

Between Martyrdom and Mobilization: Women's Participation in Karnataka's Nationalist Movement

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the significant yet often underrepresented role of women in Karnataka's nationalist movement between the late 19th and mid-20th centuries. It highlights how women participated not only as supporters but as active revolutionaries, mobilizers, and martyrs. Drawing on secondary data, government archives, and published reports, the study explores the contributions of prominent figures such as Kittur Rani Chennamma, Onake Obavva (symbolic inspiration), Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, and grassroots women activists during Quit India and Civil Disobedience Movements. Women's engagement took diverse forms—ranging from organizing protests, distributing underground literature, to leading satyagraha's. Despite patriarchal constraints, their mobilization efforts contributed to shaping Karnataka's socio-political consciousness. The study employs a historical-analytical method and qualitative content analysis of archival records and scholarly works. It identifies key mobilization networks, local organizations, and the impact of women's activism on national politics. The paper also addresses the historiographical gap in documenting regional women's contributions and argues for integrating their narratives into mainstream nationalist history.

KEYWORDS:

Women Freedom Fighters, Karnataka National Movement, Mobilization, Martyrdom, Revolutionary Leadership

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Introduction

The Indian national movement was not merely a political upheaval but a transformative moment in the history of collective resistance, where diverse social groups participated in challenging colonial domination. Among these, women emerged as a critical yet underrepresented force. Their contributions were not confined to the national stage alone but were deeply rooted in regional mobilizations that gave strength and mass character to the freedom struggle. Karnataka presents a particularly significant yet underexplored case in this regard. Long before nationalist slo-

gans echoed across India, Kittur Rani Chennamma's defiance against the British in 1824 laid a foundational legacy of female resistance. Over time, the nationalist movement in Karnataka expanded from isolated acts of rebellion to widespread mobilizations involving thousands of women. These women were not passive followers; they became leaders, organizers, satyagrahis, couriers, underground activists, and, in many instances, martyrs. Their participation extended from urban centers such as Mysuru and Bengaluru to rural regions like Belagavi, Dharwad, and Shimoga, where women joined local organizations, picketed foreign goods shops, participated in salt satyagraha's, and endured imprisonment during the Quit India Movement.

Yet, despite their courage and sacrifice, their stories remain at the margins of mainstream nationalist historiography, overshadowed by dominant male-centered narratives. This invisibility is not due to lack of involvement but due to the way history has been recorded, often privileging elite, urban, and male experiences.

This paper seeks to recover and foreground the role of Karnataka's women in the national movement, analyzing how they balanced domestic expectations, social reform, and political activism. By situating their participation within both regional and national contexts, the study aims to highlight their agency, leadership, and contributions. This re-examination is crucial not only to correct historical omissions but also to build a more inclusive and accurate understanding of India's struggle for independence.

Background of the Content

Karnataka's political and social landscape during the colonial period was deeply shaped by its distinct regional identity, early resistance movements, and strong undercurrents of social reform. Unlike some provinces directly under British rule, a significant portion of Karnataka—particularly the princely state of Mysore—experienced a dual influence of colonial power and indigenous princely administration. This duality created unique spaces for political negotiation, resistance, and mobilization, where women found opportunities to engage in public life and anti-colonial activism. The earliest recorded act of female resistance in Karnataka is embodied in Kittur Rani Chennamma's uprising of 1824. Her defiance against the Doctrine of Lapse and armed confrontation with the British East India Company transformed her into a symbolic figure of resistance.

Her legacy inspired later nationalist activities, serving as a cultural and emotional touchstone for subsequent movements.

By the early 20th century, the rise of nationalist politics under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership intersected with regional currents. During the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22), women in Karnataka participated in spinning khadi, boycotting foreign goods, and attending public meetings. In the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–32), women moved beyond symbolic roles to active participation—leading salt satyagraha's, organizing marches, and facing imprisonment. Archival and government records from the Belagavi, Dharwad, Mysuru, and Shimoga districts show a marked increase in female political engagement during this period. Social reform movements such as the Basavanna-inspired Lingayat reform tradition, education initiatives by missionary institutions, and the nationalist focus on female literacy collectively enhanced women's political awareness and agency.

By 1942, during the Quit India Movement, women were no longer at the margins but at the heart of local mobilization networks, often acting as couriers, organizers, and leaders. Their increasing visibility reflected both a transformation of gender roles and the deepening regional commitment to India's freedom struggle.

