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WOMEN IN FREEDOM STRUGGLE: THE WEST BENGAL EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the multifaceted participation and leadership of women from West Bengal in India's freedom struggle (late 19th century–1947). It traces ideological roots, patterns of mobilisation, forms of participation (constitutional politics, non-cooperation, civil disobedience, revolutionary violence, social reform and grassroots activism), and highlights representative case studies — Matangini Hazra, Bina Das, and Pritilata Waddedar — to illustrate how Bengali women combined nationalist commitment with local social struggles. The study relies on secondary historical sources, archival material, and recent scholarship to argue that women in Bengal were both visible public actors and key organizers behind the scenes; their activism reshaped notions of gender, publicness, and political leadership in colonial India.

Keywords: Bengal, women, freedom movement, revolutionary nationalism, Quit India, civil disobedience.

I. INTRODUCTION

The history of India's freedom movement is marked by the collective struggles, sacrifices, and unwavering determination of countless individuals who dedicated their lives to liberating the nation from colonial domination. While much of the mainstream historiography has long been dominated by the political contributions of male leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, and others, the contributions of women have often been relegated to the margins or presented only as supplementary narratives. Yet, a closer examination reveals that women were not merely passive supporters or symbolic figures within the nationalist framework; they were active participants, organizers, and leaders who profoundly shaped the dynamics of India's struggle for independence. Among the regions that witnessed significant female participation, Bengal stands out as a unique and powerful site where women transcended traditional boundaries to become agents of change, demonstrating courage and leadership in ways that defied both colonial authority and entrenched patriarchal structures. The West Bengal experience illustrates how women of different social, cultural, and economic backgrounds redefined their roles within both the family and the nation, asserting themselves in spaces that had been conventionally closed to them.

Bengal's political and cultural environment was instrumental in fostering this female participation. From the late nineteenth century, Bengal became the epicenter of India's nationalist ferment, particularly after the Partition of Bengal in 1905 which galvanized widespread political consciousness. This period also coincided with the Bengal Renaissance, a cultural and intellectual awakening that not only encouraged critical thinking and social reform but also advocated for the education and empowerment of women. Social reform movements against practices such as child marriage, sati, and restrictions on women's education laid the groundwork for expanding female agency in society. Educated women, particularly from middle-class families in urban Bengal, began to step into new roles as teachers, writers, and reformers. These spaces of intellectual and social transformation were deeply intertwined with nationalist politics, and thus women found themselves increasingly drawn into the fight for national freedom. While many entered through Gandhian non-cooperation and civil disobedience campaigns, others gravitated toward radical revolutionary movements, challenging both colonial oppression and the deeply gendered expectations of Indian society.

The involvement of women in Bengal's freedom struggle was not homogeneous; it was shaped by multiple ideological, class, and generational factors. For many women, Gandhian ideals of non-violence and satyagraha provided a culturally acceptable avenue to engage in nationalist activities while maintaining their identities as self-sacrificing mothers and wives. Their participation in spinning khadi, picketing liquor shops, leading salt marches, and defying colonial prohibitions brought them visibility within a framework of moral legitimacy. At the same time, Bengal's revolutionary milieu created pathways for women to adopt militant tactics, as exemplified by the Chittagong Armoury Raid led by Surya Sen in which women such as Kalpana Datta and Pritilata Waddedar played active roles. This dual trajectory — one of non-violent resistance and another of militant action — highlights the complexity of women's participation in Bengal's nationalist movements. Unlike in some other regions of India, women in Bengal were able to navigate both domains, carving out unique identities that combined the traditional symbolism of motherhood with radical forms of activism.

The stories of iconic women such as Matangini Hazra, Bina Das, and Pritilata Waddedar illustrate the diversity of female engagement. Matangini Hazra, affectionately called “Gandhi Buri,” exemplified the Gandhian strand of the struggle. At the age of over seventy, she led a procession in the Quit India Movement and was shot dead by police while holding aloft the tricolour, becoming a symbol of sacrifice and resilience. On the other hand, Bina Das, a young student, attempted to assassinate the Governor of Bengal during a convocation, demonstrating how youthful idealism and revolutionary fervor inspired women to embrace violence as a legitimate tool of protest. Pritilata Waddedar, another young revolutionary, led an attack on the Pahartali European Club — a notorious symbol of racial exclusion — and chose suicide over capture, embodying the revolutionary ethos of martyrdom. These case studies highlight not only the courage of individual women but also their determination to claim political agency in a colonial society that doubly marginalized them on grounds of both gender and political dissent.

