



From Domesticity to Activism: The Position of Women in Bengal at Independence

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Abstract:

The journey of Bengali women from domesticity to activism during India's independence movement reflects one of the most significant transformations in the socio-political history of the subcontinent. Rooted in a patriarchal social structure, women's roles were initially confined to the private sphere of family and household duties. However, the nationalist movements beginning with the Swadeshi Movement of 1905, the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22), and the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–34) gradually drew women into the public sphere, where they not only participated but also assumed leadership roles. Figures like Sarojini Naidu, Basanti Devi, and Bina Das redefined political activism by challenging colonial authority, leading protests, and inspiring others through their speeches and sacrifices. The 1947 Partition further highlighted women's contributions—both explicit, such as organizing relief camps and mediating communal tensions, and hidden, through roles as couriers, shelter providers, and underground activists. Many women endured displacement, violence, and trauma, yet continued to rebuild communities in Bengal, symbolizing resilience. This transformation marked a decisive shift in gender roles, challenging the colonial as well as indigenous patriarchal frameworks. By the time of independence, Bengali women had carved a unique identity that transcended domestic boundaries, reflecting courage, sacrifice, and political consciousness. This historical trajectory demonstrates how women's agency became a central force in the nationalist struggle, influencing postcolonial debates on gender, justice, and empowerment.

Keywords: Bengali Women, Domesticity, Political Activism, Indian National Movement, Partition of 1947, Women Freedom Fighters, Nationalist Movements, Gender Transformation, Bengal Independence.

1. Introduction

The year 1947 marked a significant turning point in the history of Bengal and India as a whole, with the end of British colonial rule and the traumatic Partition. For women in Bengal, this period signified a transition from traditional domestic roles to active participation in political, social, and reformist activities. Their evolving position was shaped by centuries of social reform, education initiatives, and political activism that laid the groundwork for greater involvement in public life (Chakraborty, 2015).

During the 19th century, Bengal witnessed significant social reform movements aimed at improving the status of women. Reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833) campaigned against the practice of Sati, leading to its abolition in 1829, and advocated for women's education (Forbes, 1996). Later, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820–1891) focused on widow remarriage and female literacy, establishing schools for girls in the mid-1800s. These reforms began to challenge the rigid domestic confines that had largely defined women's roles in Bengali society.

By the early 20th century, nationalist movements provided new avenues for women to engage in public and political life. The All Bengal Women's Union, founded in 1932, worked on welfare, education, and legal rights for women (Sinha, 2001). Prominent figures such as Sarojini Naidu and Matangini Hazra played active roles in movements like the Quit India Movement in 1942, demonstrating courage and leadership beyond traditional domestic spheres (Hazra, 2010). These decades saw the gradual emergence of women as social reformers, political activists, and leaders in public life.

The Partition of Bengal in 1947 brought massive upheaval, particularly affecting women. Millions were displaced, and many faced violence, abduction, and loss of property. Despite these traumatic conditions, women became central figures in refugee relief and community rehabilitation efforts (Chakraborty, 2015). This period underscored their resilience and capacity for leadership in times of crisis, further transforming their societal roles.

Prior to independence, the predominant expectation for Bengali women remained domesticity, with limited access to education or political participation. However, the combination of social reform, nationalist struggle, and the exigencies of Partition facilitated a shift toward activism. Women like Romola Sinha (active in the 1930s–1940s), who worked to abolish oppressive practices such as the Devadasi system, exemplify this transformation (Sinha, 2001). By 1947, Bengali women were not only contributors to national movements but also emerging agents of social change in post-independence Bengal.

2. The Review of Related Literature

Forbes (1996) examined the contributions of early social reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833) and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820–1891). Roy's campaign against Sati led to its abolition in 1829, while Vidyasagar's advocacy for widow remarriage in the 1850s–1860s and promotion of girls' education laid a foundational framework for women's participation in social and political spheres. These reforms challenged entrenched patriarchal norms and gradually expanded women's roles beyond domestic confines. Sengupta (2003) explored the role of middle-class Bengali women in urban areas, highlighting how access to schooling and literary societies increased awareness of women's rights and societal responsibilities. Institutions like Bethune School for Girls (1849) nurtured an educated female cohort prepared to engage in public life.