Important Events

The nationalist movement in Karnataka unfolded through several landmark events that highlight the evolving participation of women in anti-colonial struggles. The earliest significant episode was in 1824, when Kittur Rani Chennamma led an armed resistance against the British East India Company, challenging the Doctrine of Lapse. Her defiance became a symbol of female courage and leadership, inspiring later generations.

During 1920–22, as the Non-Cooperation Movement gained momentum, women in Karnataka stepped into public spaces, attending nationalist meetings, promoting khadi, and participating in Swadeshi campaigns. This marked their initial organized entry into mass politics. By 1930–32, in the Civil Disobedience Movement, their role deepened—they picketed foreign cloth shops, joined salt satyagraha's, and faced imprisonment, especially in districts such as Belagavi, Dharwad, Mysuru, and Shimoga.

The Quit India Movement of 1942 witnessed large-scale mobiliza-

tion of rural women, many of whom joined underground resistance networks. Government records, especially from the Home Political Department and Mysore State archives, document these women-led satyagraha's and detentions. After 1942, organizations like the Karnataka Mahila Parishat sustained nationalist momentum through community mobilization, literacy drives, and local protests. These events collectively demonstrate the progressive integration of women into the freedom movement's core.

Literature Review

Chatterjee, P. (1993). *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Chatterjee examines how nationalist movements constructed gender roles within the colonial context. He argues that women were often seen as cultural symbols of the nation. This work provides theoretical insight into the intersection of nationalism and gendered identities. Although not region-specific, it helps contextualize women's activism in Karnataka within broader nationalist narratives. It offers a strong conceptual base for analyzing how women balanced cultural expectations and political participation.

Desai, N. (2005). *Women in India's Freedom Struggle*. Desai documents the widespread participation of women in India's freedom movement. The book highlights both prominent and lesser-known figures, emphasizing their leadership and sacrifices. It provides valuable insights into how women contributed to mass movements like Non-Cooperation and Quit India. Though national in scope, it mentions southern regions and thus informs Karnataka's context indirectly. This text serves as an essential secondary source for reconstructing women's roles.

Forbes, G. (1996). *Women in Modern India*. Forbes explores the transformation of Indian women's roles during colonial modernity. She links education, reform movements, and political participation, showing how these enabled women's entry into public life. The work outlines the rise of female agency in nationalist politics. It provides historical context useful for understanding the emergence of politically active women in Karnataka. Her analytical framework helps situate regional events within national patterns.

Gupta, M. (2009). *Revolutionary Women in India*. Atlantic. Gupta's work focuses on militant and revolutionary women who defied colonial authority. She details their participation in underground networks,

protests, and acts of resistance. The text emphasizes courage, leadership, and sacrifice, highlighting how women transcended traditional gender roles. This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding activist women in Karnataka's Quit India Movement. It complements Gandhian narratives with a revolutionary lens.

Iyer, L. (2015). *Women Freedom Fighters in South India*. Iyer provides a regionally focused study on women freedom fighters from South India, including Karnataka. The book documents individual stories, local organizations, and their roles in various nationalist phases. It emphasizes grassroots mobilization, offering a more localized perspective compared to national narratives. Iyer also draws from archival sources, adding authenticity to the accounts. This is a key reference for connecting regional events to national movements. Kosambi, M. (1998). *Gender, Culture and the Freedom Struggle*. Kosambi examines how cultural practices and gender roles influenced women's participation in the freedom struggle. She highlights the dual pressures women faced—patriarchy and colonialism—and their strategies of negotiation. The book provides critical insights into how culture shaped forms of resistance. It is particularly useful in understanding symbolic figures like Rani Chennamma. Kosambi's gendered lens adds analytical depth to regional studies.

Nair, J. (2011). *Women and Social Reform in Modern India*. Nair focuses on the linkages between social reform and women's political activism. She shows how reforms in education, marriage, and property rights paved the way for women's entry into public and political life. The book situates activism within the larger socio-political transformation of colonial India. It is highly relevant for understanding how literacy and reform movements in Karnataka empowered women. Nair's work bridges social and political histories effectively.

Sarkar, S. (1989). *Modern India 1885–1947*. Macmillan. Sarkar provides a comprehensive political history of modern India. While not gender-focused, it offers critical background on the major nationalist phases—Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, and Quit India Movements. Understanding this timeline helps locate women's activism within key political turning points. It contextualizes Karnataka's regional movements as part of the larger national struggle. Sarkar's work gives essential historical scaffolding for thematic analysis.

