

WOMEN IN INDIAN FREEDOM STRUGGLE

1. **Dr. B. R. Prasad Reddy**, M.A. M.Phil., Ph.D.

Associate Professor,
Department of History ,
Silver Jubilee Government College (Autonomous),
Kurnool.

Andhra Pradesh. India.

2. **Dr. Malreddy Naganna**,

Assistant Professor,
Department of History,
Silver Jubilee Government College (Autonomous),
Kurnool.

Andhra Pradesh. India.

“I am not ready to die because it requires infinitely higher courage to live” - Sarojini Naidu

Abstract

The history of the struggle of Independence of India would be incomplete without describing the contribution of women. What the women of India have done is priceless. The history of the Indian freedom struggle is full of stories of women's sacrifice, altruism and valor. Very few of us know that there were hundreds of women who fought side by side with their male counterparts. They fought with true spirit and indomitable courage. Indian women broke away from various restrictions and left their traditional domestic roles and responsibilities. Therefore, the participation of women in the struggle for freedom and national awakening is incredible and commendable. However, it is not easy for women to fight as warriors in a male-dominated society. Even if women tried to change the perception of people so conservative who thought women are just there to do housework. Furthermore, women not only sacrifice their lives but also struggle with these issues. Rani Laxmi Bai was one of those women who fought against the British. This paper is an attempt to highlight this legacy of women in history.

Keywords: Indian, Women, Freedom movement, Role, Society

Introduction

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. Women'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 guerrilla warfare. Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi whose heroism and superb leadership laid on outstanding example of real patriotism. Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, Vijay Lakshmi Pundit, Annie Besant etc., in the 20th Century is 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.

Women Freedom fighters of India

History has witnessed many women with exceptional bravery and intelligence who walked shoulder to shoulder with men of their times. Let us remember women of the freedom era who fought bravely for their country and contributed towards the achievement of independence of the country India. They are still a source of inspiration to not only women but to all. Though there are many but here is a list of only 12 of them who were exceptionally great and their absence would have definitely made this task more difficult than it was.

1. BHIMA BAI HOLKAR

Women's participation in the freedom struggle began as early as 1817 when Bhima Bai Holkar fought against the British Colonel Malcolm and defeated him in guerrilla warfare. At a very critical time for our motherland when the British East India Company was fast expanding its empire in India. When Tipu Sultan had been eliminated (1799), the proud Marathas had been humbled (1815), Chenamma 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.

2. RANI LAKSHMI BAI OF JHANSI (19th November, 1828 – 17th June, 1858)

Rani of Jhansi Rani Lakshmi Bai whose heroism and superb leadership laid an outstanding example for all future generations of women freedom fighters. Married to Gangadhar Rao head of the state of Jhansi. She was not allowed to adopt a successor after his death by the British, and Jhansi was annexed. With the outbreak of the Revolt she became determined to fight back. She used to go into the battlefield dressed as a man. Holding the reins of their horse in her mouth she used the sword with both hands. Under her leadership the Rani's troops showed undaunted courage and returned shot for shot. Considered by the British as the best and bravest military leader of rebels this sparkling essence of courage died a hero's death in the battlefield. The first name that comes to the mind is that of famous Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi. Dressed in the men's clothes, she led her soldiers to war against the British. Even her enemies admired her courage and daring. She fought valiantly and although beaten she refused to surrender and fell as a warrior should, fighting the enemy to the last. Her remarkable courage inspired many men and women, fighting the enemy to the last. Her remarkable courage inspired many men and women in India to rise against the foreign rule.

3. BEGUM HAZRAT MAHAL (1820—1879)

Begum Hazrat Mahal was a great Indian freedom-fighter who played a major role during India's First War of Independence. She was also known as Begum of Awadh and the wife of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, ruler of Lucknow. She led a band of her supporters against the British, and was even able to seize the control of Lucknow. She worked in close association with other leaders of the India's First War of Independence, including Nana Sahib. Begum was not only a strategist but also fought on the battlefield. When the forces under the command of the British re-captured Lucknow and most of the part of Awadh, she was forced to retreat. When her forces lost ground, she fled Awadh and organized soldiers again in other places. She turned down all offers of amnesty and allowances by the British rulers. Finally, she took refuge in an asylum in

Nepal, where she died in the year 1879. To acknowledge her endless efforts in fighting for the freedom of country, the Government of India issued a stamp on 10th May 1984.