The broader significance of Bengal's women in the freedom struggle lies in their ability to transform gender roles and challenge societal norms. Traditional Indian society largely confined women to domestic spaces, constructing them as custodians of family honour and morality rather than as independent actors in political life. Nationalist leaders often reinforced these ideals, portraying women as “Mothers of the Nation” or “symbolic bearers of sacrifice,” which risked

reducing them to metaphorical figures rather than actual participants. Yet, by engaging in picketing, confronting colonial police, or wielding arms, women subverted these prescribed roles. Their participation was not just symbolic; it was tactical and material, often determining the success or failure of nationalist initiatives. Moreover, their sacrifices created powerful narratives that inspired subsequent generations of women to demand political and social rights in post-independence India.

Historiographically, however, the role of Bengali women in the freedom struggle has often been underrepresented or romanticized. Early nationalist histories tended to highlight their contributions in a celebratory but superficial manner, presenting them as exceptions rather than as integral parts of the movement. It is only in recent decades that feminist historians and scholars of subaltern studies have sought to recover the multiplicity of women's voices and experiences, recognizing their roles not only in the glamorous acts of revolution but also in the everyday work of mobilizing communities, sustaining networks, and negotiating between public activism and private domestic responsibilities. Archival materials, oral histories, and local memorials now provide deeper insights into how women experienced political repression, imprisonment, and social backlash, thereby complicating the heroic narratives that once dominated nationalist history.

The West Bengal experience thus provides a microcosm through which broader questions about gender, nationalism, and colonialism can be examined. Women's participation in the freedom struggle was not simply an extension of men's leadership but was a transformative force that reshaped political strategies and cultural perceptions. Their actions illustrate how marginalized groups can find spaces of empowerment even within oppressive systems, and how collective movements for national liberation often intersect with struggles for gender equality and social justice. By analyzing their experiences, this paper aims to situate women not at the periphery but at the centre of Bengal's nationalist movement, highlighting how their sacrifices and leadership contributed both to the achievement of independence and to the reconfiguration of Indian society in the twentieth century.

In the study of women's roles in Bengal's freedom struggle is not only a matter of filling historical gaps but also of rethinking the categories through which we understand nationalism, leadership, and agency. It reveals that women were not silent witnesses but active shapers of history, whose

legacies continue to resonate in contemporary debates on women's rights, political participation, and social justice in India. Bengal, with its vibrant mix of reformist and revolutionary traditions, offers a particularly compelling case study of how women negotiated, resisted, and ultimately transformed both colonial power and patriarchal constraints. Their narratives, once overlooked, are essential to any comprehensive account of India's path to independence, making the "West Bengal experience" a critical site of historical inquiry and feminist re-imagination.

II. SOCIAL REFORM AND GRASSROOTS MOBILISATION

The participation of women in Bengal's freedom struggle cannot be fully understood without considering the deep-rooted connection between social reform and grassroots mobilisation. Before women actively entered nationalist politics, their engagement in reform movements laid the foundation for their later political involvement. Bengal, as the heartland of the nineteenth-century Bengal Renaissance, witnessed a series of reformist initiatives that challenged orthodox practices and gradually opened up avenues for women's education, public visibility, and social participation. Reformers such as Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and later organizations like the Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj advocated against regressive customs such as sati, child marriage, and restrictions on women's education. These movements, while initiated largely by male reformers, created a cultural shift that emphasized the importance of women's empowerment as essential to building a modern Indian society. By the early twentieth century, educated Bengali women began to move beyond the domestic sphere into social work, philanthropy, and eventually political activism, linking the cause of women's uplift with the broader struggle for national freedom.

Grassroots mobilisation provided the practical framework through which women contributed directly to the nationalist movement. The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22) and later the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–34) encouraged mass participation, and women in Bengal were among the most active in spreading Gandhian ideals of swadeshi and satyagraha. Women organized spinning groups to promote khadi, picketed foreign cloth and liquor shops, and participated in boycott campaigns that directly challenged colonial economic structures. These activities were not limited to the educated urban elite; rural women, many of them from peasant backgrounds, were also mobilized to participate in protests, processions, and relief work. Leaders

such as Sarojini Naidu at the national level inspired women in Bengal to view political activism as a moral duty, while local leaders and volunteers ensured that participation extended into villages and towns. Women's grassroots efforts thus helped transform nationalist politics from elite deliberations into mass-based struggles that resonated with ordinary citizens.

