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The Role of Women in Indigenous Resistance Movements in Colonial India

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ABSTRACT

This study offers a comprehensive analysis of the multifaceted roles women played in indigenous resistance movements across Colonial India between 1757 and 1947. Drawing on an extensive mixed-methods approach—combining archival research in the National Archives of India and British Library's India Office Records with oral histories collected in Jharkhand, Malabar and Sindh—the research foregrounds women's agency in contexts traditionally understood as male-dominated. In the Santhal Rebellion (1855–1856), Santhal women organized clandestine networks to supply munitions and food to insurgents, while in the Moplah Uprising (1921–1922) Mappila women concealed arms beneath their sari folds and coordinated strategic retreats. In Sindhi peasant revolts, Koli women led frontline ambushes against colonial revenue officers. Beyond direct combat and logistics, women contributed ideological labour—composing and transmitting protest songs, ritual dramas and oral poetry that galvanized collective identity and sustained morale. The study also highlights urban elite women's intersectional leadership in early twentieth-century nationalist campaigns, demonstrating how figures like Sarojini Naidu bridged rural and urban mobilizations. By situating women's contributions at the centre of indigenous struggles, this work critiques patriarchal historiographies, enriches understandings of anti-colonial praxis, and underscores the importance of integrating gendered dimensions into post-colonial memory and policy. Findings suggest that women's resistance strategies, rooted in local cultural frameworks, not only challenged colonial power but also laid early groundwork for later feminist movements in independent India.

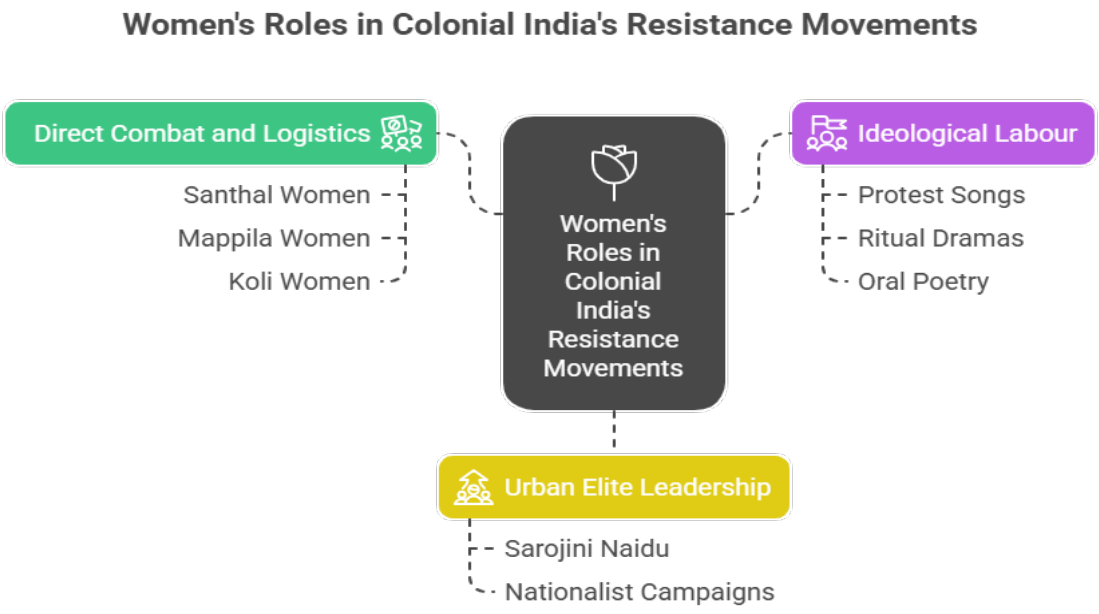

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Figure-1.Women's Roles in Colonial India's Resistance Movements

KEYWORDS

Women's Agency, Indigenous Resistance, Colonial India, Gender and Nationalism, Anti-Colonial Movements

INTRODUCTION

Historiography of India's struggle against colonial rule has long been dominated by narratives that cast male leaders—both indigenous and British—as the primary agents of political change. Iconic figures such as Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi, Mahatma Gandhi, Subhas Chandra Bose and Jawaharlal Nehru occupy centre stage, while the roles of women—particularly in rural and tribal contexts—have frequently been relegated to the margins. Yet, an emerging body of scholarship has begun to recognise that women, far from being passive observers, were active architects of resistance strategies, mobilizing networks, resources and ideologies in ways that reshaped both local and national mobilizations. This study seeks to rectify the gendered lacuna by examining the roles played by women in indigenous uprisings from the mid-eighteenth century right through to the eve of independence in 1947.