4. ANNIE BESANT (1st October, 1847 – 20th September, 1933)

Annie Besant an Irish lady the leader of the Theosophical Society joined the Indian National Congress and gave it a new direction. She was the first woman president of the Congress and gave a powerful lead to women's movement in India. She soon became a leading labour organizer, strike leader and reformer. She also became involved in Indian Nationalism and in 1916 established the Indian Home Rule League of which she became President. She started a newspaper, "New India", criticized British rule and was jailed for sedition. She came to be associated with rationalistic congress group of workers who did not appreciate Gandhi's views.

She got involved in political and educational activities and set up a number of Schools and Colleges, the most important of which was Central Hindu College High School at Banaras which she started in 1913.

5. MADAM BHIKAIJI CAMA (24th September, 1861 - 13th August, 1936)

Madam Cama fought for the freedom of the country till the last in her own way, and helped many revolutionaries with money and materials. She unfurled the first National Flag at the International Socialist Conference in Stuttgart (Germany) in 1907. She declared "This flag is of Indian Independence! Behold, it is born! It has been made sacred by the blood of young Indians who sacrificed their lives. I call upon you, gentlemen to rise and salute this flag of Indian Independence. In the name of this flag, I appeal to lovers of freedom all over the world to support this flag." A thousand representatives from several countries were attended. She traveled lot of places including America and propagates Americans about Indians struggling for Independence.

6. KASTURBA GANDHI (11th April, 1869 – 22nd February, 1944)

Kasturba Gandhi, Mahatma Gandhi's wife worked with him for many years. She was a leader of Women's Satyagraha for which she was imprisoned. She helped her husband in the cause of Indigo workers in Champaran, Bihar and the No Tax Campaign in Kaira, Gujarat. She was arrested twice for picketing liquor and foreign cloth shops, and in 1939 for participating in the Rajkot Satyagraha.

She many times took her husband's place when he was under arrest. Kasturba suffered from chronic bronchitis. Stress from the Quit India Movement's arrests and ashram life caused her to fall ill. After contracting pneumonia, she died from a severe heart attack on 22nd February, 1944. She died in Mahatma Gandhi's arms while both were then in prison.

7. SAROJINI NAIDU (13th February, 1879 – 2nd March, 1949)

Sarojini Naidu had known as "Cuckoo of India". She was a distinguished poet; renowned freedom fighter. Her father was principal in Nizam College. At that time Nizam was not in favour of Women's education, hence Sarojini was sent to Madras for schooling. She topped the matriculation examination at the age of twelve. She met English authors Arthur Simon and Edmond Gause. It was Gause who convinced Sarojini to stick to Indian themes-India's great mountains, rivers, temples, social milieu, to express her poetry.

Sarojini Naidu was elected as a president of Indian National Congress. Dramatic meeting with another respected leader of time, Gokhle, in 1906 was to change her life forever. His response to her fiery speech

brought into her life the impact of a visionary who saw in her oratory and brilliance a leader of the future. The period from 1917 to 1919 was the most dynamic phase of Sarojini's career. During this time, she campaigned for the Montagu Chelmsford Reforms, the Khilafat issue, the draconian Rowlett Act and the Satyagraha. When Gandhi launched the Civil Disobedience Movement, She proved a faithful lieutenant. With great courage she quelled the rotors, sold proscribed literature, and addressed frenzied meetings on the carnage at Jallianwala Bag in Amritsar. In 1930 when Mahatma Gandhi chose her to lead the salt Satyagraha the stories of her courage became legion. After Gandhi's arrest she had prepared 2,000 volunteers under the scorching sun to raid the Dahrsana Salt Works, while the police faced them half a mile up the road with rifle, lathis(canes) and steel tipped clubs. The Volunteers wildly cheered when she shook off the arm of the British police officer who came to arrest her and marched proudly to the barbed wire in full force and she came under the influence of Gopalkrishna Gokhale and Gandhi. Gokhale advised her to spare all her energy and talents for the nation's cause. She gave up writing poetry and fully devoted herself to emancipation of women, education, Hindu-Muslim unity etc. She became a follower of Gandhi and accompanied him to England. Whenever in England, she openly criticized British rule in India which caught the attention of scholars and intellectuals.

8. KAMALA NEHRU (1899 – 1936)

Kamala Nehru, Jawaharlal Nehru's wife gave full support to her husband in his desire to work actively for the freedom struggle. In the Nehru home town of Allahabad, she organized processions, addressed meetings and led picketing of liquor and foreign cloth shops. She played a prominent part in organizing the No Tax Campaign in United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh).

In the Non Cooperation movement of 1921, she organized groups of women in Allahabad and propagated use of Khadi cloths. When her husband was arrested, to prevent him delivering a "Seditious" public speech, she went in his place to read it out. She was twice arrested by British authorities. Kamala died from tuberculosis in Switzerland while Jawaharlal Nehru was in prison. She spent some time at Gandhi's ashram with Kasturba Gandhi.

