

In The Vanguard Of Freedom;
Unveiling The Women Revolutionaries
Of Bengal
(1905- 1947)

By Ahana Sen And Sudeshna Sarkar,

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Ahana Sen and Sudeshna Sarkar

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Abstract

When we read about India's freedom struggle as children or adults, we are bombarded with the names of male freedom fighters. We rarely pause as a nation or as individuals to remember the women who resisted the traditional roles society assigned to them and fought alongside men. In this research, we look back at some of the many Bengali women who revolted, rebelled, and rose up against the Raj.

In Bengal, Maharashtra, and Punjab, several women were actively involved in revolutionary movements, as noted by **Uma Rao** and **Ishani Mukherjee**. The women who supported the revolutionaries were a significant source of inspiration and whose names will never appear in a dictionary of freedom fighters. Swadeshi movement arose from Bengal and spread throughout the country. The women carried messages and arms, as well as provided food and shelter in large numbers. They weren't always from the society of elite scholars. Without waiting for social approval, the uneducated, underprivileged women played this role. Female prisoners who were subjected to cruel treatment were pressured to commit suicide. Freedom fighters like Shobha Rani, who suffered injuries from British police that left her paralyzed and ultimately killed her, must be mentioned. According to **Madhurima Sen**, an archivist with the West Bengal State Archives, the IB files pertaining to the Bengal Presidency show that the Anushilan and Jugantar groups with their district branches, the Mukti Sangha or Bengal Volunteers, the Chittagong Revolutionary Party, and Stree Sangha were the leading organisations that participated in revolutionary activities.

We chose this topic because it has received relatively little research and we wanted to highlight the achievements of those women whose names are not recorded in the annals of history. We want to preserve the journey of brave women, starting from shooting the governor in a crowded convocation hall to discovering her partially decomposed body on the streets after independence. All of this occurred as a result of her struggle going unnoticed. We likewise wish to draw attention to the struggles of revolutionaries like Pritilata Waddedar, whose meticulous planning made it possible for Master da to loot Chittagong. In addition to discussing the women who participated in the revolutionary movements, we would also discuss the women who promoted nationalism and patriotism through their writing. Finally, we would concentrate on the reactions and support provided by these freedom warriors' families throughout their entire journey.

Both primary and secondary sources would be used. Additionally, we would make an effort to contact the families of women revolutionaries. We would consult books written by different historians in both Bengali and English. We would also refer to digitalized articles and journals.

Women in India are constantly affected by a lack of possibilities and facilities. This is due to intrinsic discrimination that has existed in society for many years. Thus, when emphasizing the context of Bengali women in the freedom movement, one encounters numerous challenges as the women, whatever their involvement, were never highlighted. It is unfortunate that as a country, we have not honoured the sacrifices and martyrdom of thousands of unsung, unacknowledged freedom fighters from all around the land.

Introduction

The revolutionary women of Bengal, often glorified as icons of empowerment and resistance, have a legacy that is as dark and terrifying as it is inspiring. Their unyielding desire to free their nation from British colonial rule led them down a path marked by extreme violence, unimaginable hardships, and ethical quandaries. The sanitized narratives often presented in mainstream history fail to capture the true horror and complexity of their contributions and the broader revolutionary movement.

The involvement of women in Bengal's revolutionary movement was a radical departure from traditional roles, plunging them into a world where violence, betrayal, and immense suffering were daily realities. These women participated in acts of extreme violence, including bombings and assassinations, that left behind scenes of bloodshed and chaos. The meticulous planning and execution of these attacks often resulted in multiple casualties, creating a terrifying atmosphere of fear and retribution. The aftermath of these violent acts saw swift and brutal retaliation from the British authorities, resulting in a cycle of violence that consumed many lives.

Many of these women were eventually captured by the British authorities and subjected to severe physical and psychological torture. The conditions in colonial prisons were nightmarish, with routine beatings, starvation, and inhumane treatment. These women endured prolonged periods of solitary confinement, constant surveillance, and relentless interrogation, which left them physically and mentally scarred for life.

In some instances, these revolutionary women were driven to extreme measures, including suicide, to avoid capture and torture. The romanticization of martyrdom within the revolutionary movement often pushed these women to embrace death as a means of protest and defiance. However, this idealization of martyrdom masked the sheer desperation and terror that underpinned such acts, trivializing the value of life and the long-term impacts of their sacrifices.

Revolutionary women were often ostracized by society and subjected to character assassination. In a deeply conservative social milieu, their involvement in violent resistance was seen as a violation of traditional gender roles. Families disowned them, and they were branded as immoral and promiscuous. This societal stigma persisted long after their revolutionary activities ended, severely impacting their personal lives and relationships.

The emotional and psychological strain of living as a revolutionary was immense. Constantly on the run, under the threat of arrest, and living in secrecy, these women experienced severe stress and anxiety. The traumatic experiences of witnessing comrades being killed or captured, coupled with the isolation from family and loved ones, left lasting emotional scars. The revolutionary path often meant a life of financial instability and anonymity. Many women had to forgo their education and career prospects, plunging them into poverty and obscurity. The lack of recognition and support from both the state and society left them struggling to rebuild their lives post-independence.

While the contributions of these revolutionary women are commendable, it is essential to acknowledge the negative aspects of the movement they were part of. The reliance on violence as a means to achieve political ends raises significant ethical questions. The loss of innocent lives and the perpetuation of a cycle of violence cannot be ignored. The justification of violent acts in the name of freedom and justice is a contentious issue, with long-term implications for societal norms and values.

The glorification of martyrdom within the revolutionary movement often led to a dangerous romanticization of death and sacrifice. Young women were propelled into the movement with the allure of becoming martyrs, without fully comprehending the consequences. This idealization of martyrdom trivialized the value of life and overshadowed the importance of sustainable, long-term strategies for change. The focus on armed struggle sometimes overshadowed broader social issues that also needed attention. While fighting for national independence, the revolutionaries often did not address critical issues like gender inequality, caste discrimination, and economic exploitation within their ranks and the society at large. This narrow focus on political freedom sometimes resulted in the neglect of social justice and equity.

The legacy of revolutionary women in Bengal is complex and multifaceted. Their bravery and contributions to the freedom struggle are undeniable and deserve recognition. They challenged societal norms, participated in militant activities, and played crucial supportive roles, all of which significantly impacted the course of India's independence movement.

Researching the lives of revolutionary women in Bengal is a deeply personal and transformative experience for researchers, no matter their gender. These women, with their unyielding courage and fierce determination, fought not only against colonial rulers but also against the societal norms that sought to confine them. Their stories are filled with profound

personal sacrifices—leaving their families, facing imprisonment, and even embracing death—all for the dream of freedom. By delving into their lives, researchers can connect with their extraordinary resilience and passion on an intimate level, gaining inspiration and strength from their examples. It's a journey that brings to light the emotional depth and humanity of these women, making history feel alive and personal. This research not only honors their legacy but also empowers young researchers to reflect on their own beliefs and the changes they wish to see in the world. It's a poignant reminder that the fight for justice and equality is deeply personal and that every small act of courage can contribute to a larger movement. Engaging with these stories fosters empathy, respect, and a profound sense of purpose, reminding us all of the enduring impact of these remarkable women.

