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**A STUDY ON THE CONTRIBUTION AND
STRUGGLE OF WOMEN IN THE FREEDOM OF
INDIA**

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A Study on the Contribution and Struggle of Women in the Freedom of India

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Abstract – This article deals with the Indian Freedom Struggle and the contribution of Indian women in this war of Independence. The article tells us the participation of women of Punjab in the nationalist movement from 1901-10, 1911-20, 1921-30, 1931-40 and 1941-47. In 1901 10, political upheavals in the province of Bengal affected Punjabi women and few women showed their sympathy with the Bengali individuals. The decade 1911-20 was the most important decade as the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy and therefore the martial law of 1919 acted as a catalyst for making ladies consciousness for fighting for the freedom of India. Then these women victims and alternative sympathetic women directly jumped into the Non-Cooperation movement of 1920. The decade 1921-30, witnessed the direct involvement of girls of Punjab in the freedom struggle and these women came into the contact of M. K. Gandhi. The decade 1931-40 was the period of direct action and women of Punjab region did not sit back at their homes and got active in disobeying the government by following the non-violent ways of Gandhi from 1930-34. The last seven years from 1941 to 47 were those when the women of Punjab province came forward and fought aboard men and suffered the same consequences as the men suffered. These activist ladies were so trapped in this struggle, that they unheeded gender issues or put them aside until independence had been achieved and in the finish in 1947 after the accomplishment of independence, the women of Punjab were given credit to their deeds.

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INTRODUCTION

The entire history of the freedom movement is replete with the saga of bravery, sacrifice and political sagacity of hundreds and thousands of women of our country. At a very critical time for our mother land when the British East India Company was fast expanding its empire in India, when Tipu Sultan had been eliminated, the proud Marathas had been humbled, Chennamma the widowed queen of Raja Malla Sarja frustrated the machinations of British to annex her kingdom Kittore, a tiny principality in the present Belgaum District of Karnataka.

She fought against the mighty British army and scored initial success. No other woman warrior in the history of India has made such a powerful impact on the minds of the Indian people as the Rani of Jhansi, Lakshmi Bai. She was the second wife of the ruler of Jhansi Raja Gangadhar Rao who protested against the 'Doctrine of Lapse'. She refused to surrender Jhansi and fought bravely attired as a male during the Revolt of 1857 and died in the battle field fighting the British forces. Her courage inspired many Indians to rise against the alien rule.

Another woman whom we remember in this context was Hazrat Mahal Begum. She was the wife of the deposed ruler of Lucknow who actively took part in the

revolt of 1857 against the Doctrine of Lapse under which Dalhousie wanted her to surrender Lucknow. She gave stiff resistance. But after the fall of Lucknow she escaped to Kathmandu.

Kasturba, the wife of Mahatma Gandhi, was one of the foremost supporters of the Gandhi's programmes. One of the first women to be imprisoned in Transvaal, she took part in the Quit India Movement (1942) and was arrested. She died while imprisoned in Poona.

Many women of Nehru family joined the freedom movement. The mother of Jawaharlal Nehru, Swarup Rani Nehru cheerfully gave her husband and children to the country's cause and she herself, old and frail, entered the fray at its thickest. Kamala Nehru, married to Jawaharlal Nehru in 1916, participated in various movements, led the Civil Disobedience Movement.

Sarojini Naidu holds pride of place among women freedom fighters of India. She was responsible for awakening the women of India. She was first woman President of the Indian National Congress in 1925 at the Kanpur Session.

Aruna Asaf Ali played a leading role during the Quit Indian Movement. Her moment of reckoning came in 1942 during the Quit India Movement and she rose to

occasion. She unfurled the National Flag at the Gowalia Tank maidan in Bombay to signify the commencement of the Quit India Movement and became a legend for thousands of youth that rose to emulate her. She became a full time activist in the Quit India Movement and went underground to evade arrest.

She edited 'Inquilab' a monthly journal of the Indian National Congress. She was awarded India's highest civilian award, the Bharat Ratna. Kalpana Dutta was another prominent woman revolutionary leader who was influenced by the revolutionary idea of Surya Sen. She joined the Chittagong armoury raids.

Later she joined the Communist Party of India. Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur was a close follower of Gandhiji from 1919 onwards. A Congress member, she actively participated in the 1930 Salt Satyagraha and the Quit India Movement. She became the first Health Minister in Post-Independent India. She was the founder – President of Indian Council of Child Welfare and the founder-member of All India Women's Conference.

