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**CONTRIBUTION OF WOMEN FREEDOM FIGHTERS OF WEST  
BENGAL TO THE INDIAN NATIONAL MOVEMENT**

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*Women Freedom  
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Revolutionary Activities,  
Independence Struggle.*

**Abstract**

The Indian National Movement was a broad-based struggle against British colonial rule that witnessed the active participation of people from diverse social, economic, and regional backgrounds. Women emerged as an important force in the movement, contributing significantly to political mobilization, revolutionary activities, social reform, and nationalist campaigns. West Bengal occupied a distinctive position in India's freedom struggle due to its rich intellectual tradition, revolutionary nationalism, and political consciousness.

Women from Bengal participated not only in Gandhian mass movements but also in revolutionary organizations that directly challenged colonial authority. This paper examines the contribution of women freedom fighters of West Bengal to the Indian National Movement between 1920 and 1947. It analyzes the role of prominent women leaders and revolutionaries, including Basanti Devi, Pritilata Waddedar, Kalpana Datta, Bina Das, Matangini Hazra, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, and Nellie Sengupta. The study highlights their contributions to political activism, revolutionary resistance, and social



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	transformation. The paper argues that the participation of women from West Bengal significantly strengthened the nationalist movement and laid the foundation for women's political empowerment in independent India.
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**Introduction -**

The history of India's struggle for independence is marked by the sacrifices, dedication, and contributions of countless individuals who devoted their lives to the cause of national freedom. The freedom movement was not merely a political struggle against British colonial rule; it was also a social and cultural awakening that inspired people from different regions, classes, religions, and genders to participate in the collective quest for independence. Among the many contributors to this historic movement, women played an exceptionally significant role in transforming the struggle into a broad-based mass movement. Their active participation challenged traditional gender norms and demonstrated their capacity for leadership, courage, sacrifice, and political commitment.

The involvement of women in the freedom movement represented a major shift in Indian society. Traditionally, women were expected to remain within the domestic sphere and had limited opportunities for public participation. However, the growing nationalist movement created new spaces for women to engage in political and social activities. Influenced by the ideals of nationalism, social reform, and education, women began to emerge as active participants in public life. They organized meetings, participated in demonstrations, boycotted foreign goods, promoted indigenous industries, provided support to revolutionary organizations, and, in many cases, faced imprisonment and persecution for their involvement in anti-colonial activities.

Among the various regions of India, West Bengal occupied a unique and influential position in the freedom struggle. The province emerged as one of the most important centers of anti-colonial resistance and nationalist activities. Bengal was often regarded as the intellectual and political heart of the Indian nationalist movement. The growth of nationalism in Bengal was closely linked to social reform movements, educational advancement, literary and cultural awakening, and the emergence of revolutionary organizations. The impact of the Bengal Renaissance during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries played a crucial role in creating an environment that encouraged critical thinking, social awareness, and political consciousness. Reformers such as Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Keshab Chandra Sen advocated women's education and social reforms, which laid the foundation for greater female participation in public life.

The partition of Bengal in 1905 acted as a turning point in the development of nationalist sentiments within the province. The Swadeshi Movement that followed encouraged large-scale participation by women in political activities. Women contributed by organizing boycott campaigns, promoting indigenous products, and supporting nationalist causes. This period witnessed the emergence of a politically conscious generation of women who would later play a prominent role in the freedom struggle. By the early twentieth century, educational opportunities and social reforms



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had enabled many women in Bengal to develop a stronger sense of political awareness and national identity.

The period from 1920 to 1947 was particularly significant in the history of women's participation in the Indian freedom movement. During these years, women from West Bengal actively participated in major national movements such as the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, and Quit India Movement. They attended political meetings, organized protests, courted arrest, and mobilized support for nationalist campaigns. Their participation was not confined to urban educated women alone; women from different social backgrounds increasingly joined the movement, contributing to its expansion and effectiveness.

In addition to their involvement in mass political movements, many women of West Bengal also played an important role in revolutionary activities. Bengal was a major center of revolutionary nationalism, and several women became actively associated with revolutionary organizations. They assisted in underground activities, transported messages and weapons, provided shelter to revolutionaries, and in some cases directly participated in armed resistance against colonial authorities. Prominent figures such as Pritilata Waddedar, Kalpana Datta, Bina Das, and Matangini Hazra became symbols of courage, patriotism, and resistance. Their actions demonstrated that women were not merely supporters of the movement but active agents of political change.

The contribution of women from West Bengal extended beyond direct political and revolutionary activities. They played a vital role in spreading nationalist ideas through education, social service, and community mobilization. Women established educational institutions, participated in relief work, promoted indigenous industries, and worked to raise political awareness among the masses. Through these activities, they helped strengthen the social foundations of the nationalist movement and contributed to the creation of a broader culture of resistance against colonial rule.