9. VIJAYA LAKSHMI PUNDIT (18th August, 1900 – 1st December, 1990)

She is the daughter of Motilal Nehru, was the president of Congress and brother Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister. She was inspired by Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi and impressed by Sarojini Naidu. She entered the Non Co-operation Movement to fight against the British rule. Vijaya Lakshmi Pundit represented India in many of the conferences abroad. She attended numerous public lectures and challenged the British dominated delegate's rights to represent India therein. She was a great fighter and took parts in many of the freedom movement. She was arrested in 1932 and sentenced to one year's rigorous imprisonment. She was arrested in 1940 and yet again during the Quit India Movement in 1942. She was the first women to become cabinet minister, she was designated the post of minister of local self-government and public health. She was also the first woman president of United Nations General Assembly. She was also the first woman ambassador in the world who attained the position in three countries – Moscow, Washington and London.

10. SUCHETA KRIPALANI (25th June, 1908 – 1st December, 1974)

She was a freedom fighter and worked closely with Mahatma Gandhi during Partition riots in India. She also played major role in politics by joining Indian National Congress. During the formation of constitution of India she was elected as a member of the drafting committee of Constituent assembly. Another feather to her cap is attached when she sang “Vande Mataram” in the Constituent Assembly. She was also elected as the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh state after Independence.

11. ARUNA ASAF ALI (16th July, 1909 – 26th July, 1996)

Arun Asaf Ali, a radical nationalist played an outstanding role in the historic Quit India Movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi on August 9, 1942, and was a prominent leader of the underground movement. She published bulletins, went from place to place and even met Mahatma Gandhi avoiding arrest. She edited Inqulab a monthly journal of the India National Congress. She is a well known Indian independence activist. Being an activist she participated actively in public processions during Salt Satyagraha, and she also became an active member of Indian National Congress. Due to her activity she was imprisoned but prison walls did not stop her she continued with her protests and strikes inside the jail for indifferent treatment of prisoners which resulted in the improved condition of prisoners in Tihar Jail.

12. DURGA BAI DESHMUKH (15th July, 1909 - 9th May, 1981)

She was a follower of Mahatma Gandhi and thus; played active role in Gandhi Satyagraha movement and played role of Indian struggler, a lawyer, a social activist and a politician. She was a Lok Sabha member as well as member of Planning Commission of India. While being member of Planning Commission she launched a Central Social Welfare Board through which she improved condition of education, women, children, handicap and rehabilitation of needy persons.

13. USHA MEHTA (25th March, 1920 - 11th August, 2000)

Usha Mehta is remembered for broad casting the Congress Radio, and called her the Secret Congress Radio, an underground radio station, which was functioned for few months during the Quit India Movement of 1942. She is also known as child leader as in 1928, eight-year-old Usha participated in a protest march against the Simon Commission and shouted her first words of protest against the British Raj: “Simon Go Back.” As a child, she did not comprehend the significance of her actions except that she was participating in a movement to free her country under the leadership of Gandhi. She and many other children participated in morning protests against the British Raj and picketing in front of liquor shops. During the Quit India Movement, Usha quickly became a leader. She moved from New Delhi to Mumbai, where she hoisted the tricolor on 9th August, 1942 at Gawalia Tank Ground.

All these women freedom fighters with their contribution made the Indian freedom struggle successful, memorable and inspirational.

Conclusion

The story of women's participation in India's struggle for freedom is a story of making bold choices, finding themselves on the streets, inside the prison and in the legislature. After so many efforts, India gained independence on August 15, 1947. Thousands of Indian women dedicated their lives to achieving independence for their country. The non-violent movement that led to India's independence not only took women but also depended on the active participation of women for its success. Finally, we can say that in the last fifty years, the women's movement has matured and progressively deepened its ties with other movements such as trade unions, environmental movements and other progressive movements that fight against all forms of oppression, injustice and degradation. 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 lives for obtaining freedom of their motherland and only very few could include in this essay due to space restriction.

References

1. Aggarwal, R.C; Constitutional Development and National Movement of India, S.Chand Publishing limited, New Delhi, 1999.
2. Chopra, P.N; Women in India freedom struggle, Published by Ministry of education and social welfare, Govt. of India, New Delhi, 1975.
3. Desai, Neera; Women in modern India, Vora's loy, 1977.
4. Freedom Fighters of India 4th VolumeEdited by M.G. Agrawal,
5. Role of Women in India's freedom struggle.....by V Rajendra Raj
6. The Indian ladies Magazine, February, 1904.