Beside the hundreds and thousands of Indian women who dedicated their lives for India's freedom, there were many foreign women who saw in India a hope for the redemption of the world. A famous disciple of Swami Vivekananda, Sister Nivedita was an Irish lady named Miss Margaret Nobel who arrived in India in January, 1898 in search of truth. She propagated for the cause of India throughout America and Europe. She attended the Benares Congress Session in 1905 and supported the Swadeshi Movement.

On the auspicious occasion of the Independence Day of our country it will be most befitting on our part to pay our respectable homage to all those brave daughters of Mother India and to those noble and courageous foreign women who fought and contributed enormously to the success of our freedom struggle and all other nation building activities.

WOMEN AND INDIA'S INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT

The entire history of the freedom movement is replete with the saga of bravery, sacrifice and political sagacity of great men and women of the country. This struggle which gained momentum in the early 20th century, threw up stalwarts like Mahatma Gandhi, Lala Lajpat Rai, Motilal Nehru, Abul Kalam Azad, C. Rajagopalachari, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Jawaharlal Nehru and Subash Chander Bose. Their number and stature often gives us an erroneous impression that it was only a man's movement. But it is not so. Many prominent women played a leading role in the freedom movement.

The important place assigned to women in India dates back to the time of the Vedas and Smritis. Manu declared that where women were adored, Gods frequented that place, During the Vedic age the

position of women in society was very high and they were regarded as equal partners with men in all respects. Who had not heard of Maitri, Gargi, Sati Annusuya and Sita?

In keeping with this tradition, burden of tears and toils of the long years of struggle for India's freedom was borne by the wives, mothers, and daughters, silently and cheerfully. The programme of self-imposed poverty and periodical jail going was possible only because of the willing co-operation of the worker's family. In the various resistance movements in the villages, the illiterate women played this passive but contributory part as comrades of their menfolk.

WOMEN IN THE NATIONALIST MOVEMENT

"Women is the companion of man gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the minutest details of the activities of man, and she has the same right of freedom and liberty as he..... By sheer force of a vicious custom, even the most ignorant and worthless men have been enjoying a superiority over women which they do not deserve and ought not to have."

"Since resistance in Satyagraha is offered through self-suffering. It is a weapon pre-eminently open to women..... She can become the leader in Satyagraha which does not require the learning that books give but does not require the stout heart that comes from suffering and faith."

The above mentioned extracts are taken from the issues of 'Young India' of Mahatma Gandhi of July 26, 1918 and January 14, 1930 respectively. In these extracts Gandhi discussed the importance of women in social revolution, reconstruction and in the nationalist struggle. He wanted the women to join the struggle for freedom at the appropriate time.

Similarly, Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya⁴ also tried to rouse the entire womanhood of the country to come forward to take their place in the society and in the body politic as an equal partner of man. She said, "The politics of the nation are the supreme need of humanity in its attempt to scale the ladder of freedom. No one sex can build up a nation. Woman has her own unique contribution to make for the purpose of enriching life so that it may fulfill its own divine mission to perfection, so in the struggle for freedom they are destined to play their legitimate part and bear their share of the responsibility in breaking the chains that weigh heavily on people."

'Participation of Women in the public life' made them aware about the other provinces of India; and events happening in these provinces. And most important, print media particularly vernacular press played a significant role. The appeals of local and national leaders in these issues motivated women to participate in the Nationalist struggle.

CONCLUSION

After a century of revolutions, struggle, blood shedding, Sathyagrahas and sacrifices, India finally achieved independence on August 15, 1947. The Hindus, the Muslims, the Sikhs, the Christian and all the other brave sons and daughters of India fought shoulder to shoulder to throw out the British.

Perhaps for the first and the only time in world history, the power of a mighty global empire 'on which the sun never set', had been challenged and overcome by the moral might of a people armed only with peace, ideals and courage.

Women shouldered critical responsibilities in India's struggle for freedom. They held public meetings, organized picketing of shops selling foreign alcohol and articles, sold Khadi and actively participated in National Movements. They bravely faced the baton of the police and went behind the iron bars. Hundreds and thousands of Indian women dedicated their lives for obtaining freedom of their motherland and only very few could include in this essay due to space restriction.

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