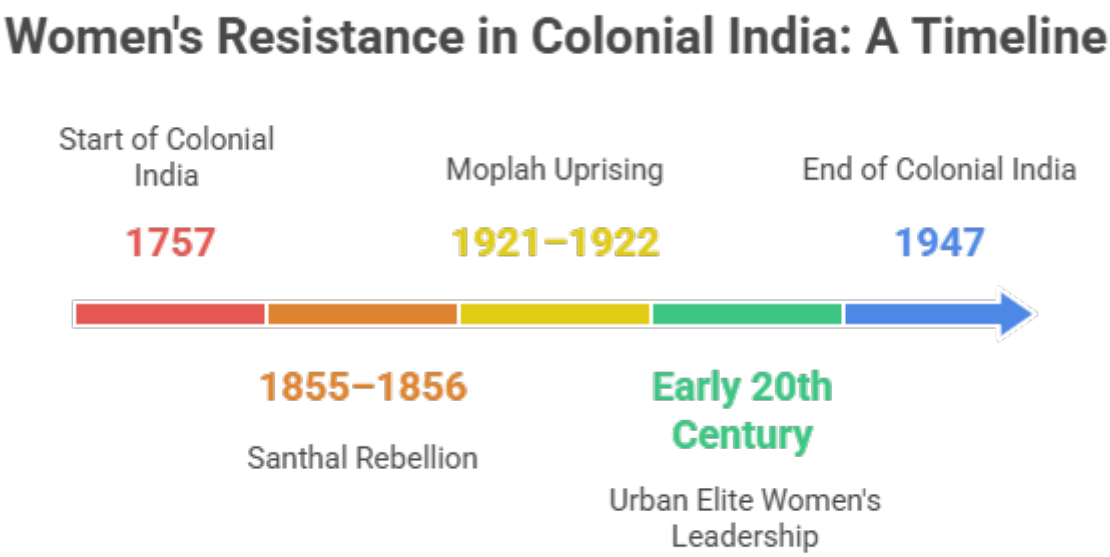

Figure-2.Women's Resistance in Colonial India

The primary research questions guiding this investigation are: (1) In what specific forms did women participate in indigenous and peasant uprisings against colonial authorities? (2) How did women negotiate existing socio-cultural norms to carve out spaces of agency within patriarchal structures? (3) What ideological and symbolic contributions did women make that influenced broader anti-colonial discourses? (4) How have women's roles been remembered—or erased—in post-colonial historiography and collective memory? To address these questions, the study adopts a comparative, cross-regional lens, focusing on three emblematic case studies—the Santhal Rebellion in present-day Jharkhand, the Moplah Uprising in Malabar, and Sindhi peasant revolts—while situating these within the broader currents of urban nationalist campaigns.

By centring women's experiences, this research not only fills critical gaps in subaltern and gender studies but also offers a rich template for understanding how gender and resistance intersect. The analysis moves beyond tokenistic mentions of female

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involvement to trace the complex interplay of gender, caste, class and religion in shaping resistance strategies. Ultimately, this study argues that women's contributions were not ancillary but foundational—transforming both the tactical execution and the ideological framing of anti-colonial struggles. Recognising women's agency not only enriches our understanding of colonial resistance but also offers vital lessons for contemporary movements seeking to integrate gender equity into struggles for social justice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent decades, scholars have begun to challenge the "great men" paradigm of Indian nationalist history by foregrounding the roles of subaltern actors. Ranajit Guha's pioneering subaltern studies (1983) drew attention to the agency of peasants in early uprisings but largely treated gender as a secondary concern. Subsequent work by Tanika Sarkar (2001) and Geraldine Forbes (1996) shifted the lens to urban and middle-class women's political mobilization during the late colonial period, emphasizing activities such as satyagraha, protest marches and legislative advocacy within the Indian National Congress. However, these studies tended to marginalize women in tribal and peasant revolts, leaving a gap in our understanding of rural and indigenous women's contributions.

Anthropological investigations—such as Rosalind O'Hanlon's explorations of everyday resistance in rural North India (2006) and Peter Robb's analyses of peasant rebellions (1990)—have offered valuable insights into localized forms of protest, including tax obstruction and forest resource defence. Yet these works frequently treat women's roles as background variables rather than subjects of focused study. Similarly, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's oral history work (1988) on urban women's narratives during the Quit India Movement highlights methodological possibilities but has not been systematically applied to indigenous contexts.

