

From Royal Resistance to Mass Activism: Women's Leadership in the United Provinces during the Indian Freedom Movement

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Abstract- *This paper aims to demonstrate the role of women's leadership in the United Provinces during the freedom movement (1857-1947). It shows that their role grew from royal and aristocratic resistance to British rulers to mass activism of the pro-freedom movement. The early participation of women in the revolt of 1857 was primarily military and was associated with the names of royal princesses Begum Hazrat Mahal and Rani Lakshmibai. Subaltern women such as Uda Devi and Jhalkari Bai also played a heroic role. However, in the following decades, women's leadership in the freedom movement changed. The development of the public movement, education, print media, women's participation in social reforms, and mass struggles under the leadership of Gandhian leaders allowed women from all classes and social statuses to take part in the freedom movement. They performed various functions such as organizing boycotts, rallies, and underground activities. Women's activism in India's freedom struggle laid the foundation for their further development in different spheres of public life.*

Keywords: *Indian Freedom Movement, United Provinces, Uttar Pradesh, Women's Leadership, Women's Political Participation, Royal Resistance, Mass Activism, Women's Empowerment*

I. INTRODUCTION

Women's role in the Indian Freedom Movement was significant. Despite the predominance of male leaders in the national movement, there were women whose political activity greatly contributed to the fight against British oppression. The United Provinces is a region where women's participation in the freedom movement was notable both at the pre-parliamentary and mass levels. Women from the royal palace and subaltern peasants took part in the early stages of the

freedom struggle. Later, women's education, print culture, and mass nationalism developed, leading to women's involvement in the nationalist movement. The present research will discuss the role of women's leadership in the United Provinces during the Indian Freedom Movement.

1. Women's Leadership during the Revolt of 1857: Royal and Popular Resistance

The revolt of 1857 was the first one in which women played a noticeable role. There were women rulers, soldiers, and volunteers. The United Provinces were at the forefront of the fight against the British. Women took part in the rebellion when royal power was overthrown and feudal estates were dismantled. Nevertheless, women's participation was mainly due to political instability in the country. Women rulers such as Begum Hazrat Mahal and Rani Lakshmibai were the driving forces behind the revolt. Peasant women also participated in the revolt, although their activities were much more limited. However, their role was critical as they provided the necessary support to soldiers and leaders. The revolt of 1857 served as the precursor to future independence movements, which also involved many women.

Begum Hazrat Mahal: Political Leadership in Awadh
Begum Hazrat Mahal's role in the history of the United Provinces was crucial. When Awadh was annexed by the British, she played the most active political role in opposing this decision. After her husband, the Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, was forced to leave Lucknow, Begum Hazrat Mahal took over the role of a regent for her son, the new Nawab Birjis Qadr. For the most part, she managed state affairs independently. She allied herself with taluqdars and

supported the mutiny in Lucknow. Hazrat Mahal was able to unite the feudal lords against the British and was elected President of the Provincial Assembly. The uprising heroine showed incredible organizational skills and managed to rally both Indian Muslims and Hindus against a common enemy.

Rani Lakshmibai: Military Leadership and Resistance
Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi was another notable figure among Indian female leaders. According to the Doctrine of Lapse, the British annexed her kingdom, which significantly weakened the Indian princely states. Despite the lack of military support, Rani Lakshmibai raised an army and defended Jhansi. Like many other female leaders, Lakshmibai did not sit in her palace and command. The Rani took a direct part in the fighting. In addition, she gathered an elite women's regiment known as the Durga Dhow. These women were engaged in various types of auxiliary work and actively participated in battles. Thus, Rani Lakshmibai continued to be a military leader even after her territory was taken by the British.

Subaltern Women in the Revolt

There were many subaltern women who bravely fought against the British. For example, Uda Devi, a Pasi woman from Lucknow, participated in the fight against the oppressors. She killed several soldiers during the Battle of Sikandar Bagh before being killed. Jhalkari Bai, a member of the Kori tribe, saved the Rani of Jhansi by serving as her body double. According to the legend, she deceived the enemy, as she looked exactly like Rani Lakshmibai. However, such stories might have been exaggerated to elevate these women to the status of national heroes. Nevertheless, these women did play a significant role in the revolt. They showed incredible bravery and loyalty, which was quite rare for subaltern women at that time.