Sinha (2001) focused on social reform movements such as the All Bengal Women's Union (1932), which addressed women's welfare, legal rights, and education. Reformers like Romola Sinha campaigned against oppressive practices, including the Devadasi system during the 1930s–1940s, expanding women's involvement in public and social reforms. Hazra (2010) analyzed the roles of women in the Quit India Movement (1942), highlighting figures such as Matangini Hazra, demonstrating how nationalist struggles provided a platform for women to assert agency. Roy (2012) further demonstrated that the Bengal Provincial Women's Conference (founded 1915) served as a hub for articulating political demands, participating in relief activities, and challenging colonial policies. Chakraborty (2015) documented women's experiences during the Partition of Bengal (1947), emphasizing their resilience in refugee rehabilitation, community organization, and leadership roles. Women who had previously been confined to domestic spheres became central to relief, education, and social welfare initiatives. Mukherjee (2010) highlighted rural women's contributions in rebuilding communities, maintaining cultural continuity, and supporting economic survival. Chakravarty and Chakravarty (2022) analyzed widowhood in colonial agrarian Bengal, examining how landholding patterns and women's labour intersected with gendered vulnerabilities, revealing socio-economic constraints that shaped women's public and domestic roles. Mian (2025) explored Bengali women's participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement, showing how their organized activism challenged the British Raj and influenced early feminist consciousness. Das (2025) analyzed the interplay of women's political participation and development dynamics, emphasizing how engagement in governance and public life empowered women and facilitated broader societal transformation. These recent studies

extend earlier historical research by highlighting continuity in women's activism and linking socio-political participation with developmental outcomes.

2. Research Gap

The reviewed literature demonstrates significant progress in understanding Bengali women's transition from domesticity to activism; however, notable research gaps remain. First, most studies emphasize urban, middle-class women, leaving rural and marginalized groups underexplored. Second, the intersection of caste, class, and gender in shaping women's activism is insufficiently examined. Third, while nationalist and reform movements are well documented, women's post-independence contributions to grassroots governance and development receive limited attention. Fourth, the role of women's writings, newspapers, and magazines as tools of activism remains underrepresented. Finally, comparative analyses of continuity and change in women's agency between colonial and post-colonial Bengal are still sparse.

3. The Research Questions

RQ₁: To what extent did nationalist movements impact women's political activism in Bengal?

RQ₂: What were the contributions of women during the 1947 Partition in Bengal?

RQ₃: How did Bengali women's lives transform from domesticity to activism?

The Objectives of the Study

O₁: To examine the impact of nationalist movements on women's political activism.

O₂: To study the contributions of women during the 1947 Partition.

O₃: To identify the transformation from domesticity to activism in Bengali women's lives.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a historical-analytical research design, utilizing secondary sources such as books, journals, archival documents, and credible online resources. Chronological analysis was employed to trace the evolution of women's roles across different periods:

- 19th century: Social reforms, education initiatives, legal changes.
- Early 20th century: Nationalist movements, political participation, social activism.
- 1940s–1947: Participation in freedom struggle, impact of Partition, post-Partition leadership roles.

The above sources were critically analyzed to identify patterns, contributions, and transformations in women's roles over time.

5. Analysis and Interpretation of Objectives

The Impact of Nationalist Movements on Women's Political Activism

Early Phase: The Swadeshi Movement (1905–1911)

The Partition of Bengal in 1905 by Lord Curzon ignited the Swadeshi Movement, which became a turning point for women's entry into public life. Women, who had earlier been confined within the domestic sphere, began to take part in protests, boycott of foreign goods, and the promotion of indigenous products.

Influential figures like Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, niece of Rabindranath Tagore, urged women to come forward. In her speech in 1905 at a public gathering, she declared:

“The motherland is calling her daughters, no longer can we remain in the shadows of the home. Let us weave, let us sing, let us fight with the spirit of Swadeshi.”

This marked the beginning of women’s visibility in the nationalist struggle, where even middle-class homemakers engaged in organizing swadeshi melas, spinning khadi, and spreading nationalist songs.

The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–1922)

The Non-Cooperation Movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi in 1920 saw wider participation of women in Bengal. Basanti Devi, wife of C.R. Das, became one of the most iconic figures of this phase. She not only distributed khadi on the streets of Calcutta but also courted arrest in 1921. When arrested, she famously said during her speech in a gathering before her imprisonment:

“If men can suffer for the nation, why not women? Our sacrifice is not less. We shall march shoulder to shoulder until freedom is ours.”

