



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

A Study Of Women's Participation In Non-Cooperation Movement With Special Reference To Bundelkhand-Sub Regions

¹Asma Khan and ²Dr. Anubha Shrivastava

¹Research Scholar (History), ²Professor

¹Bundelkhand University, Jhansi, India

²V.M.L. Government Girls' Degree College, Jhansi, India

Abstract

The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–1922), initiated under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, marked a significant chapter in India's struggle for independence, witnessing widespread participation across various strata of society. This paper explores the often-overlooked contributions of women in the Bundelkhand sub-regions an area steeped in historical and cultural richness. Through a comprehensive study based on archival research, oral histories, and secondary literature, the paper highlights the multifaceted roles played by women, ranging from active participation in protests and boycotts to mobilizing communities and sustaining the nationalist fervor at the grassroots level. The research examines the socio-cultural difficulties that influenced and sometimes limited their participation, while also highlighting their resilience and agency. This research elucidates regional narratives, so enhancing the history of women's contributions to India's liberation fight and underscoring the importance of local movements in the context of national resistance activities.

Keywords: Non-Cooperation Movement, Women's Participation, Bundelkhand, Indian Freedom Struggle, Regional History, Gender and Nationalism, Grassroots Mobilization, Colonial India.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Non-Cooperation Movement, launched by Mahatma Gandhi in 1920, marked a pivotal phase in India's struggle for independence. As one of the first mass movements against British colonial rule, it sought to mobilize Indians across social, economic, and regional lines through nonviolent resistance. Among the most remarkable, yet often underrepresented contributors to this national uprising were Indian women. Their participation in the movement reflected a significant shift in the sociopolitical landscape, challenging both colonial authority and traditional gender roles. In the Bundelkhand region, which spans parts of present-day Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, women played an essential yet relatively undocumented role in the Non-Cooperation Movement. The sub-regions of Bundelkhand, known for their rich cultural heritage and history of valor, witnessed an inspiring rise in female activism during this era. Women from rural and urban backgrounds alike responded to the call for Swaraj by engaging in picketing, boycotting foreign goods, spreading nationalist messages, and supporting the cause through local initiatives and civil disobedience. This paper seeks to explore the depth and diversity of women's involvement in the Non-Cooperation Movement within the Bundelkhand sub-regions. It aims to highlight individual and collective efforts, analyze the socio-cultural constraints they faced, and assess the broader impact of their participation on the freedom struggle and gender dynamics in Indian society. By bringing forth regional narratives, the study adds a valuable perspective to the larger discourse on women's roles in India's independence movement.

1.1 Historical Background of the Non-Cooperation Movement

The Non-Cooperation Movement was formally launched on 1st August 1920, as a direct response to a series of oppressive colonial actions, including the Rowlatt Act of 1919, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, and the injustices of the Khilafat issue. Spearheaded by Mahatma Gandhi, the movement advocated non-violent non-cooperation with British authorities, urging Indians to boycott government institutions, foreign goods, titles, and honors. The goal was to paralyze the colonial administrative machinery and assert Indian self-reliance and dignity through peaceful resistance. The movement marked a critical transition from elitist political agitation to a more inclusive mass mobilization. For the first time, common people from diverse backgrounds including peasants, laborers, students, and women were inspired to participate actively in national politics. The involvement of women was particularly significant, as it represented both a political awakening and a social revolution. The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–1922) was a landmark in India's freedom struggle. It emerged as a direct response to the repressive policies of British colonial rule and the growing nationalist sentiment among Indians. The immediate catalysts included shown in figure 1.

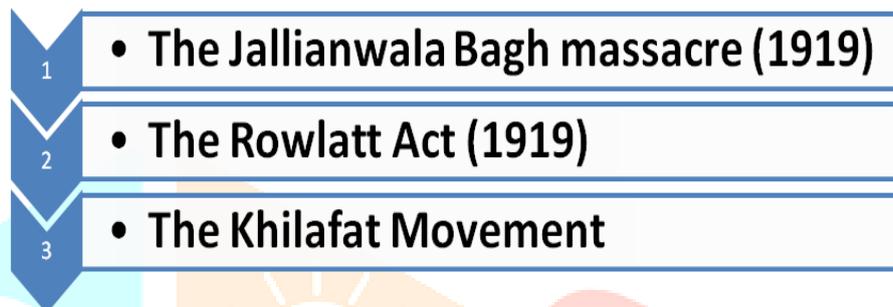


Figure 1: The immediate catalysts for Non-Cooperation Movement

The Jallianwala Bagh massacre (1919), which horrified the nation and revealed the brutality of British rule. The Rowlatt Act (1919), which authorized the government to imprison people without trial. The Khilafat Movement, which expressed Indian Muslims' discontent over the treatment of the Caliph in Turkey after World War I. The movement was formally launched in 1920 under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, who envisioned a mass protest that was non-violent but uncompromising.

