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The Awakening of Women's Power in India and the Anti-British Movement (1905–1947)

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Abstract

The period between 1905 and 1947 marks a crucial phase in the history of India's freedom struggle, characterized by the simultaneous rise of nationalist consciousness and the awakening of women's power. The Partition of Bengal in 1905 acted as a catalyst for mass political mobilization, transforming regional discontent into a nationwide anti-colonial movement under the Swadeshi and boycott programmes. This paper examines the evolution of women's participation from the anti-partition movement to the Quit India Movement, highlighting their transition from symbolic and domestic forms of protest—such as Raksha Bandhan and *Arandhan*—to active involvement in political agitations, revolutionary activities, and mass civil disobedience movements.

The study argues that the anti-partition movement served as a foundational moment for integrating women into the

nationalist discourse, aided by the socio-religious reform movements of the nineteenth century that expanded women's access to education and public life. Women across class, caste, and religious boundaries contributed significantly to the strengthening of the anti-British struggle, both in organized movements led by leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and in revolutionary activities in Bengal and beyond. Their participation not only intensified the nationalist movement but also redefined gender roles in colonial India.

Thus, the awakening of women's power was not merely a by-product of the freedom struggle but an integral force that shaped the trajectory of India's path to independence, leaving a lasting impact on the socio-political transformation of modern India.

Keywords: Women's Awakening, Swadeshi, Partition of Bengal (1905), Anti-Colonial Nationalism, Women in Freedom Struggle, Boycott, Civil Disobedience, Non-Cooperation, Quit India Movement (1942), Revolutionary Nationalism, Gender and Nationalism, Social Reform and Women's Empowerment

Introduction

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Partition of Bengal is regarded as a significant moment in the emergence of Bengali national identity, which later flowed into various streams of the national freedom movement. Centering on the partition of Bengal, a wave of nationalist movements spread across all sections of Bengali society. The land of India became turbulent with the sacrifices of countless lives against the oppression of British imperialism—an era that came to be known as the "Age of Fire." A bold and visionary history of transformation was forged. As nationalism awakened and patriotic consciousness grew among Indians, the British rulers became alarmed and attempted to divide the unity and heritage of undivided Bengal through the implementation of the partition.

Although the awakening of women in Bengal had begun in the mid-nineteenth century, large-scale collective participation of women became evident during the anti-partition movement. Initially identified as a provincial movement of Bengal, it soon developed into an organized struggle against British imperialism under the banner of boycott and Swadeshi. This anti-British mass movement spread not only across Bengal but also to other parts of India, particularly Punjab and Maharashtra, and even beyond India. Women's participation played a central role in accelerating and shaping the movement.

At the beginning of British rule, the northern territories of India were directly governed by the Governor-General of Bengal, while other regions were administered under the Governors of Madras and Bombay. In 1853, Awadh was annexed and became a separate British province. The remaining regions of northern India—Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Orissa, and Chotanagpur—were administered by a Lieutenant Governor. In 1874, Assam, along with Bengali-speaking areas such as Goalpara, Cachar, and

Sylhet, was formed into a separate province under a Chief Commissioner. The remaining part of Bengal covered about 18,990 square miles with a population of approximately 78.5 million and revenue exceeding 11 crore rupees. Due to the administrative difficulty of governing such a vast province, various proposals emerged, leading to debates within the ruling circles.

After becoming Viceroy, Lord Curzon proposed in 1903 to include Chittagong, Dhaka, and Mymensingh within Assam. This would divide Bengali-speaking people into two separate regions. This proposal sparked intense public opposition. Within two months, around 500 meetings were held in Eastern Bengal alone condemning the proposal. Numerous pamphlets were circulated explaining the harmful consequences of the partition. Even English newspapers and institutions like the Bengal Chamber of Commerce opposed the proposal.

On July 7, 1905, the British government officially announced the partition of Bengal, and on July 19 it was published as a resolution. Though the decision did not affect basic necessities, it deeply wounded the emotional and cultural unity of Bengalis. The entire country erupted in protest. Newspapers in both English and Bengali strongly condemned the move. Surendranath Banerjea declared that the partition would not be accepted and would be opposed through lawful means until it was revoked.

Between December 1903 and October 1905, nearly 3,000 public meetings were held in protest. Hindus and Muslims united in opposition across Bengal. About 75,000 people signed petitions against the partition. Newspapers such as *Hitabadi*, *Sandhya*, and *Sanjibani* played a key role in informing the public. Even British officials and institutions opposed the move. John Morley later acknowledged that the movement was a genuine expression of public sentiment.

The idea of boycotting British goods was first proposed on July 13, 1905, in *Sanjibani*. It was formally adopted at a Town Hall meeting on August 7. On October 16, 1905—the day the partition took effect—Rabindranath Tagore's idea of Raksha Bandhan as a symbol of unity and the observance of *Arandhan* (cooking abstinence) marked both solidarity and mourning. The British responded with repressive measures such as the Carlyle Circular. This led to boycotts of government educational institutions and the establishment of national schools. Women's participation significantly expanded grassroots involvement in the movement.

The Swadeshi movement quickly spread across India. Leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai, and Bipin Chandra Pal helped expand it to different regions. Protest meetings were organized across districts like Barisal, Dhaka, Pabna, and others. Boycott of foreign goods became a central strategy, complemented by the promotion of indigenous products.

Tagore encouraged the celebration of Raksha Bandhan across communities and called for unity beyond caste, class, and religion. Ramendrasundar Trivedi promoted *Arandhan* as a domestic form of protest, enabling women to participate from within the household. This initiative elevated women's dignity and connected domestic life with political resistance. It marked an important preparatory stage for women's future political participation.

Women writers and activists also contributed significantly. Figures like Ambuja Sundari Devi and Kumudini Mitra urged people to boycott British goods. Begum Rokeya and others expressed nationalist sentiments through literature.

Women's involvement strengthened the movement and extended it into the domestic sphere.

The anti-partition movement became a milestone in women's awakening. The nineteenth-century social reform movements had already laid the groundwork by promoting women's education and reducing social barriers. As a result, women emerged from seclusion and actively participated in public life. Their role in promoting Swadeshi goods and rejecting foreign products was crucial.

Rabindranath Tagore, in his essays, emphasized women's role in national sacrifice and identity. He highlighted that the use of indigenous goods was not merely economic but symbolic of national consciousness.

Women like Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, Kadambini Ganguly, and others played important roles in organizing and inspiring participation. Revolutionary movements also saw the involvement of young women like Shanti Ghosh, Suniti Chaudhuri, Bina Das, and Pritilata Waddadar.

During the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22), women's participation became more direct and widespread under Gandhi's leadership. Women from various social backgrounds joined movements like Satyagraha. Leaders like Basanti Devi led protests and even courted arrest.

The Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930 saw massive participation of women across classes. Sarojini Naidu led protests, and women demonstrated courage and organizational strength. Various women's organizations across India contributed significantly to the movement.

During the Quit India Movement of 1942, thousands of women sacrificed everything for independence. Leaders like Matangini Hazra, Aruna Asaf Ali, Sucheta Kripalani, Kasturba Gandhi, and many others played crucial roles. Women's participation across religious and social boundaries strengthened both non-violent and revolutionary movements.

In conclusion, the anti-partition movement and subsequent national movements marked a transformative phase in the history of Indian women. Their active participation not only strengthened the freedom struggle but also paved the way for women's empowerment and social transformation in modern India.

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