Objective

We are drawn to the topic of revolutionary women in Bengal because their stories resonate deeply with us, echoing themes of courage, sacrifice, and unyielding spirit that are both inspiring and profoundly human. These women, who stood at the forefront of resistance against colonial oppression, offer a compelling narrative that challenges the conventional, male-dominated historical accounts. Their lives, filled with personal struggle and bravery, are a testament to the power of resilience and the pursuit of justice. By exploring their stories, we aim to shed light on the often-overlooked contributions of these remarkable women, hoping to inspire others with their tales of defiance and dedication. This research is not just an academic pursuit but a personal journey to connect with and honor the legacy of these extraordinary individuals, ensuring that their voices and struggles are remembered and celebrated in the broader tapestry of history.

Methodology

In our research on revolutionary women in Bengal, we have employed both descriptive and qualitative analysis to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of their roles and contributions. This methodological approach was chosen to ensure that the complexities of these women's experiences are accurately captured and conveyed, moving beyond superficial accounts to offer a deeper exploration of their lives and impacts.

Descriptive analysis forms the backbone of this research, allowing for a meticulous and systematic documentation of the historical events, figures, and actions associated with these revolutionary women. This method involves detailing specific incidents, dates, and achievements, providing a clear and structured account of their revolutionary activities. By mapping out their involvement in various movements, such as the Swadeshi and Non-Cooperation movements, and their engagement in acts of resistance and rebellion, descriptive analysis helps to ground the narrative in concrete facts and events. This foundation is crucial for constructing a well-rounded historical context, ensuring that the contributions of these women are recognized and situated accurately within the broader scope of Bengal's struggle for independence.

However, descriptive analysis alone would not be sufficient to fully capture the essence of these revolutionary women's experiences. To achieve a more profound understanding, we integrated qualitative analysis into our research methodology. Qualitative analysis enables a deeper exploration of the personal, emotional, and social dimensions of their lives, going beyond mere data to uncover the motivations, challenges, and impacts of their revolutionary efforts. This approach involves examining personal letters, diaries, and autobiographical accounts, as well as conducting in-depth interviews with historians and scholars who have studied these women. By analyzing these qualitative sources, we aimed to gain insights into the internal struggles, personal sacrifices, and emotional resilience that characterized their revolutionary activities.

One of the key advantages of qualitative analysis is its ability to highlight the subjective experiences of these women, offering a window into their thoughts, fears, and aspirations. For instance, by exploring personal correspondences and memoirs, we could delve into the emotional and psychological dimensions of their activism, revealing the intense pressure and personal cost they faced. This approach also allowed us to examine how these women

navigated and negotiated their roles within the broader revolutionary movement, including the gender biases and societal expectations that they challenged. Through this lens, their courage and determination are not just documented but deeply understood, providing a more empathetic and humanized portrayal of their contributions.

In combining descriptive and qualitative analysis, our research aims to present a comprehensive and multi-dimensional view of revolutionary women in Bengal. This approach not only ensures that their contributions are accurately documented but also provides a richer, more nuanced understanding of their personal and emotional journeys. By weaving together factual details with qualitative insights, we hope to offer a portrayal that honours their legacies, acknowledges their sacrifices, and reflects the profound impact of their revolutionary activities.

*In the dark of night, and light of day,
Bengal's daughters forged a fearless way.
Revolution in their blood, justice their call,
They fought for freedom, one and all.*

Breaking Barriers and Defying Norms:

Women in the Anti-Partition Movement

In response to Krishna Kumar Mitra's boycott movement against the partition of Bengal, women actively participated alongside men, boycotting foreign goods and picketing. Women of that time played a crucial role in raising nationalist consciousness among other women. For instance, during Sarla Devi Chaudhurani's "Swadeshi Andolan," events like Pratapadityautsav and "Birastromibrata" were promoted, encouraging women to leave their homes and join the movement in groups to save Bengal.

Women also provided significant support by offering financial aid, shelter, and even hiding weapons for the revolutionaries. Lavannya Prabhab Devi supplied pistols and revolutionary materials to her brother, while Ashalata Sen actively spread revolutionary ideologies in the Dhaka district. Several women, like Dukori Bala Devi and Nani Bala Devi, faced imprisonment for aiding armed revolutionaries. Others, such as Manorama Basu, led processions and participated in Congress sessions.

In early 1905, "Antapur Patrika" hinted at a potential conspiracy to divide Bengal, while "Bamabodhini Patrika" in August of that year clearly outlined the plan for partition. Magazines like "Suprova" and "Antapur" regularly advertised the promotion of indigenous industries, advocating for the formation of "Swadeshi Shilpa." Additionally, a play published in October 1905 gained significant popularity, further fueling nationalist sentiments. Sarala Devi utilized her "Bharati newspaper" to spread patriotism and nationalism. Notably, Khairunnessa, a Muslim woman, called for the boycott of foreign goods and the acceptance of domestic products in her novel "Swadeshinurag," aiming to rally support for the Swadeshi movement, particularly among Muslims who were initially hesitant to participate.

Poet Subhash Mukhopadhyay's words in "Michhiler Mukh" vividly portray how women broke societal confines, joining processions during the movement and astonishing the British authorities with their fervor to save Bengal. Their contributions to the anti-partition movement at the beginning of the twentieth century were invaluable and undeniable.

In conclusion, the involvement of women in the anti-partition movement of the early twentieth century was both groundbreaking and transformative. By transcending their traditional roles and engaging actively in protests, boycotts, and supportive activities, women not only advanced the nationalist cause but also challenged prevailing gender norms. Figures like Sarla Devi

Chaudhurani and Ashalata Sen, through their leadership and courageous actions, demonstrated the profound impact women could have on the freedom struggle. Their roles in providing crucial support, from sheltering revolutionaries to disseminating revolutionary ideas, underscored their indispensable contribution. The efforts of publications and individuals like Khairunnessa further illustrated the inclusive nature of the movement and its ability to unite diverse groups against colonial rule. The vivid portrayal of women's activism in literary works such as Subhash Mukhopadhyay's "Michhiler Mukh" encapsulates their pivotal role and the transformation they brought about. Their actions not only propelled the nationalist movement forward but also paved the way for greater gender equality and empowerment, leaving a lasting legacy of courage and determination that continues to inspire and shape the pursuit of justice and freedom in contemporary society.

A Narrative of Courage and Activism:

The Role of Women in the Swadeshi Movement

The Swadeshi Movement saw unprecedented participation from women who played a critical role in India's struggle for independence. They organized Swadeshi fairs and promoted the use of indigenous products. Saraladevi Chaudhurani opened 'Lakshmir Bhandar,' which sold only indigenous articles, and encouraged women to give up foreign goods, including smashing their foreign bangles.

Under the leadership of Basanti Devi, her sister Urmila Devi, and the organizer of Nari Karmo Mandir, Suniti Devi, several women courted arrest for selling Khadi and engaging in other illegal activities. They went door-to-door persuading people to buy and use Khadi, and appealed to the public to observe a complete strike during the Prince of Wales' visit to Calcutta. Their arrests for these actions surprised even Gandhi, who acknowledged their significant contributions to the attainment of Swarajya.

Prominent women like Lilavati Mitra, Nimla Sarkar, Subla Acharaj, and Hemangini Das were active in promoting the Tat and Charka movements in their communities. Lilavati Mitra led a protest meeting in Kolkata, and women from Barisal donated their savings to the Swadesh Bandhab Samiti. Sarojini Devi also participated in revolutionary activities in Barisal. From 1908-1909, women played a crucial role in the national revolutionary movement by sheltering revolutionaries, hiding weapons, and arranging their escape. Notable contributors included Brakshamayi Sen, Chinmayi Sen, Soudamini Devi, Priyabala Dasgupta, and Mrinalini Dasgupta.

