaries with the support of allies in India and England took the initiative in advocating a number of social reforms in Hindu Society. They drew attention to practices such as infanticide, child marriage, the deplorable conditions of widows, the exposure of the sick and dying on the banks of holy rivers, Hook- swinging at the Hindu festivals, the practice of sati, the prevalence of caste system that dehumanized a great part of the society, bonded labour etc. In 1820, Raja Ram Mohan Roy emerged as the first modern Hindu exponent of social reform. The first step in the direction of Women's liberation in modern India was taken by Raja Ram Mohan Roy by way of opposition to sati and its abolition through legal sanctions (Dec. 1829) has left a lasting legacy for the women's movement in India⁸. The issues that dominated the 19th century were sati abolition, widow remarriage, education, rising the age of marriage. It was with the efforts of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, KeshabChandra Sen, and a host of others came forward for the betterment of the women and her lot in society started improving. Under pressure from social reformers, the Govt. of India Act of 1856 legalised the marriage of Hindu widows, child Marriage Act of 1872 banned child marriage and fixed minimum age of marriage at 14 for the girl and 18 for the boy, permitted widow remarriage and inter caste marriage and penalized polygamy among the Brahmo Samaj. It is these reforms mainly in the provinces of Bengal that helped the women to participate actively, even as early as 1885, in the emerging nationalist movement, by freeing them from the shackles of the traditional practices and values. From the inception of Indian National Congress (1885) its membership was open to women also. Allan Octavian Hume even went ahead asking for all shades of opinion never to forget that unless the evaluation of the female element of the nation proceeded pari passu (with an equal place) with their work, all their labour of the political enfranchisement of the country would prove vain⁹.

The women attended the fourth session of the Congress at Bombay in 1889. Like the males, females participated from Calcutta including Swarnakumari Devi, sister of Rabindranath Tagore. She had abandoned purdah and together with her husband, edited the Bengali journal, Bharati, having thus achieved the name of being the first Indian Woman editor. Swarnakumari began 'Sakhi Samiti' (Ladies Association) to infuse among Indian Women an active and enlightened interest in country's welfare. From Bengal also came Kadamboni Ganguli, a graduate of Kolkata University and the first woman doctor from Bengal. Swarnakumari Devi and Kadambori Ganguli attended the Congress Session as delegates in 1890. The later had the honour of being the first woman to speak from the congress platform when she proposed a vote of thanks to the President Pheroze Shah Mehta. Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, daughter of Swarna Kumari, who was to take an active part in the nationalist movement in the years to come, composed a song urging the people different provinces of the country to join the freedom struggle. Interestingly the same song was sung in chorus at congress session in 1901, The decision for the partition of Bengal, announced by the Govt. on 20th July 1905, first time galvanized the common people including women into political action. In Sept. 1905, Rabindranath Tagore announced his plan for observing Rakhi Bandhan on the partition Day i.e. 16 October. Women also took 'non-cooking day' as suggested by Ramendra Sunder Trivedi¹⁰. Protest meetings were convened by women and about five hundred of them witnessed the laying of the foundation stone of the Federation Hall at Calcutta on 16 Oct. 1905. Women organized Swadeshi fairs and Saraladevi Chaudhurani opened 'Lakshmir Bhandar' selling only indigenous articles, gave up use of foreign articles and use of foreign cloth and smashed their

