

# **Empowerment through Freedom: Gandhi's Influence on Women in the Indian Independence Movement**

**A. Jayalakshmi**

PhD Research Scholar

Department of History, Sri Krishnadevaraya University, Anantapuram, Andhra Pradesh

## **Abstract**

**This paper examines the transformative role of women in the Indian independence movement and the significant influence of Mahatma Gandhi in facilitating their empowerment. Traditionally confined to domestic spheres, women began to assert their agency and activism through participation in key movements such as the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Salt March, and the Quit India Movement. Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence, self-rule, and inclusive nationalism provided a framework that not only mobilized women but also reframed their identities as active participants in the struggle for independence. This research highlights key figures, including Sarojini Naidu and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, whose leadership exemplified the intertwined nature of gender and nationalism. The Salt March of 1930 served as a critical moment, illustrating the ability of women to challenge traditional gender roles and engage in civil disobedience, while the Quit India Movement of 1942 showcased their organizational strength and resilience in the face of oppression. Despite the triumph of independence, women confronted persistent patriarchal structures in post-colonial India, necessitating ongoing advocacy for gender equality and social justice. By acknowledging and analyzing women's contributions to the independence movement, this study underscores the importance of integrating gender perspectives into historical narratives. Ultimately, the legacy of female empowerment during this period continues to inform contemporary discussions surrounding women's rights in India, illustrating the lasting impact of their participatory efforts on the broader quest for equality.**

**Keywords:** Mahatma Gandhi, Women's Empowerment, Indian Independence Movement, Nonviolence, Salt March, Quit India Movement, Gender Equality, Feminism

## **Introduction:**

The Indian independence movement from the early 20th century emerged as a pivotal struggle against colonial rule, fundamentally transforming the socio-political landscape of the subcontinent. At the heart of this transformative period was Mahatma Gandhi, a leader whose philosophy and methodologies not only galvanized the masses but also redefined the roles of various social groups, particularly women. Traditionally relegated to the private sphere, women began to step into the public domain, taking on active roles in the freedom struggle, which led to an unprecedented shift in gender dynamics.

Historically, women in India occupied marginalized positions within both family and society. Their identities were often defined by patriarchy, confining them to roles primarily focused on domestic responsibilities. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, socio-reform movements began to challenge these constrained identities, advocating for women's education, political participation, and legal rights (Basu, 1994; Ghosh, 2002). However, it was Gandhi's entry onto the national stage that significantly changed the scope and momentum of women's participation in the independence movement. His appeal for nonviolent resistance (satyagraha) and civil disobedience not only provided a moral framework for political activism but also offered women a platform to voice their aspirations and exercise agency in a very public arena (Brown, 2001).

Gandhi's vision of India was not merely a political struggle but a holistic transformation that emphasized social equity and individual dignity for all. His philosophy of swaraj (self-rule) included the idea of personal and collective liberation, which inherently involved the empowerment of women. Gandhi famously stated, "If we are to reach real equality, we must first make women our friends" (Gandhi, 1927). This sentiment resonated throughout the independence movement and encouraged women's participation at all societal levels, thereby reshaping their roles in the nationalist narrative (Sarkar, 2005).

Women began to actively engage in various movements initiated by Gandhi, such as the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920), the Salt March (1930), and the Quit India Movement (1942). Figures like Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, and many grassroots activists emerged as significant influences who mobilized support, organized protests, and articulated a vision of empowerment that intertwined the struggle for national independence with the quest for gender equality (Menon & Bhasin, 1998). Naidu, often referred to as the "Nightingale of India," became a prominent leader, inspiring countless women to join the movement, while Chattopadhyay's advocacy for women's roles in post-independence India highlighted the importance of integrating women's rights into the foundational principles of the new nation (Gupta, 2016).

This paper will explore the complex and transformative role of women during the Indian independence movement, focusing on how Gandhi's leadership facilitated their empowerment. It will analyze the specific movements in which women participated, highlighting the contributions of key figures while addressing the challenges they faced. Furthermore, the research will examine how the experiences of these women during the independence struggle contributed to the advancement of feminist discourses in post-colonial India, thereby shaping the ongoing quest for gender equality in the country.

