



LEADERSHIP AND SACRIFICE: WOMEN IN BENGAL'S INDEPENDENCE HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the leadership, sacrifice, and multifaceted participation of women from Bengal in India's struggle for independence against British colonial rule. Focusing on the period from the late 19th century through the 1940s, the study explores how women navigated social constraints, mobilized through educational and reformist initiatives, and engaged in direct political action — from nonviolent civil disobedience to armed revolutionary activities. By combining biographical case studies (including Begum Rokeya, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, Bina Das, Pritilata Waddedar, Kalpana Dutta, and Matangini Hazra) with an analysis of women's organizations, grassroots mobilization, and cultural memory, this paper argues that Bengal's women played a transformative role that reshaped gender norms and left enduring legacies in South Asian political culture. The study uses archival sources, published biographies, newspapers, and secondary scholarship to chart continuities and ruptures in women's political engagement, and it reflects on how their sacrifices have been remembered — and sometimes marginalized — in dominant nationalist narratives.



I. INTRODUCTION

The history of India's independence struggle has often been shaped by narratives that foreground the contributions of male leaders, movements, and organizations, yet such accounts obscure the remarkable and indispensable role of women, particularly those from Bengal, whose leadership and sacrifices redefined both nationalist politics and gender norms. Bengal, as a geographical and cultural region, occupied a distinctive position in the freedom struggle due to its unique historical trajectory marked by the Bengal Renaissance, the rise of reformist and revolutionary movements, and its role as a hub of intellectual, political, and cultural ferment. The late nineteenth century Bengal Renaissance, spearheaded by reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, provided an early framework for questioning deeply entrenched social norms and introducing reforms aimed at education, widow remarriage, and women's empowerment. Within this reformist landscape, women like Begum Rokeya seized opportunities to establish girls' schools, publish feminist writings, and critique the structures of patriarchy that sought to confine women to domestic roles. Her vision of education as a vehicle for women's emancipation created a foundation upon which women could claim a public role in society and subsequently link their demands for gender equality with the broader nationalist call for self-rule.

As India's independence movement gained momentum during the early twentieth century, Bengal became both a center of Gandhian-style nonviolent resistance and a stronghold of revolutionary radicalism, offering women multiple avenues of political engagement. The Gandhian emphasis on nonviolence, self-reliance, and mass mobilization opened unprecedented opportunities for women's active participation. No longer confined to symbolic support, women in Bengal became direct participants in boycotts of foreign goods, salt satyagrahas, spinning khadi, and picketing liquor shops. Their presence in these public demonstrations challenged colonial authorities and simultaneously destabilized patriarchal narratives that positioned women as fragile, passive, or politically irrelevant. Figures such as Matangini Hazra exemplify this new political identity: known affectionately as 'Gandhi buri,' Hazra at an advanced age took up leadership in the Quit India Movement, leading processions with the national flag until her martyrdom at the hands of colonial police. Her life and death became powerful symbols of sacrifice, embodying both the spirit of maternal resilience and the determination to resist colonial domination. In such examples, Bengal's women not only contributed to the struggle but became the moral backbone of nationalist resistance, demonstrating how nonviolent activism carried both political efficacy and profound symbolic power when led by women.

Alongside Gandhian mobilizations, Bengal was also the site of intense revolutionary activity, particularly in districts like Chittagong, where armed resistance became an integral expression of anti-colonial sentiment. It is within this revolutionary space that women like Pritilata Waddedar, Kalpana Dutta, and Bina Das stepped into roles that radically challenged



both colonial power and patriarchal norms. Pritilata, trained in clandestine operations, led the daring attack on the Pahartali European Club, a symbol of British exclusivity, and ultimately embraced martyrdom by ingesting cyanide to avoid capture, transforming her death into an enduring narrative of sacrifice. Kalpana Dutta, similarly associated with Surya Sen's revolutionary network, participated in raids and embodied the courage of a young woman prepared to sacrifice her safety and freedom for the nationalist cause. Bina Das's assassination attempt on Governor Stanley Jackson in 1932 was not only a direct attack on colonial authority but also a radical act that defied societal assumptions about the political agency of women. These acts of revolutionary participation shattered gendered stereotypes and reinforced the reality that women could be as determined, militant, and sacrificial as men in the fight for independence. They also illuminated the spectrum of political action women engaged in, from nonviolent satyagraha to armed rebellion, thereby expanding the definitions of leadership within the nationalist movement.