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foreign bangles. Another eminent lady was Kumudini Mitra (daughter of Krishna Kumar Mitra, a renowned nationalist) also organised a group of educated ladies in order to make a liaison among different revolutionaries. It also propagated and preached the cause of the revolutionaries through Suprabhat, a Bengali magazine. Women helped in distributing revolutionary pamphlets and literature and in maintaining connections between different revolutionary leaders. Mrs. Ramsay McDonald, who accompanied her husband in his tour of India, visualized that the Swadeshi movement could not have succeeded without the female assistances. Swadeshi movement arose from Bengal and spread throughout the country-stormy tours of leaders, women's dharnas at foreign goods stores and bonfires of foreign goods and students giving up schools and colleges in the face of expulsions for violating Government orders became a routine matter¹¹. Women too played an important role in organizing processions, rallies and dharnas and in spreading the boycott movement and raising funds for it. Women of Bengal, Maharashtra, Punjab and the central provinces were more active. Sushila Devi of Sialkot was spreading new awareness by delivering lectures at various places. Hardevi, wife of a barrister of Lahore Mr. Roshan Lal was editing Hindi magazine Bharat Bhagini Pooran Devi of Hisar, a leading member of Arya Samaj, was visiting every district to spread the message of Swadeshi Agyawati and Ved Kumari of Delhi were delivering lectures to men folk more than to women. Sarla Devi of Bengal visited Punjab and served as a bridge between the two provinces. Among the freedom fighters of the Central Provinces, the most active women were Satyabhama Tilak, Yamunabai Savarkar, Avantika Bai Gokhale, Lakhmibai Khare, Janakibai Gore, Lakshmibai Datar, Lakshmibai Rahalkar, Godabai Khare etc. They set up a women's wing of Abhinav Bharat and named it Atma Night Yuvati Sabha whose members secretly assisted the revolutionaries through this institution¹². The women of Maharashtra organized Hindu Sahbhajam Haldi Kumkum etc. to eradicate untouchability. Mrs. McDonald, wife of Ramsay McDonald, who visited India during those days, wrote : A storm like movement is running through the women. The year 1917 was considered a milestone in the history of women's progress in India. Mrs. Annie Besant became the first woman President of the Congress. Under Annie Besant's Presidentship a resolution was passed demanding equal voting rights for women. A women's deputation led by Smt. Sarojini Naidu met Mr. Montague, Secretary of State for India and Viceroy Lord Chelmsford. Although in the name of the social incapability of women, the British Government did not give voting right to women in the Parliament under the Mount – Ford Reforms Scheme, but the Provincial Legislature Council was given the right to think over the matter of it so desired. Women Indian Association, Mahila Sewa Sabha, Women's Home Rule League and Indian Women's University joined together to register a strong protest against it and intensified their activities. Consequently the British Government was compelled to pass on the issue to the State Legislative Councils. The entire history of the freedom movement, as we know underwent a change with the advent of Mahatma Gandhi on the political scene in 1917. With his experience of South Africa behind him, Gandhi was conscious of the female potentialities as passive resisters. As he experimented with his weapon of Satyagraha in India he felt that women could take part in it together with men. Women were drawn to Gandhi by his magnetic personality, his distinctive naturalness and transparent sincerity.¹³

During the days of the Champaran Satyagraha in India in 1917, women had lent a helping hand to him by organizing literacy classes and doing other constructive work. Also in the Ahmadabad labour movement of Feb 1918, Anusuyaben Sarabhai fought a brave battle on behalf of the workers even against her own brother. Mahatma Gandhi was deeply influenced by Ghokhale's views. Like him, he was a moderate, as such he favoured social reforms and cooperation with the Government for this purpose. In the issue of young India (31st Dec. 1919) he wrote ““The Reform Law and the declaration accompanying it indicate the British Government's intention to do justice to the Indians. Indians should, therefore, shed all doubts. It is not our duty to criticize the proposed reforms, we must make efforts for their success. “Gandhi, thus, co-operated with the British Government from the very beginning. But the issues of the Rowlatt Act, Jallianwala Bagh massacre and Khilafat compelled him to follow the policy of non-co-

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operation. Defense of India law was to lapse six months after the end of war. Therefore, the government tried to bring in the oppressive Rowlatt Act to acquire preventive and punitive powers. Gandhi declared a country wide strike on 6th April 1919. The Hindu – Muslim unity made the strike a great success, A massive public meeting was organised at Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar, on 13 April 1919. When people had assembled there, General Dyer reached Jallianwala Bagh with 100 Indian and 50 English Soldiers. Without warning the people, General Dyer fired 1650 rounds. According to the government reports, 500 persons were killed and one to two thousand persons got injured¹⁴.