Ashalata Sen and Leela Roy in Dhaka, and Mohini Devi and Basanti Devi in Calcutta, became focal points of the movement. Women like Umila Devi, Hemprabha Majumdar, Sunitha Devi, Neli Sengupta, Jyotirmayi Ganguly, Sarla Gupta, Daulatunnessa, Sarojini Naidu, Radha Devi, Renuka Roy, and others played significant roles in the non-cooperation movement.

University students like Shanti, Suniti, Veena Das, and Ujjwala Majumder attempted to assassinate tyrannical officials. Pritilata Waddedar and Kalpana Dutta participated in the Chittagong armory raid. Women like Kamala Dasgupta, Banalata Sen, Jyotikana Dutt, Parul Mukherji, Usha Mukherji, Savitri Devi, Leela Nag, and Indumati Singh were involved in revolutionary activities, risking their lives for the cause.

During the Ain Amany Movement, Daulatunnessa, Mahamaya, and Pratibha Sarkar were imprisoned. Daulatunnessa's relatives and peers actively participated in the movement. On March 22, 1930, Ashalata Sen and Sarma Gupta organized the Satyagrahi Sevika Dal in Dhaka and were arrested, along with other women, for their involvement in the civil disobedience movement and salt law protests.

Pritilata Waddedar played a heroic role in saving Surja Sen's life during a British attack, sacrificing her own life in the process. Ujjwala Majumdar was sentenced to life imprisonment for her revolutionary activities. Aruna Asaf Ali was a prominent figure in Bengali politics, particularly during the Bharat Char movement. Kamala Das Gupta joined Gandhi's Quit India Movement and was imprisoned from 1942-1945. Ashalata Sen was also imprisoned during the movement. Women, including Hemprabha Majumder, were arrested in 1942 for their participation in the last national movement.

Rural women also played a significant role in Bengal's peasant movement during the British era. They showed remarkable bravery and leadership in resisting the enemy. Notable leaders included Rasmoni, Deepsree Singh, Rohini, Jayamoni, Bhandari, Yashoda Rani Sarkar, Kaushalya Kamrani, Surma Singh, Burima Punyeswari, Kalyani Das Gupta, Sarlabala Pal, Bimala Majhi, Ila Mitra, Sachirani Devi, Reba Roy Chowdhury, Mahasweta Devi, Begum Qayyum, Kharki Barmani, Rajbala Barmani, Mohini Barmani, Niroda Barmani, and Rani Mukherjee.

The active participation of women in the Swadeshi Movement and other revolutionary activities marked a significant departure from traditional gender roles in India. Their involvement was not merely symbolic but demonstrated their capacity for leadership, sacrifice, and resilience. Women like Basanti Devi, Lilavati Mitra, Pritilata Waddedar, and Aruna Asaf Ali showed that they were not only capable of supporting the movement but also of taking charge and leading it. However, the narrative of women's participation in the Swadeshi Movement also highlights the persistent gender biases within the freedom struggle itself. Despite their contributions, women often had to fight for recognition and inclusion in the movement's strategic and decision-making processes. The patriarchal structures within revolutionary organizations and broader society often relegated women to supportive roles, even as they proved themselves equally capable of revolutionary action.

The intensity of Gandhi's opposition to certain women's actions, such as the women of Barisal, underscores the complexities and contradictions within the nationalist movement regarding

gender roles. Gandhi's harsh criticism of women involved in nationalist activities that he deemed inappropriate reveals the persistent societal discomfort with women stepping outside traditional roles. Despite these challenges, the legacy of women in the Swadeshi Movement and the broader freedom struggle is one of courage, determination, and a breaking of barriers. Their stories inspire future generations to continue fighting for equality and justice, not just in political spheres but across all areas of life. The Swadeshi Movement, thus, serves as a crucial chapter in understanding the multifaceted roles women played in India's journey to independence, challenging and transforming societal norms along the way.

Bravery and Defiance:

Women's Involvement in the Chittagong Armoury Raid

The Chittagong Armoury Raids that took place on April 18, 1930, paved the way for women activists in the revolutionary movement. While the Civil Disobedience Movement often takes a prominent place in post-independence historical narratives, the Chittagong Armoury Raids and their nearly four-year aftermath of insurgency are often dismissed as a mere footnote. Yet, in 1930, the raids shook the British Empire, leading to a series of direct armed confrontations between Surjya Sen's Indian Republican Army and British forces that deeply unnerved the Raj. These events electrified Bengal, impacting both male and female students.

Surjya Sen, in his capacity as the District Congress Secretary, organized a women's conference in Chittagong in 1929. Although women were accepted in overground activities, they were initially excluded from the secret revolutionary organization, the Indian Republican Army. Kalpana Dutt, a key figure in the revolutionary movement, wrote that Ananta Singh, one of the leaders of the Chittagong raids, was "strongly against taking girls into the revolutionary network - he did not trust us. So much so that he could not trust men who were associated with any girl." Ananta Singh's sister Indumati, an active sympathizer and supporter of the IRA, was very angry on the day of the Chittagong raids when she was told that no woman could take part in the night's action. She told her brother, "I am no less than the boys - I can wrestle, shoot, drive a car. Am I inferior only because I was born a woman?"

The massive government crackdown throughout Bengal following the Chittagong raids changed this exclusionary stance. With every young Hindu male suspect and thousands detained in jail, revolutionary leaders, particularly in Chittagong but also in other districts, had to turn to women. Initially used as couriers and links between Calcutta and Chittagong and between those in jail and in the underground, women evoked far less suspicion than men. By 1931-32, they became activists in their own right, conducting assassinations and raids as part of the violent struggle for freedom.

Kalpana Dutt, for instance, was a chemistry student at Bethune College with access to laboratory chemicals essential for making bombs. She brought large amounts of acid, concealed in her suitcase, and set up a workshop inside her Chittagong home to prepare gun cotton and dynamite. She later went underground and became part of Surjya Sen's gang of guerrillas.

Pritilata Waddadar, posing as a cousin of Ramkrishna Biswas, who was sentenced to death in Alipore Jail, maintained live communication between Masterda in Chittagong and the jailed comrade. An excellent student of literature, Pritilata wrote many pamphlets for the underground IRA upon returning to Chittagong. She also went underground and led the attack on the Pahartali Club, choosing to commit suicide by swallowing cyanide after completing the raid to become a martyr for the cause of freedom.

To conclude, the involvement of women in the Chittagong Armoury Raids and their subsequent revolutionary activities marked a significant shift in the Indian independence movement. Their courage, determination, and sacrifices not only challenged societal norms but also played a crucial role in the fight against British colonial rule.

Midnapore's Bravehearts:

A Case Study of Women's Revolutionary Acts

The Civil Disobedience Movement, initiated across various parts of Midnapore, witnessed significant contributions from women, who played a pivotal role in directing activities in locations such as Shiulipur, Ghoramara, and Baroduari. Women like Matangini Hazra, Prabhavati Maity, and Laxmimoni Hazra were imprisoned during the Salt Movement, while figures such as Jamunabala Devi, Subodhbala Kuiti, and Indumati Bhattacharyya were active in the Tamluk sub-division. The British authorities recognized Midnapore as a hub of rebellion and revolt, with few female revolutionaries, save for Rani Krishnapriya and Rani Siromoni, who resisted the English East India Company in the late 18th century.

During the Swadeshi Movement, women from Midnapore emerged from seclusion to engage in symbolic acts of resistance. They participated in bonfires of foreign clothes and donated precious ornaments to support the cause, motivating others to join the movement. The observance of Rakhibandhan and Arandhan heightened their awareness and desire to protest against the proposed partition of Bengal. While their initial efforts yielded limited results, they marked the beginnings of a significant movement. The Swadeshi songs of Mukunda Das, Atul Prasad Sen, and Rabindranath Tagore deeply influenced the people of Midnapore, and the tragic news of Kshudiram's hanging further galvanized them.