The participation of women in the freedom struggle also had profound social implications. It challenged prevailing patriarchal norms and expanded the role of women in public life. The experience of political activism enabled women to develop leadership skills, gain confidence, and assert their rights within society. Consequently, the freedom movement became not only a struggle for national independence but also a process of social transformation that contributed to the advancement of women's status in India.

Despite their significant contributions, the role of many women freedom fighters has not received adequate recognition in mainstream historical narratives. Historiography has often focused on prominent male leaders, while the contributions of women, particularly those working at regional and local levels, have remained relatively underexplored. Therefore, a systematic study of the role of women of West Bengal in the freedom movement is necessary to understand the full scope of their contribution and to acknowledge their place in the history of India's struggle for independence.



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The present study seeks to examine the participation, contributions, achievements, and challenges of women in West Bengal during the period from 1920 to 1947. It aims to analyze their role in political movements, revolutionary activities, social reform initiatives, and nationalist mobilization. By highlighting the experiences of these women, the study contributes to a more inclusive understanding of Indian nationalism and recognizes the vital role played by women in shaping the course of India's freedom struggle.

### **Review of Literature-**

There are number of puranic work on “The Role of Women in Indian Freedom Movement”. Some of the important books and articles will be reviewed as under.

**Forbes, Geraldine (1996)** in her book *Women in Modern India* examined the social, educational, and political status of women in modern India. She highlighted the participation of Bengali women in the nationalist movement and argued that social reform movements and the expansion of women's education encouraged women to enter public life. According to Forbes, the Indian freedom movement provided women with opportunities to move beyond traditional domestic roles and actively contribute to nation-building and political transformation.

**Sarkar, Sumit (1983)** in his book *Modern India 1885–1947* analyzed various phases of the Indian national movement. He identified Bengal as one of the most important centers of nationalist and revolutionary activities and discussed the increasing political participation of women in the freedom struggle. According to Sarkar, women's involvement in the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, and Quit India Movement helped transform the freedom struggle into a mass movement and strengthened the nationalist cause.

**Chatterji, Joya (1994)** in her book *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932–1947* examined the political developments of Bengal during the final phase of British rule. She highlighted the contribution of women to political awareness, social organizations, and nationalist activities. According to Chatterji, the active participation of women played a significant role in promoting social change and strengthening nationalist consciousness in Bengal.

**Datta, Kalpana (2012 Edition)** in her memoir *Chittagong Armoury Raiders: Reminiscences* described her experiences in the Chittagong Armoury Raid and the revolutionary movement. She explained that many women in Bengal actively participated in revolutionary organizations and demonstrated courage, sacrifice, and commitment in the struggle against British colonial rule. The book provides valuable first-hand information about the role of women in revolutionary nationalism.

**Sarkar, Tanika (2001)** in her book *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* examined the relationship between women, nationalism, and social change in colonial Bengal. She argued that nationalist ideology provided women with new opportunities for social and political participation. According to Sarkar, women's involvement in the nationalist



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movement not only strengthened the freedom struggle but also contributed significantly to the process of women's empowerment in Indian society.

### **Objectives of the Study-**

- To examine the contribution of women freedom fighters of West Bengal to the Indian National Movement.
- To assess the impact of their contribution on Indian society and women's empowerment.
- To highlight the significance of their sacrifices in achieving India's independence.

### **Research Methodology-**

The present study is based on historical and descriptive research methods. Secondary sources such as books, research articles, biographies, government publications, journals, and historical documents have been consulted. The study adopts an analytical approach to examine the contribution of women freedom fighters in West Bengal during the period 1920–1947.

### **Historical Background-**

The emergence of women in the Indian nationalist movement cannot be understood without considering the social and intellectual transformations of nineteenth-century Bengal. The Bengal Renaissance promoted education, social reform, and women's emancipation. Reformers such as Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and others advocated female education and opposed oppressive social practices.

The Partition of Bengal in 1905 generated widespread nationalist sentiment and encouraged women's participation in public life. Women organized meetings, boycotted foreign goods, promoted Swadeshi products, and participated in nationalist campaigns. This experience prepared them for greater involvement in later phases of the freedom movement. By the early twentieth century, women's education had expanded, creating a new generation of politically conscious women who were willing to challenge colonial authority and social restrictions.

### **Women and the Non-Cooperation Movement-**

The Non-Cooperation Movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi in 1920 marked a turning point in women's participation in Indian politics. Women in West Bengal actively joined the movement by boycotting foreign goods, promoting khadi, and participating in public demonstrations.

**Basanti Devi** - Basanti Devi emerged as one of the most influential women leaders during this period. She encouraged women to participate in nationalist activities and worked tirelessly to spread Gandhian ideals. Her arrest by British authorities generated widespread public sympathy and inspired many women to join the movement.