At General Dyer's Cruel orders, the injured were left there in pain for the night without any water or medical aid. Women were caught and molested. The wailing women had to undergo this humiliation when they came there to look for their dear ones. Some of the women, who managed to enter or were already inside, did commendable work. Most prominent of them were Mata Attar Kaur and Rattan Devi. Wailing for their dead husbands, they ran to and for throughout the night driving away dogs gnawing at the dead bodies. They looked after the injured and consoled and encouraged them till morning. A wave of resentment ran throughout the country against this massacre. Women's organizations till now working through national organizations, for women's education, social reform and the social, economic and political rights of women had now started preparing themselves for the coming national Boycott movement. In July 1919, Sarojini Naidu went to England as a representative of the Home Rule League. At Kingsley Hall in London, she delivered a fearless speech based on facts about Jallianwala Bagh which opened the eyes of the whole world and Naidu's oratory was universally acknowledged. After the First World War, Indians expected something from the British, but they met with disappointment. And during this period of excitement and frustration, the Jallianwala Bagh incident took place. The incident lent great strength to the freedom struggle which brought the Indian struggle closer to freedom. It was an unprecedented incident¹⁵. Due to the British policy against Khilafat in Turkey, Indian Muslims had turned against the English. Therefore, in 1920, Hindus and Muslims joined hands to fight against Britain on the Punjab and Khilafat issues. On 4th September 1920 at a Special Session of the Congress at Calcutta, it was decided that a nonviolent Non-Co operation movement be launched. The national level programme of this movement was to boycott foreign institutions, government institutes and foreign goods and to adapt Swadeshi goods and organizations. The resolution got approval in the annual session at Nagpur in the Central province in Dec. 1920. Gandhi issued an appeal saying that non-violent Non-co-operation Movement for Swarajya could not succeed without the participation of women. He called upon women to join the Indian National Congress and to participate in this movement for Swarajya. He wrote in 1921, "I have great expectations from women. I want that they should make an equal contribution for the attainment of Swarajya. Their job would become much easier if women did so willingly. At Gandhi's call, women joined the congress and played an important role in taking it forward and making it successful.¹⁶ In the non-cooperation movement, women in the several parts of the country joined the processions and propagated use of khadi and charkha. Some of them deserted government schools and colleges. Bengal had come to occupy an important place in the freedom movement. Bengal had come to occupy an important place in the freedom movement. Under the leadership of Basanti Devi (wife of Chitraranjan Das), her sister Urmila Devi and the organizer of Nari Karmo Mandir Suniti Devi and several other women for the first time courted arrests by selling Khadi and indulging in other illegal activities. They went from home to home persuading people to purchase and use Khadi. They appealed to the people to observe a complete strike on the day of prince of Wales' arrival in Calcutta. The government arrested them for showing disrespect to a VIP and for selling Khadi. It surprised even Gandhi and he remarked that along with men, women also made a great contribution in the attainment of Swarajya. In the Central Provinces in Gujrat, Kasturba Gandhi led the movement. She toured various places and inspired the people to follow Gandhi's advice for the attainment of freedom. In the Nagpur area of the Central provinces¹⁷, Anusuya Bai Kale was in the forefront both in Congress work and in spreading awareness

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among women. In the Jabalpur area, well known poetess Subhadra Kumari Chauhan was busy in organizing volunteers raising funds and at the same time writing inspiring poems. In the Central provinces and Gujrat, Dandi Behan, Dahi Behan, Bhakti Bai, Mithu Ben, Maniben, Shiva Bai Patil, Nandu Ben, Narmoda Ben Bhatt etc. were organizing Satyagraha under Kasturba's leadership. Sarala Devi Tarabhai was busy in organizing volunteers. Her daughter Mridula Tarabhai also lent a helping hand. Women helped Gandhi in raising Tilak Swaraj Fund. They helped with cash and ornaments. Annapurna Devi was the first women in Andhra Pradesh to set an example of sacrifice by donating all her ornaments. Among the Muslim women, there was Abida Banu Begum who was known as Bai Amman was the mother of Ali brothers. She went from place to place in the Central Provinces to popularize Khadi and to promote Hindu Muslim unity. Women members of the Nehru family were also active. Despite weak health, Kamala Nehru took part in the movement. In Delhi, the movement was going strong under the leadership of Ved Kumari, daughter of Swami Shradhanand and in Punjab under Lala Lajpat Rai's wife Radha Devi. In Orissa, Rama Devi Chaudhuri and Savitri Devi of Nepal were going from place to place to create public opinion in favour of the non-cooperation movements¹⁸. In Southern India, women like Lilabai Sangram, Muttu Lakshmi Reddy who had been till then active in the social field alone, then jumped into the freedom struggle through the boycott movement. In Bombay, women organized several public meetings to protest against Prince of Wales' arrival and the civil reception to be given to him. Kasturba Gandhi presided over them and visited many states to make the movement successful.¹⁹