2. Education, Print Culture and the Growth of Political Consciousness (1900-1920)

Women's involvement in the public life of the country changed significantly after the failed revolt. Unlike before, women could not rely on their military strength or royal power. The new female leaders were engaged in writing, education, and social reforms. Women's participation in the freedom movement was

facilitated by numerous public events between 1900 and 1920. The emergence of print media and education allowed women to gain political awareness and call for action. Women's newspapers, journals, and schools were important factors in mobilizing the female population. The present section includes information about outstanding women leaders of the United Provinces who were engaged in writing, education, social reforms, and nationalist activities.

Women's Education

Altruistic women such as Kamala Nehru, Rameshwari Nehru, and Mahadevi Varma devoted their lives to education. Rameshwari Nehru was the principal of the Prayag Mahila Vidyapeeth, where she taught poor students. She also started a women's journal called *Stri Darpan*. In addition to writing, she promoted female education and social reforms. Nehru and other leaders of the independence movement often held meetings in their homes. Such events allowed women to express their views on the situation in the country and openly criticize the government.

Print Culture

Stri Darpan was one of the newspapers that contributed to the growth of national consciousness among Indian women. Regularly published in Allahabad by Rameshwari Nehru, the journal discussed many controversial issues of that time. *Stri Darpan* raised women's awareness of their position in society. The pages of the newspaper carried articles about social problems such as child marriage, purdah, and dowry. The writers pointed out that all these restrictions were prohibited for Indian independence. *Stri Darpan* and similar newspapers encouraged women to take part in public life.

Mahadevi Varma and Women's Education

Mahadevi Varma, a famous poetess and feminist, was also the head of the Prayag Mahila Vidyapeeth. Her speeches and writings urged women to be proud and independent. In her works, Mahadevi Varma glorified women's strength and resilience, describing them as the foundation of the nation. She emphasized that women were capable of achieving great things, including social and political change. Thus, Varma's

literature and education activities greatly influenced Indian women.

3. Gandhian Nationalism and the Expansion of Women's Public Participation: Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, and Quit India (1920-1939)

Women's participation in the independence movement continued to grow in the 1920s and 1930s. During the Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, and Quit India Movements, Indian women entered the nationalist struggle in greater numbers. They demonstrated remarkable initiative and patriotism. Women from all social classes and regions were engaged in the fight for India's freedom. They participated in rallies, meetings, processions, and strikes. Moreover, female activists were involved in more public activities such as spinning coarse cloth or making salt. All of these mass actions undermined British authority over Indians.

Kamala Nehru

The role of Kamala Nehru, wife of Motilal Nehru, was especially great in the United Provinces. This woman was one of the most active female nationalists of that time. Kamala Nehru not only supported but also led and motivated others. She initiated the distribution of khadi and regularly gave speeches on nationalistic topics. Her meetings were attended by thousands of women. In addition, Kamala Nehru took care of the political prisoners' relatives. She was also the first among Indian women to take over the post of President of the United Provinces Congress Committee.

Swarup Rani Nehru

Swarup Rani Nehru, a social worker and nationalist, also stood out among other women. She was one of the few women to join the protests against the government openly. Police often arrested Swarup Rani, who did not hide her views. Nevertheless, her rallies continued to draw crowds. In addition, her speeches served as a call to all Indian women to defend their country. Thus, by openly showing her position, Swarup Rani Nehru drew attention to herself and became a target for the authorities' repressions.

Sarojini Naidu

Sarojini Naidu was one of the most notable female independence fighters. She was a politician, poet, and orator who gave lectures all over India. Her speeches were aimed at motivating Indian women to fight for their country. The population of the United Provinces, in particular, responded well to her calls. Sarojini Naidu participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement and was arrested several times. However, she continued to participate in rallies and protests. Her public speeches were attended by thousands of people. She not only collected donations but also helped organize demonstrations. This woman devoted her life to India's independence and served as a great inspirer of nationalistic feelings among Indian women.

