



Role of Bengali Women in Indian Freedom Fighting : A Historical Analysis

Devendra Verma, Assistant Professor (VF),

Amity Institute of Liberal Arts, Amity University Lucknow Campus

Dr. Neelam Bansal, Assistant Professor,

Amity Institute of Rehabilitation Sciences, Amity University Lucknow Campus

Dr. Satyanarain Nai, Professor Special Education

*Department of Special Education, Shri Khushal Das University, Hanumangarh,
Rajasthan*

Abstract

The history of women's movements in the Indian Freedom Fighting has an significant contribution. The presented research paper attempts a detailed study of the renowned as well as Unsung Bengali Women in Freedom struggle of India. This study focuses on active participation of Bengali Women along with men in Freedom struggle specially after 1920 till Independence. Their dedication and active participation towards freedom raises the awareness and create the space for women for making India free from the British colonial rule. Bengali Women bravely and significantly contributed in early 20th century. Thousands of women contributed their participation in national movement led by Gandhi as well as the revolutionary movements of Bengal headed by Bengali leaders before Independence. Renowned Historians like R.C. Mujumdar mentioned about only Basanti Devi, Nellie Sen Gupta, Pritilata Waddedar, Bina Das, Kalpana Dutta and Sucheta Kripalani. Today everyone knows about the contribution of Revolutionary Pritilata Waddedar, Bina Das, **Santi Ghosh and Suniti choudhury** and Kalpana Dutta but it's the time for giving space in history to our unsung Bengali female freedom fighters too. Banalata Sen, Dukaribala Devi and Indumati Goenka, Kalyani Das, Kamala Chatterjee, Begum Rokeya, Prabhat Nalini Mitra, Vina Majumdar, Ila Sen, **Dukhoribala Devi**, Lila Roy, Lilawati Verma, Prabhhabhati Dasgupta, Suj, Nanibala Devi, **Jayasree**



like hundreds of Bengali Female fighters gave their life to the Indian Freedom. This paper is attempt to presented a tribute and historical analysis as well.

Keywords:

Indian Freedom Fighting, Freedom Struggle, Bengali Women, Freedom Struggle of Bengal, Bengali Freedom Fighter, Unsung Freedom Fighter of Bengal, Contribution of Bengali Women, Women Movement, Women Leaders of Bengal.

Introduction-

Freedom fighters are the courageous individuals who dedicated their lives to the cause of liberty, justice, and equality. They stood up against oppressive regimes, colonial powers, and tyrannical rule, often at great personal risk, to secure the freedom and rights of their people. In the context of India's struggle for independence, Bengali women freedom fighters played a pivotal role in ending British colonial rule and shaping the nation's destiny. They were involved in various forms of resistance and contributed to the movement through leadership, activism, writing, and support. Mostly women participate in political scenario in India occur actively after 1920. During this period large number of women came forward to provide their active participation for Freedom.¹

Objective of my Paper

1. To study the freedom movement of India in a different perspective.
2. To analyse the role of renowned women freedom fighter in freedom movement.
3. To explore the unsung women freedom fighter of Bengal.
4. To present a analytical study about different women freedom fighter of Bengal.
5. To highlight their sufferings and sacrifices of Bengali women for Independence.

Research Methodology



To write presented paper, data has mainly concentrated on textual approach, books as well as articles, various research papers written on National and International Journals has been considered for this paper. Thus, secondary and tertiary data has been used to write this paper mainly.

Gandhi says that full freedom of India is not possible unless our daughters stand side by side with the sons in the battle for freedom and this requires them to realize their own power.²

Renowned Bangali Women Freedom Fighters

Pritilata Waddedar was a prominent revolutionary nationalist from Bengal who played a significant role in the Indian independence movement. She born May 5, 1911, in Dhalghat, Chittagong District (now in Bangladesh).

Pritilata was deeply influenced by the nationalist and revolutionary movements during her college years. She joined the Indian Republican Army (IRA), led by Surya Sen, also known as '**Masterda**', a prominent revolutionary leader in Bengal. Pritilata participated in the 1930 Chittagong Armoury Raid, a daring attack on the British armory led by Surya Sen. Though the raid was not entirely successful, it marked a significant moment in the struggle for independence.