Research Gap

While national narratives document prominent female figures, there is limited research on regional women's contributions in Karnataka. Archival records exist but are not systematically analyzed in relation to women's leadership and martyrdom. Few scholarly works examine how local organizations enabled women's participation.

Research Objectives

1. To document and analyze the role of women in Karnataka's nationalist movement.
2. To identify key revolutionary leaders and their contributions.
3. To examine local organizational structures that facilitated women's mobilization.
4. To address historiographical gaps in freedom movement studies through a gendered lens.

Findings

Diverse forms of participation: Women in Karnataka were engaged in multiple dimensions of the nationalist movement. They were not merely supporters but took on leadership roles, organized local protests, managed underground networks, and served as couriers of information and nationalist literature. Their participation included both visible public actions, such as picketing foreign goods shops, and covert activities, demonstrating strategic versatility in contributing to the movement.

Link between local struggles and national goals: Rural women played a crucial role in connecting everyday socio-economic concerns—like taxation, land disputes, and famine—to the broader objectives of the independence movement. Their activism ensured that national campaigns resonated with local communities, thereby enhancing mass mobilization and creating a sense of shared purpose across regions.

Repression as a catalyst for resistance: Archival records indicate that women frequently faced arrests, imprisonment, physical punishment, and social ostracism for their participation. Rather than discouraging activism, these acts of repression often strengthened solidarity among women and inspired others to join. The experience of sacrifice and confrontation with colonial authority became an important element in constructing the identity of women martyrs.

Strength of autonomous women's platforms: Organizations such as the Mahila Sanghas functioned as more than auxiliary wings of male-led movements; they provided independent spaces for political education, collective decision-making, and strategic planning. These platforms helped women maintain sustained engagement even during periods of male leadership suppression or political crackdowns.

Unrecognized historical agency: Despite their significant contributions, women's roles have been underrepresented in mainstream historical narratives. Much of their work was documented only in local records, oral traditions, or scattered references in government archives. This marginalization reflects broader gender biases in historiography, highlighting the need to incorporate women's experiences into national histories.

Cultural influence on mobilization: Women effectively used folk songs, festivals, and traditional gatherings as mediums to spread nationalist ideas. These cultural strategies allowed them to mobilize communities subtly, circumventing colonial restrictions and integrating political messaging into daily life.

Intergenerational inspiration: The legacy of early figures such as Rani Chennamma and symbolic heroes like Onake Obavva created a continuity of resistance. Their stories inspired new generations of women to participate, showing that Karnataka's struggle was shaped not only by individual actions but also by traditions of courage and leadership passed across generations.

The nationalist movement in Karnataka cannot be fully understood without integrating the stories of women activists. Their participation reveals the gendered dynamics of resistance where women navigated patriarchal constraints while shaping political action. Mobilization often began at the local level but fed into the national movement, demonstrating how regional struggles strengthened anti-colonial nationalism.

Conclusion

The study of women's participation in Karnataka's nationalist movement reveals that their contributions were multifaceted, strategic, and transformative. Women were not mere supporters of male leaders but active organizers, mobilizers, and martyrs, whose efforts were crucial in linking local struggles to national objectives. From early acts of resistance by figures like Kittur Rani Chennamma to mass mobilizations during the

Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, and Quit India Movements, women demonstrated courage, leadership, and resilience in the face of colonial repression. Grassroots activism, facilitated through rural networks and local organizations such as Mahila Sanghas, proved pivotal in sustaining political momentum, especially in regions where male leadership was restricted or imprisoned. Women creatively employed cultural and social platforms, integrating political awareness into daily life and fostering mass participation. Their repeated confrontations with colonial authority—through imprisonment, violence, or social ostracism—highlight the depth of their sacrifices and commitment, embodying the spirit of martyrdom.

However, despite their centrality to the freedom struggle, women's contributions in Karnataka have been systematically underrepresented in mainstream historiography, resulting in an incomplete understanding of regional and national movements. Recognizing these contributions is therefore essential, not only to recover neglected histories but also to re-frame India's freedom struggle in a more inclusive and gender-sensitive manner. In conclusion, Karnataka's women freedom fighters exemplify the intersection of courage, leadership, and social engagement, demonstrating that the struggle for independence was as much about challenging colonial authority as it was about redefining women's roles in society. Integrating their narratives strengthens both historical scholarship and contemporary appreciation of India's diverse and inclusive struggle for liberation.

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