

## **Women's participation in the Indian Freedom Struggle : A Historical Overview**

**AJEET KUMAR**

Noida International University,  
Greater Noida (U.P.) India

**Key Words :** Indian Nationalist Movement, Freedom Struggle, Women's Participation, Women of India, All India Women's Conference

### **INTRODUCTION**

The History of Indian Nationalist Movement would be incomplete without mentioning the contributions of women. The freedom struggle grew stronger; more women could be seen in the forefront. And they are contributed strong role of Indian National Movement.<sup>1</sup> According to Mahatma Gandhi, "The women of India have as much share in winning Swaraj as men. Probably in this peaceful struggle women can out distance man by many a mile. We know that she is any day superior to man in her religious devotion. Silent and dignified suffering is the badge of her sex. And now that the government have dragged the women into the line of fire, I hope that the women all over India will take up the challenges and organize themselves"<sup>2</sup>. It was in worlds such as these that Mahatma Gandhi appealed to the women of India to enter the struggle for India's freedom. "If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with women"<sup>3</sup>. If the women of India arose, he said, no one can stop the country's march to freedom. It was only with the advent of the Gandhi an era that women really played any significant role in nationalist politics. India's freedom movement truly became a mass movement when thousands of women respond to Gandhiji's appeal to women published in young India on April 10, 1930. In a speech on the International women's day in 1921, Lenin declared, "The masses cannot be drawn into political life unless women are brought to play their part in it"<sup>4</sup>.

In 1928, Subhash Chandra Bose, in his presidential address at the Maharashtra provincial conference expressed similar views. "It is impossible for one half of the nation to win liberty without the active sympathy and support of the other half"<sup>5</sup>. Gandhiji's admirers as well as critics are unanimous in giving full credit to him for the impressive entry into the freedom struggle of even

---

1. See, Radha Kumar, *op.cit.* p. 64

2. Young India, 15 December 1921 in LaxmiMisra, 1992, *Women's Issues: An Indian Prospective*, p.59.

3. *Ibid.*, 10 April 1930, p.61.

4. RenuChakrawarti, 1980, *Communists in Indian Women's movement*, p.3.

5. Netaji S.C. Bose: Collected Works, volume 5, 1985, p.249.

those women of orthodox and aristocratic families who had never before come out of their seclusion. It took by surprise not only the government, but even the Indian's themselves. He believed that non-violent resistance to British rules suited women more than men as that required moral courage and determination more than sheer physical strength.

This does not of course mean that women played no part before 1919. Though it is true that the number of women who took part in the armed struggle was much less than the number of women participating in the non-violent Satyagrah Campaigns. However, we cannot forget that armed resistance had a history of more than a century. Women belonging to the royal families of various princely states fought against the British on the battle fields. In 1824, Channamma Rani of Kittur, a small princely state in Karnataka refused to yield to the East India Company and chose to fight against the trained well equipped army of the company. She was defeated and was detained in the prison at Dharwar where she died on July 13, 1830<sup>6</sup>.

One of the famous leaders of the Revolt of 1857 was the young Rani Lakshmbai of Jhansi. The young Rani joined the rebels when the British refused to acknowledge her right to adopt an heir to the Jhansi Gaddi, annexed her state, and threatened to treat her as an instigator of the rebellion of the spays at Jhansi. The Rani vacillated for some time. But once she decided to throw in her lot with the rebels, she fought valiantly at the head of her troops. Tales of her bravery and courage and military skill have inspired her countrymen even since<sup>7</sup>.

In the revolt of 1857, Rani Avantibai of Ramgad, Begum Zeenat Mahal, wife of Bahadur shah the last Mughal emperor and Begam Hazrat Mahal of Audh followed the footsteps of Rani of Jhansi and showed the same qualities of courage, determination, fearlessness and bravery. Two battalions of women led by Begam Aliya and Azizzan defied the British troops. After their defeat, both the leaders were shat dead by the British soldiers.

It was not only that the women belonging to the elites in the Indian societies participated in freedom struggle or against Britishers, but some of the tribal women also played significant role in the right for freedom. Women belonging to tribes known as Manaki, Hos, Mundas and the Oraon of Singhbhum, a District in Bihar participated in a revolt against the foreign rulers. Women participated actively in the movement, both in avenging campaigns and in keeping lines of supply and information open. In many instances, women organized the defence of their villages and withstood pressure for a period of time before being forced to surrender.