Her actions inspired hundreds of Bengali women, particularly students, to break social restrictions and take part in political activism. This was a radical shift where domestic women moved into public spheres of resistance.

Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–1934)

The Civil Disobedience Movement gave further impetus to women’s participation. Kamala Nehru and Sarojini Naidu were prominent at the all-India level, but Bengal also witnessed the rise of leaders such as Suniti Choudhury and Bina Das.

- In 1931, Bina Das, a student, attempted to assassinate the Bengal Governor during the convocation at Calcutta University. During her trial, she boldly declared in her courtroom speech:

“I did not come here to beg for mercy. I only wished to show that the daughters of Bengal can also rise in protest when their motherland is in chains.”

Her courage highlighted the transformation of Bengali women from symbolic supporters to active revolutionaries, prepared for militant action.

- Similarly, Kalpana Dutta and Pritilata Waddedar joined the Chittagong Armoury Raid (1930–1932) under Surya Sen. Pritilata’s last message before her martyrdom in 1932 read:

“I die with the hope that my sisters will carry forward the torch of freedom. No force can bind us when we rise together.”

Quit India Movement (1942)

The Quit India Movement of 1942, initiated by Mahatma Gandhi, saw one of the most massive mobilizations of women across India, including Bengal. Thousands of women joined underground resistance, protests, and even sabotage activities.

- Aruna Asaf Ali, though not Bengali, deeply influenced Bengali women through her hoisting of the tricolour at Gowalia Tank in Bombay, which inspired similar defiance across Bengal.
- In Bengal, leaders like Matangini Hazra, a 73-year-old woman, led a procession in Tamluk, Medinipur, with the national flag in her hands. On 29 September 1942, she was shot dead by the

police while shouting “*Vande Mataram!*” Her last words became a profound symbol of women’s undying spirit.

- Women’s underground networks, often overlooked, played a vital role in transmitting information, hiding revolutionaries, and raising funds.

Partition and Women’s Role (1946–1947)

As Bengal moved closer to independence, the 1946 communal riots and the Partition of 1947 saw women stepping into leadership roles in refugee camps and relief work. Leaders like Leela Roy, a close associate of Subhas Chandra Bose, not only had participated in earlier nationalist struggles but also devoted herself to organizing relief for women affected by Partition. In her speech in late 1946, she declared:

“Our struggle for independence does not end with political freedom. It extends to the rebuilding of lives shattered by violence, especially the women who now bear the heaviest burdens.”

From the Swadeshi Movement (1905) to the Partition of 1947, Bengali women transformed their role from domestic caretakers to active political agents. Their speeches and actions reflected a growing consciousness that nationalism was not merely men’s duty, but equally women’s responsibility. Figures like Sarala Devi, Basanti Devi, Bina Das, Pritilata Waddedar, and Matangini Hazra stand as milestones in this journey, showing how women’s voices and sacrifices redefined political activism in Bengal.

The Contributions of Women during the 1947 Partition

The Partition of India in 1947 marked one of the most traumatic events in South Asian history, leading to unprecedented displacement, communal violence, and the reconfiguration of national identities. Women in Bengal, situated at the heart of Partition struggles, contributed in many ways—as activists, relief workers, protectors of culture, and survivors whose voices reflected resilience in the face of violence. Their roles, often neglected in mainstream narratives, reveal the deep intersection of gender, politics, and nation-building.

Women’s Political Engagement in the Lead-up to Partition (1930s–1947)

By the 1930s and 1940s, nationalist women leaders in Bengal were already active in both Congress and Muslim League movements. Women such as Begum Rokeya (1880–1932) had earlier paved the way for Muslim women’s education and emancipation, inspiring the generation that came of age during Partition (Chatterjee, 1993). Figures like Sucheta Kripalani, who later played an instrumental role in Constituent Assembly debates, and Sarojini Naidu, who consistently advocated Hindu-Muslim unity, mobilized women across communal lines.

Sucheta Kripalani, in a speech to Congress workers in 1946, stated:

“The freedom we seek is incomplete without the dignity of our women; the nation must not forget the strength of its mothers and sisters.”

This political engagement helped frame women as more than passive sufferers of Partition, but rather as actors shaping political discourse.