II. STATUS OF WOMEN IN PRE-INDEPENDENCE INDIA

2.1. Social and Cultural Scenario

In pre-independence India, the status of women was largely shaped by deep-rooted patriarchal traditions. Social evils like child marriage, sati, the purdah system, female infanticide, and restrictions on widow remarriage were widespread. Women were often confined to the domestic sphere and denied equal participation in religious, social, and public life. The notion of women being subordinate to men was reinforced by cultural practices and religious misinterpretations. However, reform movements in the 19th century, led by figures like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Swami Vivekananda, initiated a slow change in societal attitudes toward women.

2.2. Educational and Economic Conditions

Education for women was extremely limited; very few girls attended schools, and literacy among women was negligible, especially in rural areas. Social norms discouraged women's education, fearing it would lead to moral decay or rebellion against traditional roles. Pioneers like Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, and Annie Besant championed women's education and established schools for girls. Economically, women mostly engaged in unpaid domestic work or agricultural labor. Some women from artisan communities participated in cottage industries like weaving, pottery, and handicrafts. Industrialization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries offered a few women jobs in factories, but working conditions were harsh, and wages were very low.

2.3. Role of Women in Earlier Movements

Despite the constraints, women in Bundelkhand demonstrated courage and leadership during several key historical movements. The most iconic figure from Bundelkhand, Rani Lakshmibai, led her army against the British during the First War of Independence. Her bravery became a symbol of resistance and inspiration for generations of women across India. While prominent names like Rani Lakshmibai are well-remembered, many unnamed women supported freedom fighters by cooking food, hiding revolutionaries, and carrying messages during the revolt. Inspired by reformist movements like Arya Samaj and education initiatives in princely states, some educated women began to engage in local reform activities. A few women from elite

families slowly entered the public sphere through social work and charity. Despite restrictions, women played significant roles in early reform and nationalist movements: During the social reform movements of the 19th century, women like Savitribai Phule fought for girls' education and against caste discrimination. In the Swadeshi Movement (1905), women actively boycotted British goods, spun khadi, and participated in picketing foreign shops. Annie Besant spearheaded the Home Rule Movement, inspiring many Indian women to step into public life. The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920s) saw mass participation from women, especially under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, who encouraged women to break traditional barriers. Leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, Begum Rokeya, and Kamala Nehru emerged as prominent faces of resistance. Women also participated in revolutionary activities, with figures like Kalpana Dutta and Pritilata Waddedar taking up arms against colonial rule.

III. ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE MOVEMENT: A NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Although the Indian freedom struggle had been largely dominated by male leadership, the Non-Cooperation Movement witnessed an unprecedented rise in women's activism. Influential leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Kasturba Gandhi, and Kamala Nehru played prominent roles at the national level, while countless unnamed women participated in spinning khadi, picketing liquor shops and foreign cloth stores, attending nationalist meetings, and educating others about swadeshi ideals. Women's involvement was not limited to urban centers; it percolated into smaller towns and rural landscapes, thus broadening the scope and inclusiveness of the movement. Despite societal constraints, patriarchal norms, and limited public presence, women demonstrated extraordinary courage and commitment to the cause of national freedom.

3.1 Bundelkhand: A Region of Resistance

Bundelkhand, historically known for its fierce warriors and freedom-loving populace, played a vital role in India's anti-colonial movements. Comprising parts of present-day southern Uttar Pradesh and northern Madhya Pradesh, Bundelkhand had a socio-political environment conducive to nationalist activities. The region, known for its agrarian economy and feudal traditions, also experienced the early impacts of British land policies and economic exploitation, which intensified local resistance. In this context, the involvement of Bundelkhand's women in the Non-Cooperation Movement was not merely an extension of nationalistic fervor but also a localized response to the economic, social, and political challenges they faced. Their participation was shaped by a complex interplay of regional identity, cultural values, Gandhian influence, and the growing awareness of self-rule.