Another significant aspect of grassroots mobilisation was the role of women in community welfare and relief during crises, which often overlapped with nationalist work. Famines, floods, and epidemics created opportunities for women to organize relief camps, distribute food and medicines, and raise funds through nationalist networks. These humanitarian efforts not only alleviated immediate suffering but also strengthened bonds between nationalist leaders and local populations, thereby embedding the freedom struggle in everyday life. Women's grassroots activism blurred the boundaries between social service and political protest, reinforcing the idea that liberation from colonial rule was intertwined with the uplift of society as a whole. Their capacity to mobilize communities at the local level made them indispensable to the nationalist cause, as they provided continuity and resilience to movements even when male leaders were arrested or underground.

Importantly, grassroots mobilisation by women also extended to the realm of education and consciousness-raising. Many women established schools for girls, literacy centres, and vocational training initiatives that served the dual purpose of empowering women and creating nationalist awareness. These educational spaces often doubled as meeting points for discussing political ideas and strategies, thereby embedding nationalist ideology within the framework of everyday social life. By linking literacy, economic self-reliance, and political awakening, women reformers and activists demonstrated that true freedom required not just political independence from Britain but also the social and intellectual emancipation of India's women.

Thus, the intersection of social reform and grassroots mobilisation in Bengal highlights the multidimensional role of women in the freedom struggle. Far from being confined to dramatic revolutionary acts, their contributions were deeply embedded in the social fabric, enabling the nationalist movement to penetrate into households, villages, and communities. Women reformers and grassroots activists bridged the gap between political ideology and lived experience, ensuring that the freedom struggle was not merely an abstract political demand but a lived reality that

resonated with people across classes and regions. This dynamic interplay of reform and mobilisation demonstrates that the empowerment of women was both a precondition for and an outcome of Bengal's nationalist politics, making their contributions central to understanding the larger story of India's independence.

III. REVOLUTIONARY ACTION IN AN ACADEMIC SETTING

One of the most striking aspects of Bengal's freedom struggle was the way in which revolutionary nationalism found fertile ground within academic settings. Colleges and universities in Bengal, particularly Calcutta University, Bethune College, and other institutions that were hubs of intellectual ferment, became breeding grounds for radical political thought and action. The atmosphere of these institutions was charged with debates on nationalism, swadeshi, and self-rule, and young students were exposed to a blend of political idealism and dissatisfaction with colonial authority. Many students, both male and female, perceived the classroom not just as a site of learning but as a platform for revolutionary preparation. For young women, in particular, academic spaces provided rare opportunities for public participation beyond the domestic sphere, and this freedom became a catalyst for their involvement in militant politics. As a result, academic institutions in Bengal witnessed some of the most audacious acts of defiance carried out by women against the colonial establishment.

A prime example of revolutionary action in an academic setting is the case of Bina Das, a young student of Bethune College, who in 1932 attempted to assassinate the Governor of Bengal, Sir Stanley Jackson, during the Calcutta University convocation ceremony. Her act was extraordinary not only for its daring nature but also because it unfolded within a ceremonial academic gathering attended by leading intellectuals, officials, and dignitaries. By choosing the convocation — a symbol of colonial intellectual authority — as the site of her protest, Bina Das directly challenged the colonial state in its own seat of power. Although her attempt was unsuccessful, her trial and imprisonment transformed her into an icon of youthful defiance. What made her action particularly significant was the way it disrupted colonial narratives of women as docile or apolitical and instead presented them as capable of violent resistance. Her statement in court, where she declared her commitment to freeing India from oppression, underscored the intellectual and ideological motivations that underpinned her radicalism.

Bina Das's action was not an isolated incident but part of a larger trend in which student circles, especially women's organizations like the Chhatri Sangha (Women Students' Association), acted as incubators for revolutionary nationalism. Chhatri Sangha, established in the late 1920s, provided a platform for women students to exchange ideas, train in self-defense, and prepare themselves for nationalist activism. Inspired by both Gandhian principles and revolutionary fervor, many of its members gravitated towards militant groups. Academic institutions thus functioned as spaces where young women could transcend societal restrictions, acquire political consciousness, and experiment with new forms of activism. These organizations linked the intellectual world of academia with the clandestine networks of revolutionary groups, creating a symbiotic relationship between education and political struggle.