On September 24, 1932, Pritilata led a group of revolutionaries in an attack on the Pahartali European Club, which had a sign reading "Dogs and Indians not allowed." The attack was planned as an act of protest against British rule and discrimination. The group set the club on fire, and during the raid, Pritilata was injured. After the attack, to avoid arrest and torture by the British police, Pritilata consumed cyanide and died at the age of 21. Her sacrifice became a symbol of courage and determination in the fight for India's freedom. Pritilata's bravery and commitment to the cause of independence have left a lasting impact on the history of India's freedom struggle, inspiring generations to come.³



Kalpana Datta (later known as Kalpana Joshi after her marriage) was a prominent revolutionary and freedom fighter from Bengal who played a significant role in the Indian independence movement. She born in July 27, 1913, in Sripur, Chittagong District, British India (now in Bangladesh). While studying in Kolkata, Kalpana was influenced by the revolutionary activities happening around her. She joined the Jugantar group, a revolutionary organization, and later became associated with the Indian Republican Army (IRA), Chittagong Branch, led by Surya Sen (Masterda).

Although Kalpana was not directly involved in the 1930 Chittagong Armoury Raid, she became actively involved in the aftermath of the raid. She worked closely with Surya Sen and other members of the group, participating in various revolutionary activities. In September 1932, Kalpana, along with Pritilata Waddedar, was involved in the planning and execution of the attack on the Pahartali European Club. However, she was not present during the actual attack due to an injury. Kalpana was arrested by the British authorities in 1933. She was tried and sentenced to life imprisonment but was released in 1939 after six years in jail. After her release, Kalpana shifted her focus to social work and politics. She married P.C. Joshi, a prominent leader of the Communist Party of India. She continued to be actively involved in social and political issues, advocating for workers' and women's rights.

Kalpana Datta (Joshi) remains an enduring symbol of courage and resilience in the history of India's fight for independence. She documented her experiences in her memoir, "Chittagong Armoury Raiders: Reminiscences," which provides valuable insights into the revolutionary activities of the time.⁴

Bina Das- She was born in Chittagong, East Bengal, shelter migrated to South Calcutta where she grew up. As a young revolutionary, Bina Das took up arms against the British Government. In a memoir, she describes her experience of shooting the British Governor of Bengal, Stanley Jackson. She was arrested afterwards, but the 5 bullets she had fired, had missed. Despite this incident, she later became involved in the freedom struggle after her release from prison. She was inspired by her Gandhian father and was willing to risk her life for her country's freedom.⁵

Sucheta Kripalani- Sucheta was an Indian freedom fighter, politician, and the first woman to serve as the Chief Minister of an Indian state. She was a significant figure in the Indian independence movement and later in Indian politics, known for her dedication to social justice and public service. Sucheta Kripalani was born into a Bengali Brahmo family.

She joined the Indian National Congress and was actively involved in the freedom struggle. She became close to Mahatma Gandhi and worked in his ashrams. During the Quit India Movement in 1942, she played a key role in organizing protests and strikes against British rule. Her leadership and organizational skills were instrumental in mobilizing people, particularly women, to participate in the movement.

Sucheta Kripalani was elected to the Constituent Assembly of India, where she contributed to the drafting of the Indian Constitution. She was one of the few women in the assembly and worked alongside other prominent leaders to shape the future of independent India. In 1963, Sucheta Kripalani became the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, making her the first woman to hold the position in any Indian state. Her tenure lasted until 1967, and she focused on issues such as women's rights, education, and social welfare. Sucheta Kripalani also served as a Member of Parliament and was actively involved in legislative work. She was known for her principled stands and commitment to public service.⁶

Kamala Das Gupta- She was Born in Bikrampur, (Dhaka) was inspired by the nationalist ideas she encountered in her studies at Bethune College. She became an active member for India's independence. For this She did the job of a manager in a hostel for poor women. Under the guise of the hostel, she stored and supplied bombs and bomb-making material. She was arrested several times but was released on bail every time due to lack of evidence. She is the one who supplied Bina Das with the revolver that she used to shoot at Governor Stanley Jackson. In 1936, she was held under house arrest. In 1938, she joined the *INC* from the *Jugantar Party*.⁷