3.2 Women's Contributions in Bundelkhand: Courage Amidst Constraints

The participation of women in the Non-Cooperation Movement in Bundelkhand, though less documented than in major urban centers, was both active and impactful. Their efforts were often grassroots-level and intertwined with their daily lives, making their contributions more subtle yet deeply significant in spreading the spirit of resistance. Several courageous women from Bundelkhand emerged as prominent figures during the Non-Cooperation Movement. While many names have been lost to history, oral traditions, folk songs, and local archives recount tales of women who defied societal norms to join the nationalist cause. Rani Rajendra Kumari of Chhatarpur was known for organizing local women's gatherings to promote swadeshi goods and Gandhian ideals. She reportedly refused to attend British-hosted colonial events and encouraged local households to boycott foreign cloth. Janki Bai of Banda actively participated in protest marches and spinning activities. She inspired other women in the town to contribute to the national movement by producing khadi and discouraging the use of imported items. In Jhansi, groups of women organized clandestine meetings, distributed nationalist pamphlets, and supported underground networks despite the fear of arrest. Some also took part in symbolic acts like burning foreign cloth in public bonfires. The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–1922), spearheaded by Mahatma Gandhi, inspired a surge of nationalist sentiment across India, and Bundelkhand was no exception. Women in Bundelkhand, a traditionally patriarchal and rural society, made notable contributions in various forms shown in figure 2.



Figure 2: Contribution of Bundelkhandi Women in various forms

Women actively participated in the boycott of foreign goods, especially foreign cloth, and promoted the use of khadi. They organized spinning sessions and encouraged others to abandon imported goods. Women stood at the forefront of picketing liquor shops, foreign cloth shops, and colonial institutions, often facing harassment and imprisonment. Bundelkhandi women hosted gatherings promoting indigenous goods, weaving, and handicrafts. Women collected funds for the Tilak Swaraj Fund and other nationalist initiatives by organizing social and religious gatherings. Participation included setting up and supporting *national schools* where the curriculum was free from colonial influence. Women organized and took part in early morning processions (prabhat pheris) singing patriotic songs and raising slogans like "Vande Mataram" and "Bharat Mata ki Jai."

3.4 Regional Leaders and Grassroots Mobilization

The success of women's participation in Bundelkhand during the Non-Cooperation Movement was largely due to the efforts of local leaders who believed in mass mobilization:

- **Chandrashekhar Azad** (though more prominent in the revolutionary phase, his early activism in Bundelkhand had a catalytic effect during this period, inspiring young men and women alike).
- **Rao Gopal Singh** of Chhatarpur and other regional zamindars who later leaned towards supporting nationalist causes encouraged women from noble and rural backgrounds to join.
- **Local Congress Committees:** The Bundelkhand Congress Committees organized meetings specifically aimed at mobilizing women, encouraging them to defy social norms and participate publicly.
- **Grassroots Mobilizers:** Female teachers and wives of local Congress leaders took the initiative to move from village to village, motivating women to engage in acts of resistance like spinning khadi and attending nationalist events.
- **Role of Religious Institutions:** Temples and gatherings often became informal spaces for political education, where women would come under the guise of religious activities and end up engaging in political discussions.

IV. CASE STUDIES OF PROMINENT WOMEN FROM BUNDELKHAND

Ram Dulari Devi (Jhansi)

Ram Dulari Devi emerged as a powerful symbol of courage in Jhansi. Inspired by Gandhi's call, she organized spinning sessions in her locality, held women-only meetings, and encouraged the boycott of foreign cloth. She was arrested for leading a march of women protesting against the sale of British goods.

Savitri Devi (Sagar Region)

A school teacher by profession, Savitri Devi left her job to work full-time for the nationalist cause. She organized night classes to educate rural women about nationalism, swaraj, and women's rights. She faced severe societal backlash but persisted and became a vital link between the urban leadership and rural women.

Rani Rajendra Kumari (Orchha)

Belonging to a princely family, Rani Rajendra Kumari subtly supported the movement by funding khadi workshops and sheltering Congress workers. She used her social standing to protect women volunteers from police action.

Bhagwati Devi (Hamirpur Region)

A grassroots mobilizer, Bhagwati Devi led processions of village women, urging them to give up liquor, foreign clothes, and to embrace self-reliance. She became locally famous for confronting British officials during a protest in 1921.

V. CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN IN BUNDELKHAND

- **Social Constraints and Patriarchy** - Women in Bundelkhand during the colonial period, and even today to some extent, faced deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. Traditional gender roles confined women largely to the domestic sphere, limiting their access to education, property rights, and public participation. Their mobility was restricted, and decisions regarding marriage, work, and even social interaction were dominated by male authority figures. Social customs such as *pardah* (veiling) and early marriage further marginalized women's voices, making it extremely difficult for them to assert themselves in public, political, or revolutionary activities. Despite these barriers, many women found ways to resist and contribute to societal and national movements, but often at great personal risk.
- **Colonial Repression** - The British colonial government viewed any form of dissent with suspicion, and women participating in political or social resistance were not spared from state repression. Women activists in Bundelkhand, who tried to organize protests, disseminate nationalist ideas, or support underground movements, often faced surveillance, imprisonment, public humiliation, and sometimes physical violence. The colonial authorities also exploited social norms to their advantage, knowing that harassment or punishment of women would deter broader community participation in nationalist activities. The fear of dishonor and reprisals made it even harder for women to step forward publicly against colonial rule.
- **Lack of Recognition** - Despite their significant contributions to local and national movements, the efforts of Bundelkhand's women were often overlooked in historical records. Most narratives of the freedom struggle and social reforms focused on male leaders, marginalizing or altogether ignoring the pivotal roles played by women. Even when women exhibited bravery—whether by organizing protests, acting as couriers for revolutionary messages, or providing shelter to activists—their stories were rarely documented or celebrated. This lack of recognition not only erased their legacy from mainstream history but also perpetuated the idea that women were passive participants rather than active agents of change.

VI. IMPACT AND LEGACY

6.1 Immediate Outcomes of Women's Participation

The active participation of women in the freedom struggle, particularly during mass movements like the Non-Cooperation Movement and the Civil Disobedience Movement, brought immediate and significant changes. For the first time, women were visibly present in the public and political spheres, breaking traditional social barriers. Their involvement inspired greater communal mobilization, strengthened the movements by sheer numbers, and brought a new moral force to the protests. In many regions, including Bundelkhand, women led marches, boycotts, and picketing, encouraging families and communities to support nationalist activities. Their contribution legitimized the idea that freedom was a cause for all Indians, irrespective of gender.

6.2 Long-term Effects on the Region and Gender Dynamics

In regions like Bundelkhand, the participation of women in the nationalist movements had a lasting impact on gender dynamics. Traditional patriarchal norms began to be questioned, and the idea of women as active agents of change gained acceptance. Education for girls gradually increased as families realized the importance of empowering women. Though complete gender equality remained distant, the freedom struggle planted seeds for future social reforms. Women's political consciousness, nurtured during the struggle, continued into the post-independence period, leading to increased involvement in governance, activism, and community leadership in the region.

6.3 Contribution to India's Freedom Struggle

Women's participation added an invaluable dimension to India's freedom struggle. Their involvement demonstrated that the desire for freedom transcended gender and class boundaries. Women not only supported movements but also endured hardships, imprisonment, and violence with extraordinary courage. Leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Nehru, Aruna Asaf Ali, and countless unnamed rural women played critical roles in organizing protests, raising funds, and spreading nationalist sentiment. Their sacrifices helped in sustaining mass movements and exerted moral pressure on colonial authorities. Moreover, their presence symbolized a unified national will, making the freedom movement truly representative of Indian society as a whole.

VII. UNIQUE FEATURES OF BUNDELKHAND'S INVOLVEMENT

The women of Bundelkhand contributed to the freedom struggle in ways shaped by the region's unique historical, cultural, and socio-economic context:

- **Legacy of Martial Valor:** Bundelkhand's historical association with warriors and fierce resistance against foreign rule instilled a natural spirit of defiance. Women here viewed participation not merely as political activism but as a sacred duty.
- **Grassroots Mobilization:** Unlike urbanized protests elsewhere, Bundelkhand witnessed village-centered movements where women led and participated in prabhat pheris (morning marches), distributed nationalist pamphlets, and encouraged the use of khadi and indigenous goods.
- **Support to Revolutionary Activities:** The rugged terrain of Bundelkhand allowed many freedom fighters to operate underground. Women played a crucial role in providing safe houses, food, intelligence, and logistical support to these fighters, often risking their lives.
- **Cultural Forms of Protest:** Songs, folklores, and rituals were used cleverly to spread nationalist messages. Women composed and sang *veer ras* songs (heroic ballads) that subtly encouraged resistance and maintained the spirit of nationalism.
- **Silent Sacrifices:** While elsewhere, mass arrests of women were reported and documented, Bundelkhand's women often faced brutalities away from the public eye — imprisonment, property confiscation, and social ostracization — yet bore these silently, with limited historical documentation.
- **Blend of Royal and Rural Participation:** Queens, noblewomen, village women, and even forest dwellers joined hands, demonstrating a rare solidarity across class and caste lines, unique to Bundelkhand's socio-political fabric.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The study of women's participation in the Non-Cooperation Movement, particularly in the Bundelkhand sub-regions, reveals that women played a pivotal role in mobilizing mass support and strengthening the spirit of nationalism. Despite social and cultural constraints, women emerged as significant contributors—organizing protests, participating in boycotts, spinning khadi, and raising awareness against British rule. Their involvement was not limited to urban centers; rural women too, in Bundelkhand's villages, demonstrated remarkable courage and commitment. Importantly, the movement fostered a collective identity among women, highlighting their political consciousness and their capacity to act as agents of change in society. The Non-Cooperation Movement acted as a catalyst for the empowerment of women in Bundelkhand and across India. It provided an unprecedented platform for women to assert themselves in the public sphere, challenging traditional gender roles. Participation in nationalist activities helped women gain political awareness, self-confidence, and a sense of agency. While the larger freedom struggle primarily focused on national liberation, it simultaneously sowed the seeds of women's empowerment. Though societal barriers remained post-movement, the confidence and experience gained by women during this period laid the groundwork for future struggles for women's rights and social reform in independent India.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

- **Comparative Studies:** Future research could compare the role of women in the Non-Cooperation Movement across different regions of India to highlight regional similarities and differences.
- **Oral Histories:** Collecting oral histories and personal narratives from descendants of women who participated in the movement could provide deeper insights into their experiences and struggles.
- **Impact Assessment:** Detailed studies can be conducted on how women's participation in early nationalist movements influenced their socio-political status post-independence in specific regions like Bundelkhand.

- **Role of Local Leadership:** Research can focus on local female leaders from Bundelkhand whose contributions remain undocumented or underappreciated.
- **Intersectionality:** Future scholars may also examine how factors like caste, class, and education intersected to shape women's experiences during the movement.

REFERENCES

1. Bandyopadhyay, S. (2015). *From Plassey to Partition and after: A history of modern India*. Orient BlackSwan.
2. Brown, J. M. (1972). *Gandhi's rise to power: Indian politics 1915–1922*. Cambridge University Press.
3. Chandra, B. (1989). *India's struggle for independence 1857–1947*. Penguin Books.
4. Chatterjee, P. (1993). *The nation and its fragments: Colonial and postcolonial histories*. Princeton University Press.
5. Desai, A. R. (2005). *Social background of Indian nationalism*. Popular Prakashan.
6. Forbes, G. (1996). *Women in modern India*. Cambridge University Press.
7. Ghosh, D. (2017). *Gentlemanly terrorists: Political violence and the colonial state in India, 1919–1947*. Cambridge University Press.
8. Gupta, M. N. (1969). *They lived dangerously: Reminiscences of a revolutionary*. People's Publishing House.
9. Jayawardena, K. (1986). *Feminism and nationalism in the Third World*. Verso.
10. Kosambi, M. (2000). *Women writing gender: Marathi fiction before independence*. Permanent Black.
11. Kumar, R. (1997). *The history of doing: An illustrated account of movements for women's rights and feminism in India, 1800–1990*. Zubaan.
12. Majumdar, R. (2009). *Marriage and modernity: Family values in colonial Bengal*. Duke University Press.
13. Mishra, J. P. (2008). *Bundelkhand in modern times (1803-1947)*. Research India Press.
14. Nehru, J. (2008). *The discovery of India*. Penguin Books.
15. Pandey, G. (1978). *The ascendancy of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh 1926–1934: A study in imperfect mobilization*. Oxford University Press.
16. Ray, B. (2002). *Early feminists of colonial India: Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain*. Oxford University Press.
17. Sarkar, S. (1989). *Modern India 1885–1947*. Macmillan.
18. Sinha, M. (2006). *Specters of Mother India: The global restructuring of an empire*. Duke University Press.
19. Singh, C. (1991). *Region and empire: Panjab in the seventeenth century*. Oxford University Press.
20. Thapar-Björkert, S. (2006). *Women in the Indian national movement: Unseen faces and unheard voices, 1930-42*. SAGE Publications.
21. Bannerjee, S. (2005). *Make me a man! Masculinity, Hinduism, and nationalism in India*. SUNY Press.
22. Gupta, M. N. (1979). Role of women in the freedom movement. *Social Scientist*, 8(4), 3-16.