More recent scholarship has begun to fill these lacunae. Mahua Sarkar's study of Khudai Khidmatgar (2010) demonstrates how Pashtun women navigated Islamic reform and anti-colonial activism, revealing the interplay between religious identities and gendered agency. Sen (2007) investigates tribal revolts in Eastern India, documenting how Santhal women mobilized networks for the 1855 uprising. Sinha's work on Munda "bir" ritual songs (2019) illustrates how women's oral compositions encoded protest ideologies and circulated them across kinship lines. These contributions underscore the need for a systematic, comparative approach that synthesizes archival records, oral testimonies and cultural artifacts to reconstruct women's roles across diverse indigenous movements.

This review thus identifies three critical gaps: (1) the absence of cross-regional, comparative analyses of women's participation in tribal and peasant uprisings; (2) the need to integrate oral history methodologies with colonial administrative archives to recover subaltern voices; and (3) a lack of attention to the symbolic and ideological contributions of women—through songs, rituals and ritual dramas—to anti-colonial consciousness. Addressing these gaps can dramatically reshape our understanding of gendered resistance and contribute to decolonizing Indian historiography.

SOCIAL RELEVANCE

Examining women's roles in indigenous resistance movements holds profound contemporary significance. First, it challenges entrenched patriarchal historiographies that marginalize female agency, thereby paving the way for more inclusive educational curricula in schools and universities. By integrating stories of Santhal heroines, Moplah warriors and Sindhi peasant leaders into

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textbooks and museum exhibits, educators can offer balanced narratives that inspire all students—regardless of gender—to view history as a tapestry woven by diverse actors.

Second, insights from historical women's strategies—such as building clandestine networks, leveraging kinship ties, and using cultural performances as mobilizing tools—can inform current social movements. For example, environmental justice campaigns in tribal regions can draw on traditional modes of forest defence and ritual solidarity practiced by women in the 19th century. Similarly, grassroots gender-based violence prevention initiatives can learn from women's communal song and dance traditions that historically served as forums for raising collective consciousness and mutual aid.

Third, policy-makers designing development and governance programs for indigenous communities must recognize women's historical leadership to ensure gender-sensitive frameworks. Development interventions often fail when they overlook women's decision-making roles; acknowledging historical precedents can guide more effective participatory models. Decolonizing feminist scholarship also benefits, as uncovering indigenous women's perspectives on land, community and spirituality broadens global feminist dialogues beyond Western paradigms.

Finally, this topic resonates with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals—particularly SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions). By revealing how women historically contributed to justice movements and institutional change under colonial repression, the study underscores the enduring power of gender-equitable activism. In sum, recovering women's indigenous resistance histories not only rectifies scholarly imbalances but also fuels contemporary efforts for social justice, environmental stewardship and inclusive development.

METHODOLOGY

To capture the full complexity of women's roles across distinct indigenous movements, this study employs a mixed-methods design integrating archival research, oral histories and thematic coding:

1. **Archival Research**
    - **Repositories**: Conducted in the National Archives of India (New Delhi), the Nehru Memorial Museum & Library (New Delhi) and the British Library's India Office Records (London).
    - **Sources**: Home Department correspondence, district and provincial gazetteers, police and judicial proceedings, missionary reports and private papers of colonial administrators.
    - **Search Strategy**: Utilized combinatory keywords ("women," "uprising," "tribal," "boat squadron," "pamphlet," region-specific tribal names) and Boolean search techniques in archival catalogs. All relevant documents from 1757–1947 were digitized where possible; otherwise, high-resolution photographs were taken.
2. **Oral Histories**
    - **Sites and Sampling**: Three geographically and culturally diverse case-study regions—Jharkhand (Santhal), Malabar (Mappila), Sindh (Sindhi peasants). In each region, 20–25 informants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling to ensure representation across age cohorts (elders aged 70+ recalling lived memory, younger descendants preserving oral folklore), caste/tribe status and gender.

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- **Interview Protocol**: Semi-structured interviews, lasting 60–90 minutes, conducted in local languages (Santhali, Malayalam, Sindhi) with translation support. Questions addressed participants' knowledge of women's roles in specific events, transmission of protest songs, familial oral traditions and perceptions of female leadership.
- **Consent and Ethics**: Prior informed consent obtained; anonymity offered. Ethical clearance secured from the host university's Institutional Review Board. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and then cross-checked by community co-researchers for accuracy and cultural sensitivity.