Labanya Prabha Ghosh- Labanya Prabha Ghosh was a prominent freedom fighter of India. She began fighting against Britishers with national male leaders for India's Independence. She was born in Purulia district, West Bengal, Ghosh was active in the non-cooperation movement and Imprisoned for her participation in civil disobedience, she spent three and a half years in various jails. She got arrested and imprisoned several times during the Quit India Movement.⁸

Suhasini Ganguly- She was born on 3rd February 1909. Ganguly later joined the Chhatri Sangha. She was an associate of Bina Das. She was detained several times from 1932 to 1938 but every time she got released. After that she joined the Communist Party of India. After few years She was again arrested for providing shelter to Hemanta Tarafdar between 1942-1945A.D.⁹

Matangini Hazra- Matangini Hazra was a staunch follower of Gandhi, earning her the nickname "**Gandhi Buri.**" In 1905, she became active in the Indian Independence Movement. She was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, who had been imprisoned for his agitation against colonial rule. She gave their participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement, where she got arrested for breaking the British Salt Act.

During the Quit India Movement in August 1942, she was arrested for disobeying British laws. After her release from jail, She was severely injured by a police baton charge while attending the sub-divisional conference of the INC. At the age of 73, she led a gathering of six thousand people to take over the Tamluk police station in Bengal and was shot dead by the British Policemen.¹⁰

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain Among the first feminist icons of Bengal, Begum Rokeya was a thinker, writer, educator and political activist during the British Raj. She was born on 9 December 1880. She was a pioneer of the women's liberation movement in South Asia. Begum Rokeya was a firm believer in equality for all women, She spent her life for educating girls to make them independent as well as self-sufficient.

All the works of Begum Rokeya were revolved around the struggles of women in society of Bengal. Be it a collection of her essays on feminism (*Motichur*) or an expose of the purdah system (*The Secluded Ones*), Begum spent her life fighting societal norms. She was a political activist too. She also wrote many novels and short stories. Her birthdate is commemorated as “Begum Rokeya Day” in Bangladesh.

As an activist, Begum Rokeya aimed to create an Islamic women's association to advance the rights of Muslim women in India. She attributed the sluggish progress of Muslims in British India to conservative attitudes and sought to address this through social reforms guided by Islamic principles. Beyond her efforts in social reform and writing, Begum Rokeya was a dedicated Muslim feminist who faced challenges related to gender inequality and religious conservatism within her affluent Bengali family. Despite her father's refusal to let her attend college, she pursued education secretly and achieved recognition as a prominent writer in both Bengali and English. She passed away on December 9, 1932.¹¹

Vina Mazumdar describing herself as a “feminist, trouble-maker and recorder and chronicler of the Indian Woman’s Movement” in her book, *Memories of a Rolling Stone*. She was part of the last generation of women who experienced India's transition to independence and the concurrent rise of feminism in the country. She held that educating women was crucial for their empowerment and worked to connect academia with the women’s movement. A trailblazer in advocating for changes to Hindu inheritance laws, she ensured that women were included in property inheritance.

She was born in Kolkata in 1927, she was the niece of renowned historian R.C. Majumdar. While in college, she became deeply involved in women's empowerment, organizing a visit for female students to meet Mahatma Gandhi. She played a key role in guiding the influential Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, which she considered vital for advancing human rights and social justice. Alongside her activism, she was a pioneer in women's education and one of the first to merge academic scholarship with activism, contributing to the establishment of the Indian Association for Women’s Studies.¹²



Nanibala Devi- Bankura district played a significant role in the freedom movement of Bengal, boasting of revolutionaries like Nanibala, who devoted their lives to the nation. Born in 1886 and widowed at the age of 15. Her induction into the freedom struggle happened when she met her nephew Amarendra Nath Chatterjee, who was one of the foremost members of the revolutionary group 'Jugantar'.

She became actively involved in the struggle by planning attacks and, to avoid arrest, fled to Peshawar but was eventually captured by the British. In an effort to deter female freedom fighters, the British detained her and deported her to Calcutta, making her the first woman prisoner in Calcutta Jail. There, she was held in isolation in a small cell and undertook a 21-day hunger strike. Her resolve remained unshaken, leading to her release, after which she continued her participation in the freedom movement. She secretly sent letters to imprisoned freedom fighters and arranged accommodations for them.