4. Women's Leadership during the Quit India Movement (1942)

The Quit India Movement marked the end of the long Indian independence struggle. In 1942, Quit India started as a response to the imprisonment of Congress leaders. The British administration imposed severe repressive measures on the protesters. However, women once again showed incredible initiative and took over the leadership of the movement. Women played a decisive role in keeping the movement afloat when the national leadership was imprisoned. Female activists secured the underground communication links of the party apparatus. In addition, they helped free political prisoners and provided them with material support.

Sucheta Kripalani

Sucheta Kripalani was the women's leader who took over the responsibility for continuing the work of the underground Congress. Women's newspapers and publications were also distributed by female activists. Sucheta Kripalani paid much attention to the publication of illegal newspapers and journals. This allowed for maintaining the loyalty of the population to the newly created government. She coordinated women's work in Northern India, directing and guiding them. In fact, Sucheta Kripalani became the de facto leader of India because she undertook many of the duties of the released Congress leaders. Nevertheless, Kripalani did not stand out as a great orator or politician. Her work was mainly behind-the-

scenes, ensuring that the independence movement continued to function.

Local Women's Leadership

Women's leadership in the United Provinces during the Quit India Movement was multifaceted. In addition to national figures such as Sucheta Kripalani, many local activists participated in the movement. They were engaged in mass protests and strikes and provided support to imprisoned activists. Local women's leaders conducted rallies in their districts and cities and were often arrested for these activities. In addition, women held meetings in their homes and courtyards. They also helped the oppressed population by providing assistance to those persecuted by the British. Women's participation in the independence movement was not only symbolic but also concrete. Even though many of them were unknown, their work was essential. Women of the United Provinces fought not only from their homes but also in the streets, risking being caught by the police.

II. CONCLUSION

The historical role of women's leadership in the United Provinces during the Indian Freedom Movement is difficult to overestimate. During the revolt of 1857, the most active women were royal princesses Begum Hazrat Mahal and Rani Lakshmibai. They showed incredible courage and organizational abilities in the fight against British rulers. However, royal women were not the only leaders. Many subaltern heroines such as Uda Devi and Jhalkari Bai also played an active role in the revolt. Despite their low social status, they bravely fought and saved Indian soldiers. Women's participation in the independence movement was not only military. During the early twentieth century, women were actively involved in social reforms, education, and print media. Rameshwari Nehru and Mahadevi Varma were prominent figures in this movement. They were not only active writers but also run newspapers and schools for girls. These newspapers published articles about the importance of female education and discussed social issues. Women's newspapers and journals greatly contributed to raising awareness of the female

population. In addition, female teachers and writers pointed out that women's emancipation was a necessary condition for achieving national independence. Women's involvement in the freedom movement continued in the 1920s and 1930s within the framework of the Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, and Quit India Movements. Women took to the streets in huge numbers, participating in rallies, meetings, and processions. They also took part in strikes and actively defended their patriotic views. Women demonstrated amazing resourcefulness and resilience, which earned them the respect of society. Female activists such as Kamala Nehru and Sarojini Naidu played a prominent role in these mass protests. Moreover, women continued to show initiative even when key male leaders of the movement were arrested. Female activists led by Sucheta Kripalani cared for political prisoners and ensured the distribution of clandestine newspapers. Thus, women laid the prospects for their future political development in India.

All the efforts of women's leaders paid off when India gained independence. The long and devastating struggle significantly strengthened women's voices in society. They no longer were only the supporters and assistants of men but also took on responsibility and became leaders. Notable women independence fighters such as Sarojini Naidu and Sucheta Kripalani held leading positions in the new government. In general, the role of women in the Indian Freedom Movement can be seen as a fascinating historical process that contributed to their emancipation.

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