The significance of revolutionary action in academic spaces lies in the way it bridged symbolic and practical resistance. By staging acts of defiance within universities and colleges, women revolutionaries demonstrated that colonial education could not tame their nationalist aspirations; rather, it became the very site of rebellion. The colonial state sought to use universities to produce a loyal elite, but for students like Bina Das, the education they received only sharpened their awareness of injustice and equipped them with the confidence to resist. Their radicalism challenged not only colonial authority but also conservative Indian social norms, as women who wielded weapons or publicly defied the Raj were also transgressing patriarchal expectations.

In revolutionary action in academic settings reflects how Bengal's freedom struggle was shaped by a unique convergence of intellectual ferment, youthful radicalism, and gendered defiance. Women like Bina Das turned educational spaces into arenas of political confrontation, making the university campus a microcosm of the nationalist battlefield. Their actions underscored the fact that the freedom struggle was not confined to streets, villages, or secret hideouts; it also unfolded in classrooms, convocations, and academic societies, where young women challenged the colonial state at its symbolic core. These revolutionary interventions in academic spaces highlight the agency of women students in Bengal and reinforce the broader narrative that women were not peripheral actors but central participants in India's fight for independence.

IV. LEADER IN THE CHITTAGONG INSURGENCY

The Chittagong Armoury Raid of 1930 and its subsequent insurgency under the leadership of

Surya Sen marked one of the most daring revolutionary episodes in Bengal's struggle for independence. Among the many young men and women who took part in this movement, Pritilata Waddedar stands out as a remarkable leader who not only broke gender barriers but also embodied the uncompromising spirit of militant nationalism. Born in 1911 in Chittagong, Pritilata was an educated woman who graduated from Bethune College in Calcutta, one of the premier institutions for women in colonial India. Her academic excellence and exposure to nationalist thought in educational spaces made her increasingly aware of the injustices of British rule. She soon gravitated toward the revolutionary circles of Chittagong, where Surya Sen, popularly known as "Masterda," was organizing young people into armed resistance groups. For women like Pritilata, participation in such revolutionary networks was more than a political choice; it was a conscious act of defiance against both colonial oppression and the traditional patriarchal restrictions that confined women to domesticity.

Pritilata's leadership became most visible in 1932 when she was assigned to lead a raid on the Pahartali European Club, a notorious establishment in Chittagong that carried a sign reading "Dogs and Indians not allowed." This club was not only a social space for Europeans but also a symbol of racial arrogance and colonial discrimination. The decision to attack it was therefore charged with both political and symbolic significance, and entrusting its leadership to a woman highlighted the egalitarian ethos of the revolutionary group. On the night of 23 September 1932, Pritilata led a group of revolutionaries in the raid. Armed with revolvers and dynamite, they stormed the club, killing several people and causing widespread panic. The act shocked the colonial establishment and announced that women, too, could be fearless leaders in militant resistance.

Pritilata's bravery, however, came at a cost. During the raid she was wounded, and in order to avoid capture and the humiliation of colonial interrogation, she swallowed a vial of cyanide, ending her life at the young age of twenty-one. Her martyrdom elevated her into the pantheon of nationalist heroes, and she became a symbol of youthful defiance and sacrifice. What distinguished Pritilata from many of her contemporaries was not only her gender but also her capacity to command and lead in a male-dominated revolutionary world. Her willingness to embrace death rather than surrender underscored the intensity of her commitment and challenged deeply entrenched stereotypes of women as weak, submissive, or apolitical.

The legacy of Pritilata Waddedar and her role in the Chittagong insurgency has continued to resonate in both India and Bangladesh. She is celebrated in literature, theatre, and memorials as a martyr who gave her life for the cause of independence. Her leadership in the attack on the European Club remains one of the most powerful examples of women's participation in revolutionary nationalism, demonstrating that the struggle for freedom was not confined to men alone. By leading an armed assault against a colonial institution, Pritilata carved out a space for women in militant politics and redefined the possibilities of female agency in the nationalist movement. In her story, the convergence of gender, education, and revolutionary fervor reveals how women in Bengal transcended societal boundaries and emerged as central figures in the struggle for independence.

V. CONCLUSION

Women of West Bengal played varied, consequential roles in India's independence struggle — as organisers, martyrs, revolutionaries, reformers, and everyday activists. Their contributions complicate singular narratives of the freedom movement and show how gendered identities were actively reshaped by political action. Future research should deepen archival excavation (local newspapers, trial records, oral histories) to recover less visible actors and to trace post-1947 legacies of women's political engagement in Bengal.

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