On 8 Nov., 1927 British Govt. appointed a Commission of British only, called Simon Commission. The Congress passed a resolution that it should be opposed everywhere. Women too did not lag behind. Hansa Mehta played leading role among the demonstrators. Annie Besant played an important role in opposing Simon Commission. Under her leadership a public meeting was organized at Malabar in which a large number of women participated. They held that the appointment of the Simon Commission was a negation of India's right to self determination. In Punjab, Radha Devi, Pravati Devi, Lado Rani Zutshi, Atma Devi, Kartar Kaur, Rajkumari, Amrit Kaur etc. participated in the boycott of the Simon Commission. In Uttarpradesh, Swarup Rani Nehru, Begum Abdul Qadir, Suniti Devi and in the Central Provinces Anusuya Bai were in the forefront. In 1928, Amina Ghulam Rasul Qureshi, Kusum Ben, Ganga Ben, Danda Ben, Shivabhai Patel, Mani Ben Vallabhbbhai Patel, Madhumati etc. cooperated in the no-tax movement in Gujrat and the Central Provinces. The movement succeeded only because of the efforts of women. Women of all the provinces and Presidencies were fully active during the Freedom struggle. Due to lack of education, initially the movement was not so strong but gradually women got enlightened about the movement and at Gandhiji's call, not only the urban but women from rural areas also came forward played a very significant role in it. They were not second to none in the respect of making contribution and taking interests in the on going freedom struggle of the country.²⁰

III. RESULTS

India needs to dearly hold sacred its independence. For generations the cloak of the British Rule that had grappled, sometimes with force, sometimes with injustice the very essence of freedom that is the basic right of every individual citizen, was thrown over after many attempts. And hence the Independence of this nation was won in ways and by its people in unprecedented ways. Men of honor had a significant role to play in the freedom struggle. However, surprisingly women too led from the front and emerged as game changers in the quest for independence²¹.

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Before 1857



Women leaders made a significant mark of their valor and will as early as in the 18 century and set the stage for emphasizing that women were in no way willing to be relegated to the backdrop of the freedom struggle. Maharani Velu Nachiyar (1730 – 1796) bravely fought with the British army decades before the 1857 Revolt. She probably remains the only queen to have defeated the British army successfully. Gauri Parvati Bai who was queen of Travancore carried out reforms and emphasized on the need for education of girls thus in many ways helping women elevate from social and educational stigma²².

1857 Revolt



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However, the 1857 Revolt saw many stalwart women participants in the freedom struggle that have gone down as legends in the history of Indian Independence. Rani Lakshmi Bai dressed up as man and fought alongside her battalion bravely against the British army. Begum Hazrat Mahal refused to be bogged down by the Doctrine of Lapse and reclaimed Awadh from the British as well as reinstated her young son as king. However after the fall of Lucknow she had to flee to Nepal. Rani Avantibai Lodhi of Ramgarh, Rani Tace Bai, Rani Jindan Kaur, Jhalkaribai and Uda Devi are other historical women who fought with the British army during the revolt. Besides their strength and courage at battles with the British armies, notable Indian women also paved way for social change. Savitri Bai Phule, the first female teacher in a first women school also opened a school for the untouchables and worked tirelessly for women rights. Helping her was Tarabai Shinde known for her published work *Stri Purush Tulana* considered as one of the first modern Indian feminist perspectives.¹⁰

Early 19th century

The early 19th century saw the freedom struggle take full swing and women from across all castes and class took the baton of being equally responsible and dedicated to the national cause. Where men of stature, such as, Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose and Chandrasekhar Azad emerged as leaders in their own right, women stalwarts too matched them step by step. In fact, undoubtedly women freedom fighters have made significant contributions to the independence movement and in many ways the coordinated synchronization between the two has been an important landmark in the gaining of Indian independence.¹²

Sarojini Naidu



Sarojini Naidu, also known as the Nightingale of India, was a notable poet and writer. She travelled throughout India from 1915 to 1918, giving lectures on social welfare, women's empowerment and nationalism. She has also made women of India more aware and brought them to work and in the fight for the country from the kitchen. She also