The sacrifices of Bengal's women extended beyond moments of spectacular action. Many endured prolonged imprisonments, police brutality, and social ostracism, while others relinquished personal aspirations to devote themselves fully to nationalist work. Their sacrifices were not only physical but also psychological and social, as women often faced censure from conservative families and communities who opposed their entry into political life. Yet these women persisted, motivated by the conviction that freedom for India required not only the overthrow of colonial rule but also the dismantling of restrictive gender roles. Their suffering was appropriated by nationalist rhetoric as a powerful symbol of India's collective struggle. Stories of women facing prison with stoic dignity or dying for the cause circulated widely in the nationalist press, mobilizing further support and fostering an image of the independence movement as inclusive, resilient, and morally legitimate. This dual sacrifice, personal and political, deepened the resonance of their contributions and ensured their place in the moral imagination of the struggle.

Beyond acts of defiance and sacrifice, institutional leadership also marked women's participation in Bengal. Sarala Devi Chaudhurani's establishment of the Bharat StreeMahamandal in 1910 created a national-level platform for women's education and empowerment, linking women's issues directly with the nationalist cause. Organizations such as these provided spaces where women could debate, strategize, and cultivate leadership skills, ensuring that their involvement in the independence struggle was not sporadic but embedded within structured networks. The institutionalization of women's participation also ensured continuity between reformist initiatives and nationalist politics, enabling a broader spectrum of women, across class and religious lines, to find entry points into political action. In this way, Bengal's women moved beyond episodic involvement in protest to becoming long-term architects of political change.



The introduction of women into the heart of Bengal's independence struggle represents a transformative moment in both nationalist and gender histories. Their leadership redefined the possibilities of female agency in colonial India, while their sacrifices imbued the nationalist cause with moral weight and legitimacy. The stories of women like Begum Rokeya, Matangini Hazra, Pritilata Waddedar, Kalpana Dutta, Bina Das, and Sarala Devi Chaudhurani illustrate not only individual acts of courage but also collective shifts in societal norms that reconfigured the boundaries of political participation. Women of Bengal played roles as reformers, educators, agitators, revolutionaries, and martyrs, and their multifaceted contributions reveal the layered nature of the independence movement. To understand Bengal's place in the national struggle without acknowledging the leadership and sacrifices of its women is to render the narrative incomplete. This introduction thus frames the study with the recognition that Bengal's women were not peripheral actors but central figures who reshaped the nationalist struggle, challenged patriarchal confines, and left legacies that continue to influence the discourse on women, politics, and freedom in South Asia.

II. WOMEN'S ENTRY INTO PUBLIC LIFE

The entry of women into public life in Bengal during the struggle for independence represented a profound transformation in both the political landscape and the social fabric of Indian society. Historically confined to the private sphere due to patriarchal structures, religious customs, and entrenched social hierarchies, women's participation in public affairs was initially minimal and heavily restricted.

However, the socio-cultural renaissance of Bengal in the nineteenth century—led by reformers such as Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and later the Brahmo Samaj—sowed the seeds for women's gradual emergence into educational, intellectual, and political spaces. Campaigns against sati, child marriage, and the advocacy for widow remarriage, as well as the establishment of women's schools by pioneers like Bethune, not only challenged rigid traditions but also laid the foundation for women's assertion of their rights in the public domain.

As education opened doors, women began to develop a heightened sense of self-awareness and civic responsibility, which translated into an eagerness to participate in the nation's quest for freedom. By the early twentieth century, the nationalist movement led by Mahatma Gandhi further accelerated women's entry into public life. Gandhi's call for satyagraha and non-cooperation gave women a legitimate platform to step outside the domestic boundaries and directly contribute to the anti-colonial struggle. In Bengal, women such as Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, Basanti Devi, and Charulata Mukherjee set examples by engaging in activism, organizing women's associations, and participating in boycotts of foreign goods.