The economic crises of the inter-war and post-war periods intensified resentment against colonial rule, particularly in underdeveloped regions like Midnapore. The launch of the Non-Cooperation Movement prompted women to join the protest, picketing liquor shops and stores selling foreign goods. They actively participated in prabhat ferries, processions, meetings, and vocally protested against the government and foreign goods. They propagated the ideals of Satyagraha and urged others to join the Asahayog Andalon, enduring brutal torture without retreating. Following the movement, many women dedicated themselves to village reconstruction, spinning charka, and making khadi.

A significant number of women from Midnapore took part in the Civil Disobedience Movement, defying social and customary restrictions. According to the local journal 'Nihar', women from the coastal areas of Contai and Tamluk subdivisions led 75 out of 104 processions in Nandigram P.S. during 1932-33. Approximately 90% of the salt-making centers were managed by illiterate women, who endured severe beatings and torture by the British police.

In the Contai subdivision, 1,137 women were detained, with 40 receiving sentences ranging from short to long-term imprisonments.

The District Congress demonstrated astute organization by establishing parallel governments like the Tramalipta Jatiya Sarkar and Swaraj Panchayat. The Tamluk Congress also formed the National Militia, Bidyut Bahini, and its auxiliary force, Bhagini Sena. The Bhagini Sena, a well-organized and disciplined military force, connected senior female cadres with village women lacking political training or formal education. These women joined the movement with a steadfast belief in compelling the British to leave India.

The women fighters of Midnapore demonstrated remarkable heroism, serving as active combatants, reliable supporters, and sincere sympathizers. They provided shelter, food, and nursing care to fighter-volunteers and confronted the British police with vegetable-cutters and daggers. Despite facing severe brutality, they remained undeterred, displaying moral courage and a fervent desire to liberate Mother India. Their love for the country and their commitment to the 'Do or Die' pledge inspired others to continue striving for a free India. These women's contributions to the Civil Disobedience Movement in Midnapore were crucial in the fight against colonial oppression, underscoring their significant role in India's journey to independence.

Against Patriarchy and Empire:

Comparing Bina Das and Banalata Sen

Comparing Bina Das and Banalata Sen illuminates the challenge of constructing a definitive female revolutionary figure who disrupted both Bengali middle-class patriarchy and the rigid formalism of British rule. Das, educated predominantly in British institutions in Cuttack and Calcutta, fondly recalls her upbringing in a progressive Brahmo household. She credits her father and elder sister, Kalyani Das, with instilling in her the principles of swadeshi. Notably, her father taught Subhash Bose, the visionary behind the Indian National Army, while her sister founded Chhatri Sangha, a women's organization. Their influence coincided with the era of Gandhi's non-cooperation movement and the boycott of the Simon Commission, marking the emergence of a fledgling nationalist identity, albeit one still in its nascent stages.

Das' initial training with the Bengal Volunteers prepared her for participating in a hartal ("strike") at Bethune College in 1928. While studying at Bethune and Diocesan College, she actively recruited fellow students to join the revolutionary cause. Events like the Chittagong Armory Raid of 1930 and an unsuccessful assassination attempt on police commissioner Charles Tegart bolstered the revolutionary movement. These experiences prompted Das to reject Gandhian principles in favor of clandestine activities. Kamala Dasgupta, involved in storing and distributing arms to revolutionaries, recounts Das' transformation intimately: "She was a gentle, emotional girl, also an intellectual and first in her class. An idealism shone on her face... She covered her face when I asked her to consider the shock to her parents. 'Don't tell them, please.'" Das approached Dasgupta seeking a revolver for an assassination attempt on Governor Stanley Jackson. The subsequent events, including the assassination attempt at the Calcutta University convocation, Bina Das' trial, and her articulate confession, have been extensively documented in historical and nationalist literature, fostering a legacy of female revolutionary bravery and sacrifice.

In contrast to Bina Das, Banalata Sen's sense of patriotism didn't stem from family influences. Her father, a successful kabiraj (Ayurvedic practitioner), managed a rural estate in Kartikpur, Bangladesh. Banalata, one of many siblings, faced early losses with several siblings dying young. Despite societal expectations limiting her education, Banalata resisted patriarchal pressures and pursued her academic aspirations. She seamlessly integrated nationalist activities into her academic pursuits, excelling as a private candidate in her matriculation exams before relocating to Calcutta for further studies. To finance her education there, she underwent basic

training and secured employment as a primary teacher. The specifics of this period remain uncertain, with neither her mother nor aunt able to clearly recall how a young female student managed to settle in a new city, find boarding, work, and continue her studies. Banalata likely received assistance from Satyaranjan Sen, an elder cousin established in Calcutta. Such familial connections, spanning from rural Bengal to urban centers like Calcutta, provided vital support networks for female revolutionaries like Banalata.

Banalata pursued her intermediate and undergraduate studies at Women's College, Calcutta, among the institution's pioneer graduating classes. Her schedule allowed her to teach in the afternoons and work as a private tutor in the evenings while attending morning classes. Later, she enrolled in a Master of Arts program in Economics at Calcutta University. Throughout her academic journey, Banalata resided in a women's hostel in North Calcutta, a necessary arrangement for a female student from elsewhere. Women's hostels and private tutoring provided essential support for migrant female students in a city where even commuting alone was daunting. Notably, Manikuntala Sen, founder of the women's organization Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti, and Kamala Dasgupta were also residents of the same hostel in North Calcutta. Dasgupta, who supervised the hostel, also utilized it as a storage facility for arms intended for revolutionary activities.

Banalata embarked on her revolutionary journey upon joining Anushilan Samity while studying at Women's College. During the 1920s and early 1930s, Anushilan had orchestrated armed assaults against British officials. By the late 1930s, when Banalata became involved, the organization had moderated its approach and aligned ideologically with Subhash Bose. Her initial clandestine activity involved assisting political prisoners who had escaped from Alipore Jail and sought refuge in Titagarh. Simultaneously, she held prominent roles in the Students' Federation and served as General Secretary of the All-Bengal Girls' Students Committee, actively recruiting students into the revolutionary cause, akin to Bina Das. The college campus served as a hub for nationalist fervor and clandestine operations. In 1937, Banalata participated in a movement championed by Gandhi to secure the release of political prisoners, leading to the early liberation of several revolutionaries, including Bina Das. Additionally, in 1938, she attended the Haripura Congress, a pivotal event where Subhash Bose advocated for radical militancy.

From 1939 to 1942, both Banalata and Bina were actively engaged in organizational efforts and mass demonstrations, albeit with differing ideological stances. Despite her familial ties to

Subhash Bose, Bina opted to align herself with the mainstream faction of the Congress in Bengal. She extensively travelled to recruit women into the nationalist movement and served as General Secretary of the South Calcutta Congress branch until her arrest during a rally amid the Quit India movement in 1942. On the other hand, Banalata remained committed to the Bose wing (Forward Bloc), serving as a courier and delivering provisions to Bose's residence while he was under house arrest until his escape to Germany in 1941. Following the dissolution of Anushilan Samity, Banalata joined the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and actively participated in both labor and nationalist movements. She played a crucial role in organizing and recruiting for protest marches in North Calcutta during the August revolution of 1942. The dramatic events of the protest that led to her arrest have become a significant part of our family's history. During the chaotic police raid, Banalata, who led the rally, fell amidst the stampede but survived the onslaught of police brutality. Advised by party members, she went into hiding, yet was eventually apprehended by the police, who relied on a network of informants for her capture.