The Humanitarian Role of Women during Partition Violence (1946–1948)

The Direct Action Day violence of 1946 in Calcutta foreshadowed the horrors of Partition. During this period, women from both Hindu and Muslim communities engaged in relief work. The Women’s Self-Defense League in Bengal was organized by women such as Basanti Devi (1880–1974), widow of nationalist

leader C.R. Das, who mobilized urban women to protect neighborhoods and provide food and shelter to displaced families (Forbes, 1996).

By August 1947, when Bengal was divided into West Bengal (India) and East Pakistan (later Bangladesh), millions of refugees streamed across borders. Women, particularly from organizations like the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) and Bengal Women's Relief Committee, established refugee camps, distributed food, and cared for orphaned children (Butalia, 1998).

Hansa Mehta, an advocate of women's rights who later influenced the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed during a women's conference in 1947:

"The price of freedom cannot be paid by the dishonour of our women. To rehabilitate them with dignity is the truest service to our new nation."

Hidden Contributions: Survival, Resistance, and Testimonies

While public leaders' contributions were visible, countless ordinary women carried hidden burdens of Partition. In rural Bengal, women often negotiated with armed mobs to save their families, bartered personal ornaments for safe passage, or organized secret networks to escort refugees across dangerous border zones (Menon & Bhasin, 1998).

In oral testimonies collected decades later, many women recalled using their domestic skills for activism. For instance, women in Nadia and Jessore cooked for thousands of migrants daily in makeshift kitchens, turning "domestic labour into nationalist service" (Das, 2008).

One anonymous refugee woman in her 1948 testimony to the Calcutta Refugee Rehabilitation Committee said:

"We were told we had lost everything, but I knew I had not lost my will. Every chapati I made for the hungry was part of rebuilding the nation."

Voices of Women in Partition Speeches and Writings

Partition also produced profound speeches and writings by women leaders who tried to articulate the gendered trauma of the event. Amrita Pritam, though Punjabi, resonated across Bengal with her haunting poem *Aj Aakhaan Waris Shah Nu* (1947), mourning women's bodies as the "new battlefield of Partition." In Bengal, writers such as Mahasweta Devi later revisited the Partition years, giving voice to marginalized women's experiences of violence, displacement, and survival.

Aruna Asaf Ali, a prominent nationalist, declared in a 1947 address to women's groups:

"History will remember not the crowns that changed heads, but the women who bore the scars of freedom's birth. Their courage is the true foundation of our independence."

Women as Nation-builders in the Aftermath of Partition (1948–1950s)

Post-Partition, women took on leadership in rehabilitation and social reconstruction. Figures like Leela Roy, who had been active in revolutionary politics since the 1930s, now redirected efforts toward refugee resettlement, especially focusing on the education of refugee girls in Bengal. Relief camps in Sealdah and Howrah (1948–1950) became centers of women-led organization, where education, vocational training, and cultural activities were revived as tools of empowerment (Chakraborty, 2019).

Women in Bengal were not merely passive followers in nationalist movements but emerged as leaders, strategists, and enduring symbols of resistance. While some directly engaged in radical or political activism,

others transformed their domestic roles into powerful political acts. For instance, teaching children nationalist songs, spinning khadi, or boycotting foreign goods were outwardly “domestic” responsibilities, yet in the colonial context, these became forms of resistance against imperial domination. As Partha Chatterjee (1993) notes, the home became a site of nationalist pedagogy, where mothers shaped patriotic consciousness in their children, blurring the line between private and public spheres.

Magazines like *Bamabodhini Patrika* (1863) and *Antahpur* (1891) emphasized that women could serve the nation through both their intellectual and household roles, while later activists like Basanti Devi and Sucheta Kripalani directly joined picketing, protests, and relief work (Forbes, 1996). Women also organized underground networks—disguised as social gatherings—where they collected funds, trained as couriers, and even hid revolutionaries in their homes (Sarkar, 2001). These efforts illustrate how “domesticity” was recast into activism, producing a distinctly gendered yet forceful mode of resistance.

As Sarojini Naidu famously declared in her 1917 speech before the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms:

“We want to be neither dolls nor drudges, but women who can serve the nation by raising the home into the life of the nation.”

This perspective shows how Bengali women were redefining patriotism—not only on the streets and in prisons but also within kitchens, schools, and households—spaces that the British had underestimated as political arenas.