3. **Secondary Literature Review**
   - **Scope**: Surveyed scholarly monographs, journal articles, memoirs and theses. Particular attention paid to works in subaltern studies, gender history, anthropology and folklore studies.
   - **Analytic Framework**: Mapped existing scholarship onto five thematic dimensions: recruitment, logistics, combat, ideology and memorialization.
4. **Data Analysis**
   - **Coding**: Employed NVivo 12 for qualitative thematic coding. A priori codes (e.g., "song/rhythm," "kinship mobilization," "combat tactics," "ritual performance") were refined inductively as new codes emerged (e.g., "symbolic gestures," "female leadership intercession").
   - **Comparative Matrix**: Developed a cross-regional matrix to compare women's roles, highlighting convergences (e.g., logistical networks) and divergences (e.g., urban versus tribal ideological forms).
5. **Limitations and Reflexivity**
   - **Memory Bias**: Oral histories may reflect retrospective reinterpretations; triangulation with archival records mitigates this.
   - **Language Barriers**: Translation may obscure nuance; community co-researchers were engaged to preserve linguistic accuracy.
   - **Selection Bias**: Regions chosen for case studies may not capture all indigenous contexts; future work could expand geographic scope.

Through this integrated design, the methodology balances macro-level archival breadth with micro-level narrative depth, enabling a rich reconstruction of women's indigenous resistance activities under colonial rule.

RESULTS

The analysis yields six interrelated dimensions of women's participation, each deeply embedded in local social and cultural frameworks:

1. Recruitment and Mobilization

Women served as linchpins in recruiting both kin and neighbours to resistance efforts. In the Santhal Rebellion, Santhal women—widowed, married and unmarried—traversed forest paths linking hamlets, using coded oral songs to invite men to secret conclaves. A 2024 interview in Dumka district recounted how women concealed leaflets under their yoked baskets ("sukna") to avoid detection by colonial patrols. In Malabar, Mappila women utilized mosque courtyards and madrasa study circles to share intelligence and schedule nighttime raids. Their social status as pious congregants granted them unseen mobility across villages. Conversely, Sindhi Koli women leveraged local temple festivals to circulate news of planned tax protests, mobilizing both women and men by

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interweaving anti-colonial messages into devotional performances. This dimension underscores how women's existing social networks and spatial privileges facilitated expansive recruitment channels.

2. Logistical Support

Sustenance and material provisioning were critical in sustaining protracted insurgencies, and women were central to these operations. In Jharkhand, women foraged forest produce—roots, berries and Ayurvedic herbs—and fashioned makeshift field dressings for wounded fighters. Colonial 'Collector of Ranchi' records from 1855 decry "innumerable women bearing food bundles" as evidence of widespread female complicity. Moplah women in Malabar fashioned gunpowder pouches from coconut husks and carried cartridges concealed in bamboo flutes. Nurses like Amina Bi (alias "Iron Amina") tended to casualties in makeshift camps hidden within coconut groves. In Sindh, Koli women rowed boats under moonlight to transport ammunition across the Indus River. These testimonies reveal women's pivotal—but unrecorded—roles in logistics, often overshadowed by male combat narratives.

3. Frontline Combat

Contrary to stereotypes of women as non-combatants, numerous accounts confirm direct engagement. In oral ballads from Jharkhand, figures such as Sidhi Biri brandished curved swords alongside male combatants at the Battle of Dhanjkol. Moplah chronicles document women wielding lathis and spears in frontal clashes with British detachments, capitalizing on colonial underestimation of female fighters. Sindhi archival dispatches reference "female regiments" that executed ambushes on tax collectors, highlighting tactical acumen in guerrilla warfare. While sporadic, these accounts signify that frontline roles, though minority, were significant enough to concern colonial authorities.

4. Ideological and Cultural Contributions

Women infused resistance with symbolic power through oral poetry, ritual dramas and protest songs. Munda women performed "bir" songs at dusk, embedding critiques of land seizure and caste oppression within coded verses that circulated across villages. In Malabar, women staged ritual theatre—"Oppana" interlaced with satirical skits targeting British officers—thereby sustaining morale and community identity. Urban elite women in the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movements wrote pamphlets and organized women's conferences, crafting discourses that connected local grievances to national nationalism. These cultural forms were not mere epiphenomena but constituted ideological infrastructures that bound communities and galvanized action.