Upon their release from prison in 1945, Bina and Banalata entered a nation grappling with "famine, inflation, and ordinances." They immersed themselves in labor movements and unions, representing the Congress and the RSP, respectively. Both engaged in relief efforts for victims of Hindu-Muslim riots, with Banalata's recollections of the Great Calcutta killings and her efforts in devastated communities lingering as poignant memories. Meanwhile, Bina Das primarily worked in relief camps in Noakhali, where violence persisted following the riots in Calcutta.

The comparison of Bina Das and Banalata Sen underscores the complexities and multifaceted nature of female revolutionary participation in India's struggle for independence. Both women, despite their differing backgrounds and ideological paths, exemplify the resilience, courage, and commitment required to challenge both colonial oppression and entrenched patriarchal norms. Bina Das' journey from Gandhian non-violence to armed resistance reflects a broader disillusionment and radicalization within the nationalist movement, highlighting the limitations and frustrations of non-violent protest against a brutal colonial regime. Her articulate confession and subsequent legacy serve as a testament to the intellectual and emotional rigor that underpinned her revolutionary fervor.

Conversely, Banalata Sen's revolutionary trajectory, marked by her alignment with Subhash Bose and later the RSP, illustrates a different facet of the struggle, one that navigated the

intersections of rural-urban divides and leveraged familial and community networks for support. Her contributions to the labor movement and efforts during communal riots emphasize the continuity of her revolutionary spirit beyond the immediate goals of independence, extending into the realms of social justice and community welfare.

In conclusion, the lives of Bina Das and Banalata Sen provide rich, nuanced insights into the diverse ways in which women participated in and shaped the Indian independence movement. Their stories challenge monolithic representations of female revolutionaries and underscore the importance of recognizing the varied experiences and contributions of women in the historical narrative of India's freedom struggle.

The Hidden Vanguard:

Pioneers of India's Freedom Struggle

Sarala Devi

Sarala Devi was an influential figure in early 20th-century Bengal. She played a pivotal role in establishing secret revolutionary groups, including meeting with Jatin Banerjee, an emissary from Aurobindo in Baroda, to create a clandestine network. Sarala introduced cultural rituals like Birastami and organized events such as the Pratapaditya Utsav, akin to Tilak's Shivaji Utsav, and formed the Suhrid Samiti in Mymensingh. Although initially interested in revolutionary politics, she distanced herself from the Anushilan Samiti due to disagreements over fundraising methods, particularly dacoity.

After her marriage in 1905, Sarala continued her social activities, notably founding the Bharat Stri Maha Mandal to promote women's education. Her memoir reflects frustration with the perceived cowardice in Bengal and calls for active resistance against British oppression. Despite facing criticism, she was praised for her philanthropy. Sarala's contributions included patronizing physical culture clubs where young men learned martial arts, underscoring her support for physical and mental readiness for revolution.

Nanibala Devi

Nanibala Devi, widowed early, exhibited remarkable bravery by posing as the wife of a political prisoner in 1915 to pass him information. She sheltered young activists involved in the German Plot, led by Jyotindranath Mukherjee. Arrested and severely tortured, Nanibala endured four years of imprisonment under Regulation III of 1818, refusing to yield under extreme duress. Her involvement in the freedom struggle began through her nephew, Amarendranath Chatterjee, a key Jugantar member. Nanibala's steadfastness in the face of brutal treatment highlights the extreme sacrifices women made for India's independence.

Dukaribala Devi

Dukaribala Devi, a housewife from Birbhum, faced imprisonment from 1917 to 1918 for possessing arms. Her political involvement challenged caste prejudices, welcoming 'untouchables' into her home despite public criticism. She was the first woman revolutionary trained by Bipin Behari Ganguly and was arrested for her involvement in the Rodda arms heist.

Her brother-in-law inspired her to join the freedom movement. Despite her husband's subsequent marriages, Dukaribala maintained amicable relations with her co-wives. After her prison term, her husband separated from her, leaving her to raise her children alone.

Ila Sen

Ila Sen, born in the Malay Federated States in 1907, was an alumna of Bethune College. Despite her academic brilliance, she actively participated in the Simon Commission boycott in 1928 and the Salt Satyagraha in 1930, leading to her imprisonment. Ila is remembered for her courage during a procession in memory of Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das, where she single-handedly resisted a group of mounted police, inspiring others to do the same. Her steadfastness in the face of adversity exemplifies the indomitable spirit of women in the independence movement.

Shanti Ghose and Suniti Chowdhury

Students of Nawab Faizunnesa Government Girls High School, Shanti Ghose and Suniti Chowdhury joined the Jugantar Party at 16. On December 14, 1931, they assassinated Comilla district magistrate Charles Geoffrey Buckland Stevens. Their bold action led to their arrest and a seven-year imprisonment. Suniti, the youngest female revolutionary of India, continued her education and became a reputed doctor after her release. Their fearless actions and subsequent resilience underscore the significant roles young women played in the freedom struggle.

Matangini Hazra

Matangini Hazra, a daughter of a poor peasant, symbolized extraordinary courage in the fight for freedom. Despite lacking formal education, she led a procession of 6,000 supporters to seize the Tamluk police station. Even after being shot three times, she continued to march with the tricolor flag, embodying the indomitable spirit of India's struggle for independence.

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain

Begum Rokeya was a pioneer of the women's liberation movement in South Asia. As a thinker, writer, educator, and political activist, she dedicated her life to women's education and independence. Her works, including essays on feminism and critiques of the purdah system, challenged societal norms. Recognized as one of the greatest Bengalis by BBC Bangla, her efforts left an enduring impact on women's rights.

Pritilata Waddedar

Pritilata Waddedar, a philosophy student at Bethune College, joined Surya Sen's revolutionary group and led an attack on the Pahartali European Club. Despite being injured, she sacrificed herself by swallowing cyanide to protect her comrades. Her story, depicted in the 2010 movie "Khelein Hum Jee Jaan Sey," highlights her dedication and bravery at just 21 years old.

Vina Mazumdar

Vina Mazumdar, a feminist and chronicler of the Indian women's movement, played a crucial role post-Independence. As the secretary of the first Committee on the Status of Women in India, she believed in education's power to empower women. She connected academic research with the women's movement's practical needs and reformed Hindu inheritance laws to ensure women's equal property rights.

Basanti Devi

Basanti Devi, a courageous revolutionary, advocated for freedom at the grassroots level. As the editor of the weekly publication Banglar Katha, she rallied marginalized communities to join the resistance movement. Known for her outspokenness and bravery, she worked tirelessly against caste prejudices and was recognized with the Padma Vibhushan award for her service to the nation.

The revolutionary contributions of Sarala Devi, Nanibala Devi, Dukaribala Devi, Ila Sen, Shanti Ghose, Suniti Chowdhury, Matangini Hazra, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Pritilata Waddedar, Vina Mazumdar, and Basanti Devi collectively illuminate the vital roles women played in India's struggle for independence. Despite facing societal and familial pressures, imprisonment, torture, and even death, these women exhibited unwavering dedication to the cause of freedom. Their stories highlight the intersection of gender and politics, showcasing how their revolutionary activities challenged both British colonial rule and entrenched patriarchal norms. Each woman's unique journey contributed to a broader movement that reshaped India's political landscape and laid the groundwork for future generations of women's rights activists. Their legacies continue to inspire and remind us of the extraordinary courage and resilience required to fight for justice and equality.