Their presence in public protests and political meetings broke traditional barriers and provided inspiration for countless others. The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22) marked a watershed moment when educated women, as well as those from middle- and lower-class backgrounds, came together to participate in picketing liquor shops, spinning khadi, and mobilizing support against British institutions. The Chittagong Armoury Raid of 1930 and revolutionary activities in Bengal also witnessed the remarkable courage of young women such as Pritilata Waddedar and Kalpana Datta, who not only defied social norms but also embraced martyrdom and imprisonment for the sake of freedom. Such daring involvement highlighted that women were no longer passive spectators but active agents of political change. Their visibility in the public domain, whether as leaders in protests, revolutionaries in underground movements, or social reformers in organizations like the All India Women's Conference, fundamentally redefined the role of women in Indian society.

In Bengal, where the cultural and political climate was already charged with nationalist fervor, women's entry into public life not only symbolized the dismantling of patriarchal constraints but also enriched the freedom movement with their resilience, empathy, and sacrifice. The significance of this transformation cannot be overstated, as it paved the way for women's continued participation in democratic politics and civic life in independent India. What began as hesitant steps towards social reform blossomed into courageous strides in revolutionary and nationalist activities, marking Bengal as one of the pioneering regions where women demonstrated that public life was not solely the domain of men but a shared space in the collective struggle for justice, dignity, and freedom.

III. NONVIOLENT LEADERSHIP: MASS MOBILIZATION AND GANDHIAN INFLUENCE

The entry of women into Bengal's freedom movement was greatly shaped by the philosophy of nonviolence championed by Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi's emphasis on *satyagraha* and passive resistance opened a moral and cultural space where women could assert their political voices without crossing the boundaries of social propriety. For many conservative households, active participation in politics was considered unsuitable for women; however, the Gandhian path allowed women to contribute meaningfully while maintaining a sense of dignity, sacrifice, and service. The spinning wheel, the boycott of foreign cloth, and the embrace of khadi became powerful symbols of resistance, and women were at the forefront of these initiatives, weaving their domestic labor into the very fabric of the nationalist cause.

One of the most significant aspects of Gandhian mobilization was its ability to transform the everyday activities of women into acts of defiance. Bengal's women began organizing picketing campaigns in front of liquor shops, leading processions for boycotting foreign goods, and setting up spinning centers in their localities. These actions blurred the distinction between household duties and public life. For instance, teaching other women to spin was not only a skill-based activity but also an ideological tool, spreading the message of self-reliance



and swadeshi consciousness. In this way, Gandhian influence democratized the struggle, enabling women from varied socio-economic backgrounds to find a role within it.

The Salt Satyagraha of 1930 became a watershed moment in Bengal, as women's participation reached unprecedented heights. Inspired by Gandhi's call, they engaged in the symbolic act of making salt, joined protests, and faced arrests with resilience. This was a remarkable shift from earlier decades, where political activity was largely confined to elite women or revolutionary groups. Under Gandhian leadership, participation became mass-oriented. Women like Basanti Devi, Urmila Devi, and Bina Das exemplified this transformation. Basanti Devi, wife of C.R. Das, not only led protests but also inspired countless women to step into the streets. Similarly, younger activists such as Bina Das linked Gandhian ideals with more militant resistance, showing the fluidity of leadership styles within the larger umbrella of nonviolent mobilization.

Another striking feature of Gandhian influence was its spiritual and moral dimension, which resonated deeply with women. Nonviolence was not merely a political tactic but a moral philosophy that drew upon traditional values of sacrifice, endurance, and courage—qualities often associated with femininity in Indian society. This gave women a new cultural legitimacy in the public sphere. Their acts of picketing or courting arrest were not viewed as transgressions but as sacrifices for the nation, aligning with the ideals of motherhood and selflessness. Thus, Gandhian nonviolence provided a cultural framework through which women could challenge colonial authority without appearing to challenge patriarchal norms outright.

At the same time, it is important to note that women in Bengal were not passive followers of Gandhi but active interpreters of his philosophy. They localized nonviolent strategies to fit their socio-political contexts, particularly in urban centers like Calcutta and in rural districts where mobilization took different forms. Women's processions, community kitchens, and collective defiance of colonial laws demonstrated how Gandhian ideals were reworked on the ground. This adaptability of nonviolence strengthened women's leadership and ensured that their contributions were not symbolic but materially effective in sustaining the movement.

In the Gandhian phase of the nationalist movement was crucial in expanding women's role in Bengal's independence history. It shifted the framework of resistance from elitist or revolutionary circles to mass participation, creating a moral-political environment where women could emerge as leaders, organizers, and symbols of sacrifice. Nonviolent leadership, therefore, did more than mobilize the masses; it redefined the contours of gender and politics, laying the foundation for a more inclusive nationalist struggle in Bengal.