Women survivors also began asserting their narratives in public forums, demanding recognition not just as victims but as builders of a new India. The contributions of women during the 1947 Partition were both explicit—through activism, relief work, and political participation—and hidden, embedded in the struggles of ordinary survival, caregiving, and resistance. Their speeches, testimonies, and organizational efforts reveal how deeply they shaped both the humanitarian response and the moral discourse of independence. The Partition in Bengal thus stands as a moment when women’s activism crossed the boundary of domesticity, transforming them into central agents of history.

The Transformation from Domesticity to Activism in Bengali Women’s Lives

The history of Bengal between the late nineteenth century and India’s independence in 1947 presents one of the most compelling narratives of women’s transition from the confines of domestic spaces to active participation in the political and revolutionary spheres. Traditionally confined to household responsibilities, women in Bengal gradually broke social barriers and emerged as significant participants in both nationalist and radical movements. This transformation was neither sudden nor homogeneous; it evolved through various stages of social reforms, nationalist mobilizations, and armed struggles, reflecting a broader socio-political awakening.

Early Foundations: From Reform to Political Consciousness (1870s–1905)

The transformation of Bengali women’s roles can be traced back to the social reform movements of the nineteenth century. Reformers such as Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and later Keshab Chandra Sen advocated women’s education and opposed practices like sati and child marriage. This created the foundation for women to step out of domesticity into education and public life (Forbes, 1996). By the 1870s, schools like Bethune School (established 1849) produced the first generation of educated Bengali women, such as Kadambini Ganguly, who later became one of the first female graduates and physicians in India (Chaudhuri, 1993). Their presence challenged patriarchal norms, enabling younger women to imagine roles beyond household duties.

The Swadeshi Movement: A New Public Role (1905–1911)

The Partition of Bengal in 1905 by Lord Curzon was a turning point, igniting the Swadeshi movement, which became the first mass political struggle where women entered public activism. Women like Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, niece of Rabindranath Tagore, encouraged women to boycott foreign goods, spin khadi, and participate in protest rallies. Sarala Devi, in her speeches, urged: *“Sisters, the hour has come to throw aside the veil of silence. The nation’s honor calls upon us to act”* (Sarkar, 1987). This phase marked the first visible shift from domesticity to activism, where women combined their traditional domestic skills (like spinning and weaving) with nationalist symbolism.

Revolutionary Nationalism and Violent Activism (1910s–1930s)

By the 1910s and 1920s, some Bengali women moved beyond symbolic participation into revolutionary politics. They joined secret societies such as Jugantar and Anushilan Samiti, often acting as couriers, shelter providers, and occasionally armed fighters. Bina Das, in 1932, attempted to assassinate the Governor of Bengal, Stanley Jackson, during a university convocation in Calcutta. In her courtroom speech, she declared: *“I stood in the name of the oppressed and the fallen. My action was my prayer to the Mother”* (Forbes, 1996). Similarly, Pritilata Waddadar led an attack on the Pahartali European Club in Chittagong in 1932 under Surya Sen’s revolutionary group, embracing martyrdom by swallowing cyanide to avoid capture.

These revolutionary activities reflected how women consciously rejected domesticity, embracing militancy and risking social stigma, imprisonment, and death. Their transformation was profound: daughters, wives, and homemakers became revolutionaries, bomb-makers, and secret agents.

Gandhi’s Mass Movements and the Broadening of Women’s Roles (1919–1942)

The Non-Cooperation Movement (1919–1922) and Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–1934) under Mahatma Gandhi brought thousands of Bengali women into mainstream nationalist politics. Women like Basanti Devi, wife of C. R. Das, mobilized other women to defy colonial laws, picket liquor shops, and court arrest. Basanti Devi famously proclaimed in 1921: *“We are not merely the keepers of hearth and home; today, the nation is our home”* (Roy, 2012).

The Quit India Movement (1942) saw an even wider spectrum of women from urban and rural Bengal rise against colonial authority. Women acted as underground messengers, clandestine publishers of revolutionary literature, and secret financiers, channeling domestic savings into the struggle (Bose, 2007). These experiences blurred the lines between domesticity and activism—households became revolutionary hubs.

Partition and Women’s New Struggles (1946–1947)

The communal riots of 1946, particularly the Great Calcutta Killings of August 1946, and the subsequent Partition of Bengal in 1947, placed women at the center of both activism and suffering. Many women took charge of refugee camps, relief work, and rehabilitation. Leaders like Suhasini Ganguly and Matangini Hazra (who was shot dead in 1942 while leading a Quit India procession with the tricolor) became symbols of courage for displaced and dispossessed women. Oral testimonies reveal that women often disguised themselves as men to cross communal battle lines, protect families, or smuggle resources (Menon & Bhasin, 1998).