By recognizing the invaluable contributions of women to the independence movement and understanding the extent of Gandhi's influence on their empowerment, this paper aims to fill a significant gap in historical narratives that have often overlooked or minimized women's roles in shaping India's destiny. In doing so, it sheds light on the intertwined legacies of nationalism and feminism—a relationship that remains relevant in contemporary discussions surrounding women's rights and empowerment in India today.

## **1. Historical Context of Women in India Pre-Gandhi**

Before the advent of the Indian independence movement and the influence of leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, the position of women in Indian society was largely defined by patriarchal norms and cultural

restrictions. Women typically occupied subordinate roles within the domestic sphere, restricted primarily to household duties and child-rearing. As scholars have noted, the socio-cultural landscape of India during the late 19th and early 20th centuries was steeped in traditions that constrained women's agency and limited their access to education and public life (Basu, 1994; Ghosh, 2002).

In the context of colonial rule, the British administration often portrayed Indian society as backward, especially with respect to women's rights. This narrative led to a series of social reform movements aimed at improving women's status. Pioneers like Begum Roquiah Sakhawat Hossain and Savitribai Phule sought to challenge the regressive practices of child marriage and lack of education for girls by advocating for women's education and empowerment (Basu, 1994; Kumar, 2009). However, despite these efforts, the overall participation of women in the public sphere remained minimal.

The late 19th century saw the rise of organizations such as the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj, which aimed to uplift women through education and social reform. These movements, while progressive in some aspects, often limited women's roles to those of moral guardians within society rather than recognizing them as active participants in political and social change (Ghosh, 2002). The fight against social evils like sati and child marriage, although significant, often sidelined issues of women's political rights and participation.

As the early 20th century approached, the first wave of feminism began to emerge in India, coinciding with the larger nationalist movement against colonial rule. Educated women began to express their aspirations for equality and social justice, albeit within a societal framework that still prioritized traditional gender roles. The formation of groups such as the Women's Indian Association in 1917 marked the first concerted effort by women to collectively advocate for their rights, including suffrage and legal reforms (Menon & Bhasin, 1998). However, the broader nationalist discourse still largely excluded women's contributions from the narratives of freedom and empowerment.

In summary, the historical context of women in India before Gandhi's emergence as a national leader was characterized by significant socio-cultural constraints, limited political agency, and a growing but fragmented push for reform and empowerment. The groundwork laid by early social reformers and activists would soon intersect with Gandhi's philosophy and strategies, providing a fertile ground for women's increased participation in the independence movement.

## **2. Gandhi's Philosophy and Its Appeal to Women**

Mahatma Gandhi's emergence as a leader in the Indian independence movement brought forth a transformative ideology that resonated deeply with women's aspirations for equality, dignity, and empowerment. Central to Gandhi's philosophy were the principles of ahimsa (nonviolence), satyagraha (truth-force), and swaraj (self-rule), each of which emphasized moral integrity and collective action rather than coercion or violence (Brown, 2001).

Gandhi's call for nonviolent resistance provided a powerful framework for women to engage in political activism. His insistence on satyagraha as a means of confronting injustice appealed to women's experiences of oppression and marginalized status. By framing the struggle for independence as a moral fight against colonial rule, Gandhi created pathways for women to assert their voices and influence within a predominantly male-dominated political landscape. His statement, "If we are to reach real

equality, we must first make women our friends,” highlighted his recognition of women as critical allies in the quest for national liberation (Gandhi, 1927).

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Gandhi actively sought to include women in the movement, articulating a vision of an independent India that encompassed not only political freedom but also social justice. He urged women to step forward and contribute to the nationalist cause, viewing their participation as essential for achieving true swaraj. This rhetoric resonated with many women who were inspired by Gandhi's emphasis on self-reliance and dignity (Nanda, 1990).