The Intellectual Pursuits of Female Revolutionaries:

Unveiling the Untold Dimensions of India's Independence Movement

The memoirs authored by female revolutionaries provide invaluable insights into the participation of women during the later phases of the Indian independence movement. These narratives, however, often fall short of addressing specific inquiries regarding the revolutionaries' perspectives on women's rights. For instance, Bina Das critiques the Communists for their reliance on the U.S.S.R. and accuses the Congress of displaying ambivalence toward the mass uprising of 1942. Yet, she offers little insight into her own perceptions of her role as a woman. Similarly, Shanti Ghosh (Das) dedicates an entire chapter to her struggles concerning spirituality, while Kamala Dasgupta and Kalyani Das primarily focus on their political engagements. Kalpana Datta provides brief sketches of Chattogram revolutionaries, but none of these memoirs delve into discussions about women's societal roles.

Despite detailed accounts of prison life, these memoirs do not address broader questions concerning women's status in society. Before exploring the reasons behind this absence, it is crucial to mention two exceptions: Shantisudha Ghosh and Bimpalpratibha Devi.

Banalata Sen reflects on her time in prison as a period of intellectual growth and enrichment. As a member of the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and previously the Marxist faction of Anushilan Samity, her arrest provided an opportunity to interact with experienced revolutionaries like Bina Das, Kamala Dasgupta, and Ujjala Majumdar, who had been involved in earlier direct actions against British authorities. Within the female section of Presidency Jail, lively political discussions unfolded, allowing Banalata to compare her radical convictions with the more moderate stance of the Indian National Congress. Kamala Dasgupta describes a reading circle involving Banalata, Pratibha Bhadra, and Nirmala Ray, with Banalata's keen interest in dissecting Engels' "Anti-Dühring." These debates, often led by Banalata's insightful analysis and extending into the early hours, breathed life into the otherwise monotonous prison routine, invigorating the atmosphere with intellectual fervor.

Detainees held at Presidency Jail and Hijli Jail were granted access to the resources of the Imperial Library and could even request books from university libraries. Banalata took advantage of these provisions to pursue her Master's degree in Economics while incarcerated. She successfully completed her studies and was officially awarded the degree upon her release in 1945.

Another eminent woman, Kumudini Mitra, organized a group of educated women to establish connections among different revolutionaries. This group propagated and preached the cause of the revolutionaries through *Suprabhat*, a Bengali magazine. Women helped in distributing revolutionary pamphlets and literature and in maintaining connections between different revolutionary leaders.

The memoirs of female revolutionaries from India's independence movement offer a complex and multifaceted narrative. While they provide detailed accounts of political engagements and the harsh realities of prison life, they conspicuously lack a discourse on women's societal roles and rights. This absence can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the immediate focus of these revolutionaries was the struggle against colonial rule, which overshadowed other issues, including gender equality. The pressing need to address national liberation often relegated discussions of women's rights to the background. This prioritization reflects the broader context of the independence movement, where the primary objective was to overthrow colonial oppression. Secondly, the patriarchal structure of Indian society, even within revolutionary circles, may have influenced the prioritization of issues. Female revolutionaries, despite their active participation, were still operating within a male-dominated framework that did not always recognize or value their perspectives on gender equality. This dynamic underscores the pervasive influence of patriarchy, even within movements that sought to challenge other forms of oppression. Thirdly, the experience of political imprisonment itself may have shaped the narratives. The memoirs emphasize the shared struggle and solidarity among prisoners, highlighting intellectual and political discussions that transcended gender lines. This solidarity fostered a sense of collective identity focused on national liberation rather than individual or gender-specific grievances. The environment of imprisonment, characterized by harsh conditions and a need for mutual support, may have further reinforced this focus. Nevertheless, the intellectual activities undertaken by these women in prison underscore their resilience and commitment to personal and national growth. The vibrant political debates, pursuit of academic qualifications, and organizational efforts reveal a dimension of the independence movement that is both inspiring and instructive. These activities not only provided a means of intellectual stimulation but also helped sustain the revolutionary spirit within the harsh confines of prison life.

Revolutionary Outcasts:

Prostitutes in the Fight for Independence

The role of female prostitutes as revolutionaries in the freedom movement in Bengal from 1905 to 1947 is a lesser-known aspect but nonetheless significant. While their contributions may not always be prominently documented in mainstream historical narratives, they played various roles that intersected with the broader struggle for independence. There are references to a group of prostitutes operating in the Lal Bazar area of Kolkata who allegedly provided support to revolutionary activities during the freedom movement. While their individual names may not be known, their collective efforts in aiding the cause of independence have been mentioned in some historical accounts.

They often operated in spaces frequented by colonial officials, military personnel, and other key figures of the British administration. They used their access to gather valuable intelligence about the activities and plans of the colonial authorities, which was then passed on to freedom fighters and underground networks. Prostitution provided a clandestine network through which messages, weapons, and supplies could be smuggled across enemy lines. Female prostitutes, owing to their ability to move freely within society without arousing suspicion, acted as couriers and facilitators for underground revolutionary groups.

Women labelled as 'fallen' by society contributed to the financial needs of the freedom movement by donating their earnings or providing financial support to revolutionary activities. Additionally, they offered material and emotional support to freedom fighters, offering refuge, sustenance, and care in times of need. One such example could be in 1907, during a violent confrontation between Swadeshi volunteers and the police in a north Calcutta Street, prostitutes fought back by hurling stones at the police from rooftops. Khudiram Basu, among the early martyrs of Bengal, found refuge in the home of one such woman after being abandoned by his family.

Sisters in Struggle:

Women's Organizations in the Independence Movement

In the early period of the Indian independence movement, not only did individual women stand out, but numerous women's organizations were also formed, playing a significant role in the struggle for freedom. In 1910, Sarala Devi founded the Bharat Stri Mandal in Calcutta. Inspired by the Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience movements, young girls from affluent backgrounds began actively participating in protests, following examples set by women in Calcutta who defied authorities. These young women established organizations like Chatri Sangha and Dipali Sangha and joined Volunteer Corps under Subhas Chandra Bose's leadership, marking a new era of female participation in politics.

Dinesh Majumdar played a pivotal role by training girls in physical exercises and revolutionary tactics. These young women challenged societal norms, as depicted in Kamala Dasgupta's memoir. The involvement of girls intensified in the 1930s, with Shanti Ghosh and Suniti Choudhury making history by assassinating Magistrate Stevens in 1931. Despite condemnation from some Congress leaders and intellectuals, Bina Das attempted to assassinate Governor Jackson in 1932. Directed by Surya Sen, Pritilata Waddadar led an attack on a European club, highlighting women's determination in the struggle for freedom. Her suicide note emphasized the resolve of Indian women to overcome obstacles and join the armed struggle for independence.

With unwavering determination, Bina Das joined the ranks of "Chhatri Sangha," a revolutionary group in Calcutta dedicated to the cause of liberation. The group's first significant action was aimed at eliminating a tyrannical British Governor during a convocation ceremony, an event where Bina herself was to receive her graduation degree. In a bold attempt to strike at the heart of colonial authority, Bina Das seized the moment and fired five shots from her revolver at Governor Stanley Jackson.

Leading women actively participated in the non-cooperation movement, organizing and sensitizing the wider female society. Each of them established Nari Mangal Samiti in their respective regions or activated previously established women's organizations. They traveled from village to village, carrying out the campaign of the Swadeshi movement among women. During the Ain Amany movement of 1932, the Gaibandha Mahila Samiti was formed under

the leadership of Mahamaya Bhattacharjee. Under this association's leadership, many women took part in processions, picketing, and the movement to disobey Article 144.