In 1930, during the Civil Disobedience Movement, Nanibala emerged as a prominent female freedom fighter, leading activities such as picketing, tax boycotts, and the defiant acts of hoisting the national flag and chanting "Vande Mataram." She was also a proponent of women's empowerment, encouraging both men and women to spin as a form of self-reliance.¹³

Basanti Devi – She was a revolutionary who promoted grassroots agitation for freedom, believing that the struggle was a collective effort involving all sections of society, not just a select few. Renowned for her outspokenness and bravery, Basanti Devi traveled extensively across the country to mobilize “untouchables” as active participants in the resistance movement. She is remembered for her strong stand against caste prejudices and her relentless efforts to unify Indian society. Her contributions earned her the Padma Vibhushan award.

Basanti Devi is considered one of the most influential freedom fighters in India. Born in Calcutta on March 23, 1880, she was actively involved in the Khilafat Movement and the Civil Disobedience Campaign. She was also a member of the Nari

Karma Mandira. In 1921, she joined the Indian independence movement and, inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, participated in the Non-Cooperation Movement. She was arrested several times for her activism and remained active in social issues after independence.

Her husband, Chittaranjan Das, died on 16 June 1925 and she later took over his weekly magazine, *Bangalar Katha*. She attended the Nagpur session of the INC. In 1925, she spearheaded a group of five women in selling khadi throughout the city. Basanti was warned by Subhash Chandra Bose not to sell khadi because it could lead to arrest but she continued to sell khadi.¹⁴

Suniti Choudhury- She was born on December 27, 1917, in the Nagaon district of Assam. She actively participated in India's Freedom struggle. She joined the INC and worked closely with leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Subhash Chandra Bose. She was also a member of the Indian National Army (INA) and served as a secretary to Captain Lakshmi Sahgal, who was the commander of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment. She played an active role in the Quit India Movement and was repeatedly imprisoned by the British. Her legacy as a courageous freedom fighter and dedicated social worker continues to inspire generations of Indians.¹⁵

Sarala Devi Chaudhurani- She was born on September 9, 1872, came from a progressive family and was educated at home by her father. Sarala Devi Chaudhurani actively participated in India's freedom struggle and played a significant role in the INC.

She was a close associate of leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Subhash Chandra Bose, and Rabindranath Tagore. She was an active participant in the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement and the Quit India Movement.

Sarala Devi was also a strong advocate of women's rights and worked to promote education and social reform for women. In 1910, she established the 'Bharat Stree Mahamandal,' an organization focused on women's empowerment and advancing women's rights. She was an accomplished writer and scholar. She wrote extensively on



women's issues and published several books, including '*Sita Devi the Queen of Oudh*' and '*A Nation in Making*.' She passed away on August 18, 1945.¹⁶

Bela Mitra- She was a prominent social reformer and feminist from Bengal, India. She was born on December 1, 1892, in Kolkata and was educated at the Bethune School, which was one of the first schools for girls in India.

Bela played a significant role in the Indian women's movement and worked tirelessly to improve the status of women in Indian society. She was an active member of the All India Women's Conference and the Indian National Congress, playing a pivotal role in the women's suffrage movement to secure voting rights for Indian women. Bela Mitra was also a prolific writer, authoring numerous articles and books on women's issues, including education, health, and rights. Her most renowned work, *Hawa Badal* (Change of Winds), is an autobiographical account detailing her experiences as a feminist and social reformer.

Bela Mitra's significant contributions to the Indian women's movement earned her widespread recognition. Her work played a crucial role in improving the status of women in Indian society and paved the way for future generations of women.¹⁷

Kalyani Das- She was born in 1907 and was a member of the Chhatri Sangha, an organization of women in Kolkata. She was the sister of Bina Das. She joined the Bengal Volunteers Corps during 1928-29. Kalyani Das became the Vice President of the All Bengal Students' Association.

In 1933, she got arrested because she was participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement led by Gandhi. Later she was transferred to the several jails. She was released on unconditional parole in April 1938. After that She again participated in the Quit India Movement in 1942, where she organized various strikes and protests against British rule.¹⁸

Unsung Female Freedom Fighter from Bengal

Above all I mentioned were of the well-known Bengali female freedom fighters in India. Now, I want to through light upon several unsung female freedom fighter of Bengal.