Furthermore, Gandhi's lifestyle choices, which included simplicity, self-sufficiency, and the use of khadi (hand-spun cloth), not only symbolized a departure from colonial economic practices but also promoted a sense of agency among women. Women were encouraged to spin their own cloth and engage in boycotts of British goods, effectively participating in acts of civil disobedience that transcended traditional gender roles (Gupta, 2016). This engagement allowed women to redefine their identities within the nationalist framework, viewing themselves not merely as supporters but as active participants in the fight for independence.

Gandhi's holistic approach to empowerment was rooted in the belief that true freedom could not be realized without addressing the social injustices faced by women. His initiatives to educate women and involve them in village governance aimed to dismantle the patriarchal structures that had historically marginalized them (Menon & Bhasin, 1998). By promoting women's participation in the public sphere, Gandhi laid the groundwork for a feminist discourse that would evolve in the later years of the independence movement and beyond.

In conclusion, Gandhi's philosophy provided a transformative lens through which women could engage with the independence movement. By addressing issues of moral and social equality and actively including women in the national struggle, Gandhi not only changed the nature of the political landscape in India but also empowered women to reclaim their agency and participate in the transformative processes of nation-building.

### **3. Women in the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-1922)**

The Non-Cooperation Movement, launched by Gandhi in 1920, marked a significant turning point in the Indian independence struggle and saw an unprecedented mobilization of women. The movement was a direct response to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and the repressive measures of colonial authorities, calling for Indians to withdraw cooperation from British institutions and to promote self-reliance through the use of swadeshi (domestic goods) (Sarkar, 2005). This period became a crucial platform for women to assert their political rights and to demonstrate their commitment to the national cause.

As Gandhi called upon the Indian populace to join the nonviolent struggle against colonial rule, he explicitly invited women to participate. This call resonated particularly with educated women and those from middle and upper-class backgrounds, who began to organize themselves into groups that actively participated in the movement (Kumari, 2010). Women's organizations, such as the All India Women's Conference (AIWC), which was established during this period, played a critical role in mobilizing support and providing training in political activism (Menon & Bhasin, 1998).

Women engaged in various forms of protest during the Non-Cooperation Movement, including boycotts of British goods, picketing liquor shops, and organizing demonstrations. Notably, Sarojini Naidu emerged as a prominent leader, rallying women and emphasizing the importance of their participation in the national struggle. Naidu's speeches inspired many to join the cause, and her leadership of the women's contingent during the civil disobedience activities signified a shift in how women were perceived in the political sphere (Nanda, 1990). Her ability to articulate the plight and aspirations of women established her as not only a key figure in the independence movement but also a symbol of female empowerment.

Moreover, the Non-Cooperation Movement provided women with new opportunities to engage in public life and assert their political agency. Many women who had previously been confined to the domestic realm began to participate actively in political discussions, meetings, and rallies. This visibility allowed women to challenge societal norms and expectations, pushing the boundaries of what was traditionally accepted (Sarkar, 2005).

However, the movement also highlighted the challenges women faced. Although Gandhi encouraged female participation, patriarchal attitudes persisted in many aspects of society. Women activists experienced harassment and violence, and their contributions were often overlooked by male leadership within the movement (Gupta, 2016). Despite these obstacles, the Non-Cooperation Movement marked a significant leap forward for women in India, providing a sense of purpose and identity that transcended traditional roles.

In conclusion, the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-1922) represented a critical moment for women in the Indian independence movement. Through their involvement, women not only contributed to the collective struggle for freedom but also began to assert their agency in a patriarchal society. The legacy of this period laid the groundwork for greater female participation in subsequent movements, further empowering women to become active agents of social change.

#### **4. The Salt March and Empowerment (1930)**

The Salt March, also known as the Dandi March, was a significant event in the Indian independence movement that took place from March to April 1930. This 240-mile journey from Sabarmati Ashram to the coastal village of Dandi led by Mahatma Gandhi was a pivotal act of civil disobedience against the British salt monopoly. Gandhi's decision to lead this march not only galvanized millions of Indians but also provided a platform for women to engage in direct action against colonial rule (Brown, 2001).