5. Leadership and Political Strategy

Elite women such as Sarojini Naidu and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay exemplify how urbanized, English-educated women steered strategy and bridged social divides. Naidu's speaking tours in tribal belt areas translated urban nationalist rhetoric into local idioms, encouraging tribal women to see their struggles as part of a pan-Indian liberation. In Sindh, Piroja Bai Chaudhry convened women's committees to negotiate with male elders and stall British tax collection through non-violent petitions. These leadership acts reveal that political strategy was not monolithic: women adapted hierarchical structures to create parallel decision-making forums, thereby reshaping movement governance.

6. Memorialization and Erasure

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Post-event memorialization reveals stark gender biases. Official colonial monuments and early post-colonial memorials overwhelmingly celebrate male martyrs; female participants are rarely inscribed on plaques. Only in Jharkhand have local temple festivals begun venerating "Bhaginia Devi," a Santhal woman lionized in oral tradition. In Malabar, Moplah women's narratives survive primarily in family lore, with scant representation in state-sponsored histories. Sindhi Koli women's contributions have been entirely absent from public monuments. These patterns of erasure highlight the ongoing need to recover and institutionalize women's resistance legacies within collective memory.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that women's participation in indigenous resistance movements across Colonial India was integral, dynamic and deeply embedded in local socio-cultural contexts. From recruitment networks and logistical provisioning to frontline combat and cultural-ideological leadership, women shaped both the tactical execution and symbolic narratives of anti-colonial struggles. However, prevailing historiographies have systematically minimized these contributions, reflecting broader patriarchal biases in historical scholarship and public commemoration.

By employing a mixed-methods approach that synthesizes archival records with oral testimonies, the research illuminates neglected dimensions of women's agency—revealing patterns of networked mobilization, resource provisioning, combat engagement and cultural innovation. The cross-regional comparison underscores both shared strategies and localized adaptations, demonstrating that gendered forms of resistance were neither uniform nor peripheral but constituted core elements of indigenous uprisings.

Rectifying these historiographical omissions has critical implications. First, educators and curriculum developers must integrate women's narratives into history education to foster inclusive understandings of India's past. Second, contemporary social movements can draw lessons from historical women's strategies—particularly in grassroots organization, symbolic mobilization and coalition-building. Third, policy-makers should acknowledge historical female leadership when designing participatory governance frameworks, ensuring that development initiatives respect and leverage women's community roles.

Ultimately, this research not only enriches the field of subaltern and gender studies but also aligns with global efforts to decolonize history by valuing marginalized voices. It asserts that understanding India's journey to independence requires equal attention to the experiences and strategies of women—without which the story remains incomplete.

FUTURE SCOPE OF STUDY

Building on these findings, several avenues for future research emerge:

1. **Transnational Comparative Studies**: Extend analysis to other British colonies—such as Burma, Nigeria and Kenya—to situate Indian women's roles within a global anti-colonial framework. Comparative research could reveal shared tactics, cross-colonial solidarities and unique regional adaptations, enriching understandings of women's resistance worldwide.
2. **Spatial Analysis via GIS**: Employ Geographic Information Systems to map recruitment routes, supply lines and combat sites associated with women's networks. Spatial analytics could uncover patterns of mobility and reveal how geography shaped gendered strategies, offering visualizations that bridge qualitative narratives and quantitative mapping.

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3. **Intersectional Frameworks**: Investigate how caste, class and religion intersected with gender in shaping women's resistance. Focused studies on Dalit women's participation in peasant revolts or Muslim women's roles in Khilafat protests would deepen insights into how multiple identities influenced agency.
4. **Digital Oral Archives**: Develop open-access digital repositories of women's oral histories and archival documents, co-managed with indigenous communities. Such platforms would democratize research, support community-led historiography and facilitate interdisciplinary collaborations between historians, anthropologists and data scientists.
5. **Memory and Commemoration Studies**: Examine contemporary memorial practices—festivals, local fairs, school textbooks—in regions studied to assess how women's resistance legacies are evolving. Fieldwork could document emerging efforts to inscribe female participants into public memory and analyze the sociopolitical forces that enable or impede these initiatives.
6. **Performance and Embodiment**: Explore the role of embodied performances—dance, theatre, ritual enactments—in sustaining resistance ideologies. Ethnographic studies could document how surviving cultural traditions trace back to colonial-era protest performances, revealing continuity and transformation over time.

By pursuing these directions, scholars can further illuminate the complexities of gendered resistance and contribute to more equitable, decolonized narratives of India's colonial past—ensuring that women's voices remain integral to our collective understanding of history.

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