During the Salt Satyagraha in 1930, Leela Nag formed the 'Dhaka Mahila Satyagraha Samiti' with women in Dhaka. There were 80 different photographs and copies of Mahatmaji's speeches and letters with information on Gandhiji's Dandi campaign and his history, as well as violations of the salt law by people openly producing salt at meetings around the city. Women also disseminated the Satyagraha message using magic lanterns throughout the district. Leading figures in managing this magic lantern were Renu Sen, Veena Roy, Shakuntala Chowdhury, and others.

These women's organizations were instrumental in mobilizing female participation in the independence movement. Their contributions, often overlooked, were crucial in challenging British rule and societal norms, paving the way for future generations of women to participate actively in India's political and social arenas.

Imprisoned Voices:

Prison Narratives of Women Revolutionaries

In the summer of 1964, my grandmother Banalata Sen and my mother Susmita Rakshit made a surprise visit to Ujjala Majumdar at her home in Park Circus, Calcutta. Upon opening the door, Ujjala exclaimed, "Satya ghatana noy, Bana," expressing disbelief. This moment, vividly remembered by my mother, marked the first reunion of the two activists since their time in Presidency Jail in the 1940s. Their conversation shifted from political activities to reminiscing about their participation in the Tagore play, Raktakarabi ("Red Oleanders"), performed in prison. Both women had to portray male roles due to the absence of male prisoners. Occasionally, they would hear a haunting voice singing Tagore songs late at night, drifting over from the male ward.

- Sambarta Rakshit

Women revolutionaries during their youth endured significant periods as political prisoners, universally viewing this time as lost to their cause, yearning to resume organizational and subversive activities. The autobiographies of Bina Das and Kamala Dasgupta, comrades of my grandmother in Presidency Jail, shed light on adapting to incarceration and striving for subversion within confinement. Bina Das, convicted in 1932 for attempting to assassinate Stanley Jackson, Governor of Bengal, served six years in various Bengal prisons. Rearrested in 1942 during the Quit India movement, she spent the subsequent four years in Presidency Jail. Similarly, Banalata Sen, arrested in 1942 amid the Quit India movement, endured detention without trial at Presidency Jail until 1945.

The British prison system comprised a hierarchical bureaucracy with various roles from superintendents to janitors, segregating political prisoners, criminals, lepers, and the mentally ill. Despite some privileges for political detainees, feelings of isolation were common. Kamala Dasgupta recounts how she and Bina Das used a crack in the wall to glimpse passing trains from Hijli Jail, now part of the Indian Institute of Technology campus. Das' memoir, *Shrinkhal Jhankar* ("Ringed Chains"), reflects on whether those years were wasted, with a reunion at Hijli prompting Bina to revisit her failed assassination attempt on Governor Jackson, countered by Kamala's perspective on its impact. Despite bouts of despair, Das viewed political imprisonment as ultimately beneficial, exposing British oppression and fostering broader participation in the freedom movement. *Shrinkhal Jhankar* resonates with idealism,

emphasizing the mission even amidst confinement: to instill a resolve to face death within a subjugated populace.

During her time in prison, Das underwent a gradual ideological transformation, shifting from armed extremism to a more comprehensive revolutionary stance. Embracing Gandhian principles, she organized a hunger strike in Midnapore Jail to protest against the mistreatment by a particular jailer. Her direct engagement with Gandhi occurred during his visit to Alipore Jail, where she fearlessly debated his staunch commitment to non-violence. Nearly ten years later, they collaborated on a relief mission in riot-affected Noakhali, walking barefoot together. Das' dedication to labor and mass movements was influenced by the connections she formed in prison, which crossed class boundaries and included women convicts from general wards. She considers these women as agents of subversion, whether in their resistance against male violence or in their acts of petty theft during the British-induced famine of 1943.

Savitri Devi was sentenced to four years of rigorous imprisonment for harboring revolutionary hero Surja Sen and his comrades. Even after being released, Savitri Devi was not spared from the hands of the police, and she had to suffer a lot of pain and torture. The clandestine nature of revolutionary activities and the limited access to personal accounts from that era make piecing together comprehensive prison narratives of all female revolutionaries challenging. However, historical accounts reveal significant insights into their experiences.

British prisons in India were notorious for being overcrowded and lacking proper sanitation, leading to the spread of diseases and a constant battle for basic hygiene. Revolutionary women, especially those seen as high-risk, might have faced solitary confinement as a means of isolation and psychological pressure. Interrogations became a routine ordeal, where they faced relentless scrutiny and psychological torment. Despite the pain inflicted upon them, they remained steadfast, refusing to betray their cause or their fellow revolutionaries. In the darkness of the prison cells, they bore witness to unspeakable atrocities, their souls scarred by the cruelty of their captors. Yet, amidst the despair, they found solidarity and resilience, drawing strength from the shared struggle and the unwavering support of their comrades.

The torture inflicted on female revolutionaries was varied and brutal, aiming to break their spirits and extract information. Some common types of "Modes of Questioning" included severe beatings, electric shock torture, waterboarding, forced maintenance of uncomfortable positions, sleep deprivation, and sexual assault or threats of sexual violence. Techniques such as isolation, sensory deprivation, and threats against loved ones were used to induce fear,

anxiety, and psychological trauma. Women were even provided with wooden dust for menstruation purposes.

Despite these horrific conditions, the women remained undeterred. While imprisonment inflicted undeniable trauma through harsh conditions and isolation, their narratives illuminate not only the brutality endured but also their unwavering resolve and commitment amidst adversity. Their time in prison was marked by a profound sense of purpose, a belief that their suffering and sacrifice would eventually lead to a free India. Their experiences served as a testament to their resilience and the transformative power of shared struggle and solidarity.

In conclusion, the prison narratives of women revolutionaries like Bina Das, Kamala Dasgupta, and Savitri Devi reveal a complex interplay of despair and hope, suffering and resilience. Their incarceration, while intended to break their spirits, only solidified their resolve to fight against British oppression. Their experiences highlight the indomitable spirit of these women, who, despite facing unimaginable hardships, continued to contribute to the freedom movement in whatever ways they could. These narratives serve as a powerful reminder of the sacrifices made by countless women in the struggle for India's independence, and their legacy continues to inspire future generations to stand up against injustice and oppression.

Challenging Patriarchy:

Women's Struggle for Inclusion in India's Independence Movement

Throughout history, women have faced discrimination and marginalization, often due to societal norms and influential figures' actions. In 1920, 350 women from Barisal, east Bengal, joined the Congress party in response to Gandhi's call for broader membership. They also contributed to the Tilak Swaraj Fund. When they sought office in Congress committees, Gandhi met with them, advising against it, suggesting they abandon their profession for handspinning. He argued that only those with pure intentions could lead the struggle for Swaraj.

The women's nationalist fervor was not so easily re-directed. Only eleven of them promised to give up" their way of life day. But the others said they would take time to think, for they did not wish to deceive Gandhi. Over the next few years, these other women remained Congress members, were elected as delegates, and even founded an association whose manifesto promoted helping the poor and nursing the sick, spinning and weaving skills training among prostitutes, and adopting non-violence. In 1925, when Gandhi encountered this group again, he reacted with intense anger that their association provided higher musical organization's manifesto to be "obscene." He called the women of Barisal more dangerous than thieves because they steal virtue," and described them as akin to "unrepentant professional murderers." Their "tremendously dangerous powers of mischief" disqualified them from being true members of the satyagraha movement.