IV. REVOLUTIONARY ACTION AND ARMED SACRIFICE

While nonviolent mass mobilization provided one avenue for women's engagement in Bengal's struggle for independence, a parallel and equally significant current of revolutionary action drew women into armed resistance, underground activities, and acts of daring sacrifice. The history of Bengal's nationalist movement cannot be fully appreciated without recognizing the role of women who stepped beyond conventional boundaries and embraced the path of militancy, often at great personal cost. In the early decades of the twentieth century, when Bengal became the epicenter of revolutionary organizations such as Anushilan Samiti and Jugantar, women found themselves not merely as supporters of male revolutionaries but as active participants who carried weapons, manufactured bombs, smuggled arms, and even faced imprisonment and death for the cause of freedom. Their entry into armed struggle was not a sudden departure from tradition, but rather an extension of the spirit of resistance that was already brewing in Bengal's politically charged environment.

One of the most striking examples of revolutionary courage was embodied in Pritilata Waddedar, who emerged as a formidable figure in the Chittagong Armoury Raid led by Surya Sen in 1930. As a schoolteacher, Pritilata epitomized the synthesis of intellectual pursuit and militant nationalism. She led a daring attack on the Pahartali European Club, a symbol of British elitism, and chose to embrace death by consuming cyanide rather than surrendering to colonial forces. Her act of martyrdom resonated across Bengal and inspired countless other young women to view sacrifice as a noble and necessary contribution to the liberation of their homeland. Similarly, Kalpana Dutta played an instrumental role in the Chittagong uprising, engaging in armed confrontation and enduring long periods of imprisonment. These figures not only disrupted the gendered assumptions of passivity but also demonstrated that women were fully capable of adopting violent resistance when the situation demanded it.

Beyond these well-known figures, numerous unnamed women contributed to the revolutionary cause in ways that were both invisible and indispensable. Women provided safe houses for underground activists, transported secret messages, and often disguised themselves to evade surveillance. Many were subjected to raids, harassment, and incarceration, yet their loyalty to the cause remained unwavering. The social risks were immense, as their defiance of colonial law intersected with their challenge to patriarchal norms within Indian society. Their very participation in armed resistance destabilized colonial authority on two fronts: first by directly attacking British power, and second by dismantling the stereotype of Indian women as submissive and domesticated.

The British government responded to women revolutionaries with a mixture of fear and punitive violence, aware that the visibility of women in armed resistance made repression appear even more brutal. Trials, imprisonment, and torture were frequent outcomes for women who were captured, but instead of silencing the revolutionary spirit, these measures



often amplified public sympathy. Female martyrs became powerful symbols, and their stories circulated through oral traditions, nationalist writings, and underground publications, further galvanizing public opinion against colonial rule.

Revolutionary action and armed sacrifice thus represent a critical dimension of Bengal's independence history. The willingness of women to risk and often give their lives in pursuit of freedom highlighted both the radical possibilities of women's participation and the depth of their commitment to the nation. Their sacrifices carved out a permanent place for women within the narrative of India's independence, demonstrating that their contribution extended beyond supportive roles to direct, militant engagement with colonial power. The legacy of these women continues to underscore that the struggle for independence was not simply a male-led endeavor but a collective uprising in which women claimed their rightful share of heroism and martyrdom.

V. CONCLUSION

The history of Bengal's role in India's independence movement cannot be understood without acknowledging the leadership, sacrifice, and resilience of its women, who transcended social, cultural, and political barriers to stand at the forefront of resistance against colonial rule. From reformist efforts that first prepared the ground for their participation in public life to their entry into mainstream nationalist struggles, Bengal's women demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt to shifting political contexts while staying committed to the vision of freedom. Their contributions were multidimensional—ranging from leading nonviolent movements inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's ideals, to taking up arms in revolutionary organizations, and from mobilizing grassroots communities to influencing national policy debates. What makes their struggle particularly significant is that they were not merely passive supporters of male-led movements but active shapers of India's destiny, embodying courage, foresight, and sacrifice. The sacrifices of women like Pritilata Waddedar, Kalpana Dutta, and Bina Das in armed uprisings exemplified the determination to challenge the might of the colonial state with extraordinary courage.

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