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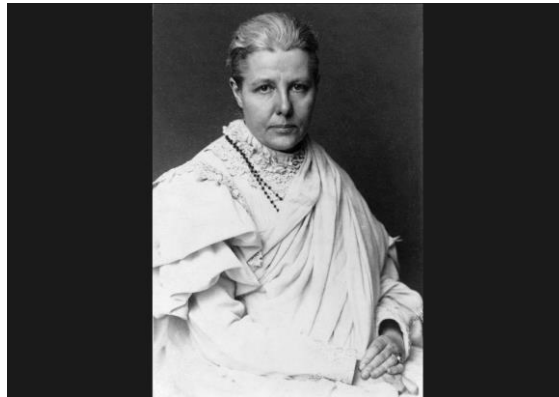
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contributed and established the foundation, in 1917, of the Women India Association (WIA). She was president and an excellent leader in the Civil Disobedience Movement and Salt Satyagraha movement and leader at the front.¹⁴

Annie Besant



Annie Besant was a notable British theosophist and reformer, and a supporter of Indian Independence. She was interested in Theosophy, a religious movement formed by Hindu concepts of karma and reincarnation in 1875. Besant was a member of the Theosophical Society and later the leader, she propagated their beliefs around the globe, particularly in India. Besant visited India initially in 1893 and afterwards settled there, participating in the nationalist struggle in India. In 1916, she founded the Indian Home Rule League, and became its president. She was also a leading member in the Indian National Congress. A social reformer, labor organizer and strike leader, was also actively involved in setting up schools and colleges to support educational activities.¹⁶

Madam Cama



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Madam Cama or Bhikaji Cama was an ardent freedom fighter who immensely contributed to the early years of the Indian battle for freedom and campaigned for women's role in society. She has drawn attention to the Indian struggle as a passionate nationalist. Although she was exiled for 35 years, her quest for liberation did not leave a stone untouched. On August 22, 1907, Madam Bhikaji Cama became the first to hoist the Indian flag on foreign land in Stuttgart in Germany. She recalled the horrific effects of a famine which had smashed the Indian subcontinent in calling for human rights, equality and autonomy from Great Britain.

Kamala Nehru



Kamala Nehru joined the country's fight for freedom with the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1921. Once known as a quiet person, she emerged as a strong woman and broke all stereotypes in the Indian Independence struggle, uniting with her husband in the movement. She started a big protest, together with other women pioneers,¹⁸ against the shops in Allahabad selling alcohol and foreign fabric. When her husband Jawaharlal Nehru was imprisoned by British for delivering a speech deemed as 'seditious', she went in his place to deliver it. Although her husband was incarcerated months ago, Kamala Nehru maintained her fight for freedom and established a dispensary for injured warriors in Nehru's mansion—Swaraj Bhawan. Together with other women volunteers, Durgabai and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, she also organised no-tax campaigns.²⁰

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Vijay Lakshmi Pandit



Vijay Lakshmi Pandit, the first woman to become the president of the United Nations General Assembly had an illustrious career spanning over decades. She was among the few to revolutionise women's role in national construction as a campaigner, minister, ambassador and diplomat which was then typically regarded as a male pursuit. In the British era, she was one of the first women cabinet ministers to demand for the Indian constituent assembly to frame a Constitution. When the resolution endorsed by the congress was tabled by the United Provinces in 1937, she did not coat any words and declared the 1935 Indian Government Act "wholly unsatisfactory." In the years 1932-1933, 1940, and 1942-1943 in connection with civil disobedience campaigns, she was arrested and three times imprisoned by British people.¹³

Aruna Asaf Ali



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Aruna Asaf Ali played a pivotal role in the Quit India Movement unfurling the flag in Bombay to signify the start of the movement. She edited 'Inquilab' a monthly journal of the Indian National Congress and was awarded the highest civilian award the Bharat Ratna. During the Salt Satyagraha, Aruna Asaf Ali participated in a number of nonviolent riots. For this, the colonial authorities quickly arrested her. In 1931, the Gandhi-Irwin pact guaranteed that all individuals who were detained during the Salt Satyagraha would be released. However, it did not include Aruna Asaf Ali. Only a vigorous protest for her release by the other women freedom activists and Mahatma Gandhi helped her case. She was not involved in politics when she was released, but became an active member of the underground movement by the end of 1942.²¹