In 1855 the Santhal Rebellion took place. The factors behind the tribal peasant's discontent leading to the rebellion were much the same as before. The Santhals had cleared lands but these were held by dikus or outsiders. The triumvirate of land lord, moneylender and merchant exploited the Santhals through the mechanism of rent and debt bondage. As a result Santhal discontent reached a boiling point<sup>8</sup>. But British East India Company suppressed the revolt under the banner of Santhal brothers Sndhu and Kanhu where all women, men and children participated with full zeal. Between October and November 1855 at least forty- five Santhal women were held in Birbhum jail<sup>9</sup>. In 1857, thousands of Bhills from the Khandesh district revolted under the leadership of Bhagoji Naikand Kajee Singh. About the Bhill women who were captured and imprisoned, the

---

6. ModeyB.Nawaz (ed), 2000, *Women in India's Freedom Struggle*, p.49.

7. Bipin Chandra, 1990, *Modern India*, p.114.

8. LeelaKasturi&VinaMazumdar (ed.), 1994, *Women and Indian Nationalism*, p.144.

9. Geraldine Forbes, 1997, *Indian Women and the Freedom Movement: A Historical Perspective*, p.26.

commissioner of police wrote to the home secretary to the Government of Bombay on June 1, 1858. The Bhill women are just as troubles omen and mischievous as the men. They obtain information and supply it for the males, cook their food and fight also.<sup>10</sup>

Women revolutionaries from different parts of India like- Uttar Pradesh, Bengal, Madras, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Bihar also helped the tribal elite women, foreign ladies in struggle for independence and took active part in various freedom movements, formed Mahila Samities, started their own women magazines<sup>11</sup>, boycotted the foreign goods and helped in enlightening various sections of women to come forward and fight for freedom struggle.

In brief, women's participation in the freedom struggle hastened the process of freedom and accelerated it onward. With so many Women taking part in freedom movement, it is not possible to focus on contribution of all women.

Women's movement in India was supported but men in the ninetieth century who were concerned with modernization women's roles. They focussed their attention on certain issues like sati, child marriage which was prevalent at that time. Numerous individuals' reform societies and religious organizations worked hard to spread education among women, to encourage widow remarriage, to improve the twinge condition of widows, to prevent marriage of young children, to bring women out of the purdah, to enforce monogamy and to enable middle class women to take up professions or public employment<sup>12</sup>.

The movement for the liberation of women received a great stimulus from the rise of the militant national movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, followed by another development i.e. the birth of a women's movement in the country. Up to the 20<sup>th</sup> enlightened men had worked for the upliftment of women. Now aware and self-confident women under took the task. They started several organizations. The most outstanding was the All India Women's Conference founded in 1927.<sup>13</sup>

Women's struggle for equality took a big step forward with the coming of independence. Articles 14 and 15 of the Indian Constitution (1950) guaranteed the complete equality of men and women. The Hindu Succession Act of 1956 made the daughter an equal co-heir with the son. The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 permitted dissolution of marriage on specific grounds. Monogamy was also made mandatory on man as well as Women. But the evil custom of dowry still continues even though the demanding of dowry has been banned. The constitution gives Women equal right to work and to get employment in state agencies. The Directive principles of the Constitution lay down the principles of equal pay for equal work for both men and women. Of course many visible and invisible obstacles still remain in putting the principles of equality of sexes into practice. A proper social climate has still to be created. But the social reform movements, the freedom struggle, Women's own movement, and the Constitution of free India have made a big contribution in this direction<sup>14</sup>. But on other hand it is ironic that women today are fighting a lone almost desperation battle, for greater representation in parliament even after sixty five years of independence.

\*\*\*\*\*

---

10. M.R. Palande (ed.), 1956, *History of Indian Administration 1600-1947*, p.26.

11. Like, *StreeDarpan*, 1909

12. Bipin Chandra, 1990, *Modern India*, p.184.

13. Joanna Liddle, Rama Josh, op.cit. p. 143.

14. Bipin Chandra, op. cit. p.184.