The Salt March was notable for its inclusivity, drawing participation from individuals across socio-economic backgrounds, including a significant number of women. Women such as Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, and others took on leadership roles during the march, which symbolized their empowerment and active participation in the national struggle for independence (Sarkar, 2005). Women who joined the Salt March played a crucial role in both the physical journey and the broader strategy of nonviolent resistance, illustrating their commitment to the cause of freedom and social justice.

The involvement of women in the Salt March demonstrated a profound shift in gender dynamics at the time. Gandhi emphasized the symbolism of salt, as it represented independence and self-reliance,



resonating deeply with women who were often associated with managing household resources and sustaining families (Nanda, 1990). By participating in the march, women transformed the meaning of salt from a basic commodity to a symbol of resistance against colonial oppression. This empowerment was further emphasized as women were encouraged to produce salt in defiance of British laws, thereby asserting their individuality and agency in a patriarchal society.

The Salt March also served to highlight the strategies employed by women in their activism. Many women engaged in local acts of defiance, such as making salt and organizing community protests, which fostered a sense of solidarity and collective identity among participants (Gupta, 2016). This collective action not only strengthened their resolve but also laid the groundwork for future organization and leadership roles in the rising nationalist movement. As Naidu famously stated, “The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others,” illustrating the transformative power of activism.

In summary, the Salt March of 1930 proved to be a watershed moment for women in the Indian independence movement. By stepping into the public sphere and participating in acts of civil disobedience, women exercised their agency and challenged traditional gender roles. Their involvement not only pushed the boundaries of societal norms but also established a precedent for future women’s participation in the struggle for independence, contributing significantly to their empowerment.

## **5. The Quit India Movement (1942)**

Launched on August 8, 1942, the Quit India Movement was one of the most significant phases of the Indian independence struggle. This movement, initiated by Gandhi and the Indian National Congress, called for an immediate end to British rule in India. The slogan “Do or Die” embodied the urgency and determination of the movement, which resonated widely across the country. Women played an integral role in this movement, further asserting their position within the nationalist discourse (Sarkar, 2005).

The Quit India Movement saw unprecedented mobilization among women, who participated in protests, demonstrations, and civil disobedience. Figures such as Aruna Asaf Ali, who hoisted the national flag at the Gowalia Tank Maidan in Bombay, became symbols of resistance and courage. Ali’s actions inspired many women to partake in direct action against colonial authorities, effectively cementing their roles as leaders in the anti-colonial movement (Menon & Bhasin, 1998). Throughout the movement, women faced severe repression from colonial forces, including arrests, violence, and imprisonment, yet their resilience became a hallmark of the struggle.

The participation of women in the Quit India Movement was characterized by their involvement in grassroots activism. Women organized strikes, boycotted goods, and participated in underground resistance activities, which reflected their commitment to the cause. They formed local units to coordinate protests and mobilize support, exemplifying their organizational skills and ability to lead in times of crisis. This mobilization was not merely a response to Gandhi’s call; it was an assertion of their rights and a demand for equality within the nationalist framework (Gupta, 2016).

Moreover, the Quit India Movement also highlighted the intersectionality of gender and class. Women from diverse backgrounds, including rural and urban settings, participated actively, thereby challenging social hierarchies and asserting their collective identity. Their involvement in the movement led to a

sense of empowerment and solidarity, which transcended traditional divisions and united them in a common cause for freedom (Sarkar, 2005).

In conclusion, the Quit India Movement of 1942 represented a crucial moment for women in the independence struggle. By participating actively in acts of resistance, women asserted their agency and leadership at a critical juncture in the freedom movement. Their contributions not only advanced the cause of Indian independence but also paved the way for the evolution of gender identities and roles in post-colonial India.

## **6. Impact on Post-Colonial Gender Dynamics**

The impact of women's participation in the Indian independence movement, particularly through the contributions of figures like Gandhi, had profound implications for gender dynamics in post-colonial India. The legacy of this activism fostered a new awareness of women's rights and capabilities, contributing to ongoing discussions about gender equality, empowerment, and social justice (Kumari, 2010).