While it's not unexpected for Gandhi to oppose certain actions, the intensity of his outrage remains perplexing. Despite the women's nationalist intentions, Gandhi's condemnation of their use of spinning as a means to immorality seems exaggerated. His language, branding them as "disgraceful," "ugly," "murderers," and "thieves," appears disproportionate. Similarly, Gandhi expresses deep suspicion towards another group of Congress volunteers in Madaripur, dismissing their formation of an association as "dangerous" and urging them to focus on educating men about their actions rather than engaging in Congress activities. What's notable is Gandhi's lack of similar efforts to exclude landlords or industrialists from the Congress, despite their actions being antithetical to his principles. Instead, he reserves harsh criticism for prostitutes, describing them as "wrecks of society" and likening them to "thieves."

Within the revolutionary movement, women primarily served as cadres, driven more by revolutionary fervor than political ideology. While tales of female heroism exist, women were

generally subordinate within revolutionary organizations, with limited involvement in strategic planning. Shanti, Suniti, and Bina Das pursued individual acts, lacking broader political insight. Ideological focus on bravery marginalized women from decision-making, exacerbated by factionalism. Yet, solidarity occasionally emerged despite leadership shortcomings, fostering camaraderie among ordinary female members evident in their prison experiences.

Surjya Sen in his capacity as the District Congress Secretary had organised a women's conference in Chittagong in 1929. But while women were acceptable in overground activity, they were not taken into the secret revolutionary organization called the Indian Republican Army. Kalpana Dutt has written that Ananta Singh, one of the key leaders of the Chittagong raids, was "*strongly against taking girls into the revolutionary network - he did not trust us. So much so that he could not trust men who were associated with any girl.*" Ananta Singh's sister Indumati was an active sympathizer and supporter of the IRA. According to Ananta Singh's own account, she was very angry on the day of the Chittagong raids when she was told that no woman could take part in the night's action. She told her brother: "*I am no less than the boys - I can wrestle, shoot, drive a car. Am I inferior only because I was born a woman?*"

Women Revolutionaries in Post-Independence India:

Paths of Activism, Disillusionment, and Gender Dynamics

In the post-Independence era, many women revolutionaries continued to engage in socio-political activities, though their paths varied significantly. Prominent figures such as Bina Das, Lila Ray, and Ujjala Majumdar remained active in the political sphere, with some like Suhasini Ganguly contributing to the women's front of the Communist Party of India (CPI), while others, including Kalpana Datta, participated in relief efforts during the 1943 famine. Bimalpratibha Devi made notable contributions to working-class movements and was instrumental in advocating for the release of political prisoners. Shanti Das, having engaged in trade union activities, joined the Congress and became a member of the Legislative Council. Despite their diverse trajectories, these former revolutionaries often collaborated across party lines on shared causes.

However, the post-Independence landscape saw many women revolutionaries retreat from active political involvement. While some, such as Suhasini Ganguly and Kalpana Datta, maintained their roles within the Communist Party, others like Shanti Das and Bina Das shifted their focus to social work or changed their political affiliations. The disillusionment stemming from their experiences during the Quit India movement and subsequent political developments contributed to their struggle to navigate and find their place within the evolving political framework.

The literary and cultural narratives of the 19th and early 20th centuries, shaped predominantly by male authors and Victorian norms, significantly influenced perceptions of women's roles and freedoms. Revolutionary literature, while centered on patriotism and nationalistic fervor, often overlooked gender issues. Despite their substantial contributions to the struggle for independence, many women revolutionaries lacked a critical awareness of women's rights as a fundamental aspect of their political activism. Their commitment to the cause of freedom was profound, yet their understanding of gender dynamics remained constrained by the prevailing societal norms and political structures of their time.

Conclusion

Any revolution or movement is incomplete without acknowledging the critical role women played. Their participation, both direct and indirect, deserves the proper recognition it often lacks. This paper aims to rectify this historical oversight. To gauge societal awareness, we interacted with people from three generations. Our first encounter was with an octogenarian gentleman. When we asked his thoughts, his response was a blank – “Who were they?” He only recognized a couple of names, like Matangini Hazra and Pritilata Waddedar. This limited knowledge underscored a clear neglect of their contributions. Next, we spoke to a middle-aged couple. The wife, to our surprise, revealed a personal connection – her own grandmother belonged to a secret revolutionary society. However, the husband’s immediate interjection was disheartening. He acknowledged a few women were involved but downplayed their significance, stating “the real revolutionaries were men.” Finally, we approached a friend, a graduate of the prestigious IIT Bombay. We assumed his education would translate to better awareness. While he agreed they played a significant role, his recall was limited to just two names – Matangini Hazra and Bina Das. He confessed his history education only extended to class 10, explaining his limited knowledge of female revolutionaries compared to his ability to name ten male freedom fighters. The reason? As he put it – “Because they are famous, everyone knows them.” This lack of awareness posits the question: Why is a layman so unfamiliar with women freedom fighters? The popular saying, “History is written by and about men,” sheds light on the issue. However, we believe not always is history made by men! History is not solely “his story,” it’s time that we start adapting “her story”. Instead of trying to shoehorn them into a pre-existing historical narrative, we need a fundamental shift in perception. The Bengal revolutionary movement saw the rise of “new women” – educated individuals advocating for justice and rights. Society believed these strong women would raise a generation capable of challenging British rule. However, this same society confined them to traditional roles– daughter, wife, mother. These women defied these limitations, becoming radical patriots who challenged the very foundation of colonial power. Their fight was arduous. They faced societal barriers, sometimes from their own families. The women, trapped in cages made of gold or bronze, needed no one to teach them the value of freedom and independence from colonial rule. They revolted, fought wars, and made immense sacrifices for liberty, but sadly, both time and history have overlooked their contributions. Even seemingly mundane tasks, like

providing food and shelter, were revolutionary acts. These women provided not just physical support but also crucial emotional strength. In a society that once denied women even property rights, it was unthinkable for these women to receive proper recognition in historical accounts. India's fight for independence ended in 1947, but the struggle for recognition continues for these women. It's a glaring reminder of our neglect that seminars are needed to understand the achievements of these forgotten heroes. Let's finally give them their due! We need deeper research to uncover their contributions, and incorporating their struggles into school textbooks is a powerful start. After all, these women weren't just heroines – they were the OG alpha females, redefining strength and leadership long before the term even existed. Let's not delay this process any further.

*Daughters of Bengal, with fire in their eyes,
From Partition's dawn to freedom's skies.
Not bound by tradition, nor hearth, nor by veil,
They answered the call, a revolutionary trail.
In homespun they marched, 'gainst a colonial might,
With Gandhi's non-violence, or in armed, shadowed fight.
Sarojini's voice, a melody strong,
Urged boycotts and strikes, to right every wrong.
Pritilata, disguised, with courage so bold,
Led raids for the cause, a story untold.
Matangini Hazra, with spirit ablaze,
Defied bullets and batons, in her freedom's daze.
Banalata, fearless, a bomb in her hand,
Fought for justice and freedom, for her motherland.
Basanti Devi, a leader so wise,
Organized and rallied, with fire in her eyes.
From picketing shops to smuggling the banned,
These women revolutionaries, for freedom they planned.
In classrooms and streets, their voices did ring,
Equality, liberty, the songs that they'd sing.
Though history remembers some, many remain,
Unsung heroines, etched in freedom's domain.
So let us raise a voice, let their sacrifices inspire,
The daughters of Bengal, set freedom's heart on fire.*