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Basanti Devi's leadership demonstrated that women could play a significant role in political mobilization. She became a symbol of courage and nationalist commitment.

### **Women in the Civil Disobedience Movement-**

The Civil Disobedience Movement further expanded women's participation in politics. Women from Bengal actively participated in protests, demonstrations, and campaigns against British policies. Many women organized public meetings, distributed nationalist literature, and encouraged people to resist colonial authority. Their participation helped transform the movement into a truly mass-based struggle.

Women also played a vital role in maintaining organizational networks when male leaders were imprisoned. Their efforts ensured the continuity of nationalist activities despite severe repression.

### **Revolutionary Nationalism and Women's Participation-**

One of the distinctive features of Bengal's freedom struggle was the prominence of revolutionary nationalism. Women participated not merely as supporters but as active revolutionaries who risked imprisonment and death.

**Pritilata Waddedar** - Pritilata Waddedar occupies a prominent place in the history of revolutionary nationalism. She joined the revolutionary group led by Surya Sen and participated in the attack on the Pahartali European Club in Chittagong. The club displayed discriminatory signs excluding Indians. The attack symbolized resistance against racial discrimination and colonial oppression. After the operation, Pritilata consumed cyanide to avoid capture by British authorities.

Her sacrifice inspired countless young Indians and established her as one of the most courageous women revolutionaries in Indian history.

**Kalpana Datta** - Kalpana Datta was another important revolutionary associated with the Chittagong Armoury Raid. She worked closely with revolutionary groups and participated in various anti-colonial activities. Despite facing arrest and imprisonment, she remained committed to the nationalist cause. Her life reflected the determination and resilience of women who challenged both colonial rule and traditional social expectations.

**Bina Das** - Bina Das became famous for her attempt to assassinate Bengal Governor Stanley Jackson during a university convocation ceremony in 1932. Although the attempt failed, her action demonstrated the intensity of nationalist sentiment among young women.

She willingly accepted imprisonment and remained dedicated to the struggle for freedom. Her courage inspired many students and young activists.

### **Role in the Quit India Movement-**



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The Quit India Movement of 1942 represented the final phase of mass resistance against British rule. Women in West Bengal actively participated in demonstrations, underground activities, and public mobilization.

### **Matangini Hazra-**

Matangini Hazra became one of the most respected figures of the movement. Despite her advanced age, she actively participated in nationalist campaigns. While leading a procession carrying the national flag, she was shot by British police. Witnesses reported that she continued chanting nationalist slogans while advancing with the flag. Her martyrdom transformed her into a symbol of patriotism and self-sacrifice.

**Social and Political Impact** - The contribution of women freedom fighters from West Bengal produced several long-term impacts:

#### **Political Impact**

- Strengthened mass participation in the nationalist movement.
- Increased public support for anti-colonial campaigns.
- Expanded leadership opportunities for women.
- Demonstrated women's capability in political organization and resistance.

#### **Social Impact**

- Challenged patriarchal social norms.
- Encouraged female education and public participation.
- Increased awareness regarding women's rights.
- Inspired social reforms promoting gender equality.

#### **National Impact**

- Strengthened the legitimacy of the freedom movement.
- Encouraged national unity across social groups.
- Demonstrated the collective nature of the struggle for independence.
- Inspired future generations of women leaders and activists.

#### **Findings -**

- Women freedom fighters of West Bengal played an active role in both Gandhian and revolutionary movements.



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- Their participation significantly increased between 1920 and 1947.
- Revolutionary women challenged colonial rule through direct action and sacrifice.
- Their involvement transformed the nationalist movement into a broader mass movement.
- Women's participation contributed to social transformation and political empowerment.
- The contribution of Bengal's women inspired similar participation across India.
- Their sacrifices continue to influence contemporary discussions on women's leadership and national service.

### **Conclusion**

The contribution of women freedom fighters of West Bengal to the Indian National Movement represents a remarkable chapter in India's history. Through political activism, revolutionary resistance, social reform, and public leadership, they challenged both colonial domination and social barriers. Women such as Basanti Devi, Pritilata Waddedar, Kalpana Datta, Bina Das, Matangini Hazra, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, and Nellie Sengupta made invaluable contributions to the struggle for freedom.

Their participation strengthened the nationalist movement, inspired public resistance, and promoted the ideals of equality and justice. The sacrifices made by these women remain a source of inspiration for future generations. Their legacy highlights the crucial role of women in shaping India's democratic and national identity. The history of India's independence movement cannot be fully understood without recognizing the extraordinary contribution of the women freedom fighters of West Bengal.

### **AUTHOR(S) CONTRIBUTION**

The writers affirm that they have no connections to, or engagement with, any group or body that provides financial or non-financial assistance for the topics or resources covered in this manuscript.

### **CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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