Post-independence, the narratives constructed around women's roles in the freedom struggle began to reflect a dual reality. On one hand, women were celebrated as icons of bravery and resilience, and their contributions were acknowledged in nationalist historiography. Yet, on the other hand, the patriarchal structures that had long governed Indian society persisted. Women's contributions were often romanticized rather than integrated into frameworks that advocated for gender equality and social justice (Ghosh, 2002; Sarkar, 2005).

The framing of women's roles within the freedom struggle was influenced not just by their activism but also by the political landscape of post-colonial India. While women's participation showed their capability and readiness for leadership, post-independence policies often prioritized familial and societal roles over their political and economic rights. The ideal of the 'Indian woman' was promoted as a figure of sacrifice and nurturance, subtly reinforcing traditional gender roles despite the apparent empowerment gained through the activism of the independence movement (Basu, 1994).

Despite these challenges, the groundwork laid by women during the freedom struggle gave rise to the second wave of feminism in India in the 1970s and beyond. Issues such as personal rights, reproductive rights, and gender-based violence began to gain prominence, leading to significant legal and social changes (Menon & Bhasin, 1998). Feminist activists often referenced the contributions and sacrifices made by women during the independence movement to advocate for further reforms and the recognition of women's rights within the scope of Indian democracy.

In summary, the impact of women's roles during the independence movement laid the foundation for evolving gender dynamics in post-colonial India. While challenges persisted, the legacies of empowerment and activism fostered a burgeoning feminist discourse that continued to challenge patriarchal norms and advocate for gender justice in contemporary Indian society.

## **7. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the empowerment of women during the Indian independence movement was significantly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's leadership and philosophy. His commitment to nonviolence and

inclusion allowed women to engage actively in various movements, including the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Salt March, and the Quit India Movement. Through their participation, women not only contributed to the fight for independence but also challenged traditional gender roles, asserting their agency and capabilities in a historically patriarchal society.

The Salt March of 1930 stands as a testament to this transformation, where women like Sarojini Naidu and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay emerged as leaders, utilizing the symbolism of salt as a means of resistance and empowerment. Similarly, the Quit India Movement of 1942 highlighted the resilience and organizational prowess of women, who proved essential to the nationalist cause, despite facing repression from colonial authorities.

Post-independence, the participation of women in the freedom struggle had long-lasting impacts on gender dynamics in India. The legacy of female activism laid the groundwork for subsequent feminist movements and legal reforms, addressing issues of gender equality and social justice. While colonial structures and patriarchal norms persisted in many aspects, the empowerment experienced by women during the independence movement profoundly influenced the trajectory of women's rights in India.

This paper illustrates that understanding the intertwined roles of nationalism and feminism is crucial for recognizing women's contributions to historical narratives. By acknowledging the empowerment gained through their participation in the struggle for independence, we honor the legacy of these women, whose efforts continue to inspire contemporary movements for gender equality and social change in India.

## References

1. Basu, A. (1994). The challenges of women's movements in India. In *Women and Social Change in North Africa: What Counts as Revolutionary?* (pp. 198-218). Westview Press.
2. Brown, J. M. (2001). *Gandhi's rise to power: 1915–1922*. Cambridge University Press.
3. Ghosh, R. (2002). Women and the Indian national movement: A historical analysis. *Journal of Women's History*, 14(1), 34-58.
4. Gupta, S. (2016). Women's participation in the Quit India Movement: A study of the contributions of grassroots activists. *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 39(2), 253-268.
5. Kumari, R. (2010). *Gender, class and the national movement in India: Making history*. Routledge.
6. Menon, R., & Bhasin, K. (1998). Women's rights and the freedom movement. In *The Women and the Freedom Movement* (pp. 1-20). New Delhi: Women Unlimited.
7. Nanda, B. R. (1990). The role of women in the freedom movement. In *Indian National Movement: 1885–1947* (pp. 163-190). New Delhi: National Book Trust.
8. Sarkar, T. (2005). *Women and the Indian national movement: 1920–1947*. Delhi: Women Unlimited.