Kalpana Dutta



Kalpana Dutta joined the Republican Indian Army of Surya Sen in 1931 which had been engaged a year earlier in the Chittagong attack. For the revolutionaries, she used to build bombs and work as a courier agent. She had the duty of attacking a European club in Chittagong the same year, accompanied by Pritilata Waddadar. However, one week before the raid Kalpana was detained during a reception in the region. She went underground following her release on bail. In 1933, however, Kalpana was arrested and imprisoned for life. Mahatma Gandhi visited her in prison in the midst of public protests. Kalpana was released from prison six years later. Kalpana was dedicated to relief efforts during the Bengal famine and Bengal division in 1943 upon her release from prison. In 1940 she joined the Indian Communist Party and three years later married PC Joshi, a leading party leader. At 81 in Kolkata she died. The principles of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose had a great influence on her.¹⁵

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Kasturba Gandhi



Kasturba Gandhi worked with Mahatma Gandhi all through her life and was the leader of the Women's Satyagraha. She always assisted her husband in almost all his movements. A key difficulty for Kasturba was her worsening health. In Borsad, Gujarat, she nevertheless took part in a Satyagraha (non-violent resistance) campaign. Over the years, Kasturba Gandhi has become part of the Indian Freedom movement and has been involved in campaigns and demonstrations of civil disobedience. Women from all over India were looking for inspiration at Kasturba and regularly asked her to organise marches and protests. Together with Gandhi and other freedom fighters, in 1942 Kasturba was arrested again for participating in the Quit India movement. The inspirational champion breathed her last in Aga Khan Palace in Pune where she had been imprisoned after a life of struggle and protest.¹⁷

Usha Mehta



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Usha Mehta who as a child participated in the ‘Simon Go Back’ movement, realized that her true calling was her nationalist spirit and broadcasting for the Congress Radio during the Quit India Movement. Usha Mehta said to her father that education had to wait and left her house to help the movement for freedom. No knowledge of her whereabouts was available for a fortnight. The British seemed to have been able to silence the Quit India campaign, as over 100,000 protesters were detained, or hidden, with important leaders. Now a secret radio station had been revived by Usha. In addition to her partners (the owners of Chicago Radio, the person supplying equipment and supplying technicians), Vithalbhai Jhaveri, Chandrakant Jhaveri, Babubhai Thakkar, and Nanka Motwani, Gandhi’s and the other major leaders messages were broadcasted here. Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia, Achyutrao Patwardhan and Purushottam Trikamdas gave riveting talks, while National Songs were also heard at the station. When the British movement was hit and the vernacular newspapers were once again restricted, the sound waves of this underground radio connected the people, gave them hope and strength and encouraged them to continue the protests. The list can go on, as one woman after the other made her individual as well as a collective mark on the independence movement. Sucheta Kriplani founder of the All India Mahila Congress, Raj Kumari Gupta who supplied the revolvers in the Kakori operation, Abadi Bano Begum who motivated crowds in Lucknow from behind her burqa, Lakshmi Sehgal who headed the Rani Jhansi regiment under Subhash Chandra Bose, Kamaladevi who actively participated in the Non-Corporation Movement, Salt Satyagraha as well as was an eminent theatre personality and promoted native handicrafts and arts, Kanaklata Barua who was shot while leading a procession bearing the Indian National Flag, Parbati Giri who worked dedicatedly for the welfare of orphans, Matangini Hazra who was shot thrice but continued to march with the National Congress Flag chanting Vande Mataram and many more were women of grit, dedication and honor.²¹

IV. CONCLUSIONS

However, as bright stars shone in the freedom struggle, there were also many nameless women who have in their own way contributed to the movement. The Swadeshi movement perhaps involved the most women who picketed foreign products. When men were arrested the women stepped up and fulfilled and finished their unfinished work. The numerous women who laid down their life at the Jallianwala Bagh, the umpteen women who silently wiped a tear in pride when the men of their family sacrificed their lives- Women as messengers, as supporters, as wives and mothers and as leaders were an integral part of the independence movement. Our nation needs to remember that our freedom struggle would not quite be the same without women. Alas, it is not just memory and names that history teaches us. It is the path forward, the respect earned and the sheer belief that women are as much capable of standing up for themselves, of demanding freedom and willing to pay any price for it.²²

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