The first files on women revolutionaries in Bengal appeared in the Intelligence Branch of British India roughly around 1919. And by 1947, more than 200 cases of conviction and sentencing of women were recorded in these files. All the valuable information about women revolutionaries are contained in a recent publication titled. And the title of the book is "*Women in the War of Freedom Unveiled, Bengal 1919-1947: Glimpse from Archival records.*"¹⁹

British Intelligence Branch in Bengal, which kept surveillance on the revolutionaries by maintaining a '**blue list**' and a '**red list**'. As per the book conviction of women in the eastern part of Bengal was far greater than the western part. The highest numbers of accused were from Chittagong because the numbers might have increased after the Chittagong Armoury Raid (1930). Women's wings became active among the students of colleges in Kolkata.

Sudhangshubala Sircar :- One such revolutionary, whose name is mentioned in the famous Alipore Bomb Case (1908).

Dukhoribala Devi:- She was one of the first woman who convicted for revolutionary activities in contemporary Bengal.

Lila Nag:- She became first woman to be recruited as a member of a famous revolutionary organisation whose name was *Dacca Shree Sangha* in 1924.

Although many women have been recognized, I want to highlight a few lesser-known but significant freedom fighters who sacrificed their lives for the country. Given the constraints of a single research paper, I can only list their names, such as:



From Kolkata: - Santashila Palit, Banalata Sen (Chakraborty), Renuka Ray, Surma Mukherjee, Renu Sen, Indumati Goenka, Mira Dutttagupta, Swarnakumari Devi, Shovarani Dutta, Hiranmayi Devi, Saudamini Mehta, Saryu Gupta, Kalyani Das,

From West Medinipur:- Puspa Bala Jana and Rani Shiromani

From East Medinipur:- Satyabhama Das, Bhagabati Jana, Sabitri Dey, Nupur Bala, Mokhodabala Samanta, Manjusree Mondal, Sucharita Pramanik, Purimadhab Pramanik, Saraswati Bala Jana, Laxmimoni Hazra, Charushila Devi

Hooghly :- Baradamoyee Hait (Habur Maa), Sulata Mitra, Radharani Roy, Jalad Barani Ghosh

Purulia :- . Malati Dasgupta, Krittibass Mahato, Bhabini Mahato,

Bankura :- Manjurani Debi, Nanibala Guha, Kamalabala Tantubay

Murshidabad:- Rahila Khatun and Shiuli Gupta

North 24 Parganas :- Pravanlini Bhandari, Sunitibala Devi

South 24 Parganas :- Balata Sen

Conclusion

Thus we can presume that women of Bengal were active during the Freedom struggle.

Due to lack of education, the participation of Bengali women in freedom movements was not so strong but gradually women got enlightened about the movement by their activities. After Gandhiji's invocation, not only the urban but women of rural areas also came forward to served their significant role in it. Muslim women like **Matangini Hazra** Known as "Gandhi Buri," **Kalyani Das**, Sister of Bina Das, she was involved in revolutionary activities and later became a social worker, **Suniti Choudhury** a revolutionary who, along with Shanti Ghosh, assassinated the District Magistrate of Comilla, **Leela Roy** a freedom fighter and feminist, she was actively involved in the



Quit India Movement and worked closely with Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and many others contributed significantly to the struggle for independence, often at great personal risk. Their involvement was a crucial aspect of the broader movement, reflecting the diverse and multifaceted nature of India's fight for freedom.

In this exploration of the remarkable female freedom fighters of Bengal, we have sought to shed light on both the celebrated and the lesser-known heroines who played pivotal roles in the struggle for independence. From the well-documented stories of renowned figures to the quieter, yet equally impactful, contributions of unsung women, the rich tapestry of Bengal's resistance movement becomes vividly apparent.

However, given the vast array of courageous women who have left indelible marks on this historical landscape, it is important to recognize that this paper, despite its breadth, may not encompass every notable figure. The endeavour to include all who contributed to Bengal's freedom struggle in a single research paper is both ambitious and challenging, and there may well be other deserving women whose stories remain to be told.

As we conclude, it is essential to approach this topic with an understanding of its complexity and the potential for omission. The contributions of female freedom fighters are manifold, and their collective legacy extends beyond the pages of any single study. Their courage, sacrifice, and resilience are woven into the very fabric of our history, and it is through continued research and discourse that we can hope to fully appreciate and honor their contributions.

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