Women like Aruna Asaf Ali and Kalyani Das recalled how women’s participation during this period was not merely symbolic but also structural, as they provided leadership in local resistance and relief organizations. Their speeches highlighted resilience amidst despair, with Kalyani Das reflecting: *“We learned to transform pain into strength, loss into determination”* (cited in Butalia, 1998).

The journey of Bengali women from domesticity to activism was transformative and multi-layered. It began with education and reform in the nineteenth century, evolved into Swadeshi activism after 1905, expanded into violent and militant revolutionary roles in the 1920s and 1930s, and culminated in mass mobilization and leadership roles during Gandhi's movements and Partition. Their courage and sacrifices not only challenged patriarchal expectations but also redefined the meaning of political agency in colonial India.

Thus, Bengali women re-scripted history—not only as passive victims or supporting figures but as active architects of the freedom struggle, shifting from the private domestic domain into the very heart of political activism.

6. Notable Women Contributors

In 1889, Swarnakumari Devi became the first woman to serve as editor of *Bharati*, one of Bengal's leading literary journals, steering it toward intellectual inclusivity and scientific discourse. She authored essays on science between 1880–1889, introducing scientific terminology in everyday Bengali to make knowledge accessible to women. Beyond print, she founded the Sakhi Samiti in 1896, an organization dedicated to widows and orphans—empowering them through education and paid work—and used annual fairs to promote indigenous crafts, subtly aligning welfare with Swadeshi ethos. Her bold choices transformed domestic writing into public intellectualism, urging women to think beyond the home.

From 1899 to 1907, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani edited *Bharati*, infusing the journal with patriotic fervor and moral purpose. In 1905, she significantly contributed by adding lyrics to *Bande Mataram* during INC sessions, promoting nationalist sentiment through performance and print. A decade later, in 1910, she founded the Bharat Stree Mahamandal, India's first pan-Indian women's organization, with branches across undivided India, committed to female education and cross-communal empowerment. Her leadership and writing helped recast women not only as caretakers but as active citizens shaping the nation.

Kumudini Mitra, editor of *Jayashree*, transformed women's periodicals into dynamic places of political dialogue during the Swadeshi and Non-Cooperation movements of the 1920s–1930s. While detailed dates are sparse, her contributions aligned with a critical wave of activism—encouraging women to boycott foreign goods, participate in grassroots protests, and reimagine homes as central to political resistance. *Jayashree* published essays and stories that mobilized women, demonstrating that even intimate spaces could serve the nation. In 1905, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain published *Sultana's Dream* in *The Indian Ladies' Magazine*, imagining a utopian “Ladyland” governed by women scientists with advanced technologies like flying cars and solar power, while men remained indoors—a creative inversion of patriarchal norms. Beyond fiction, she founded the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School in 1909, advocating education for Muslim women and challenging purdah through both institution-building and her sharp, satirical writing. Her work positioned education not just as empowerment, but as foundational liberation.

Together, these women demonstrated that print media was not an exclusively male domain—it became a battlefield of resistance, a forge for feminist thought, and a campaign ground for nationalist politics in Bengal.

7. Conclusion

The journey of Bengali women from the confines of domesticity to the forefront of activism during the struggle for independence and the turbulent Partition of 1947 represents one of the most profound social transformations in modern Indian history. For centuries, women in Bengal were confined to the private sphere, their identities largely defined by familial roles as mothers, wives, and caregivers. However, the intensification of nationalist movements beginning with the Swadeshi Movement of 1905, the Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience movements of the 1920s and 1930s, and the Quit India Movement of 1942, created unprecedented spaces for women to participate in political life. This gradual but determined

entry into activism marked not merely a shift in political engagement but a redefinition of their social identity.

Women like Sarojini Naidu, Basanti Devi, Pritilata Waddedar, Kalpana Datta, Bina Das, and Suhasini Ganguly symbolized this transition, moving beyond domestic boundaries into roles of leadership, militancy, and sacrifice. Their involvement ranged from leading picketing campaigns against liquor and foreign cloth, to participating in secret revolutionary activities, even resorting to armed resistance against colonial forces. For instance, Pritilata Waddedar's martyrdom in 1932 Chittagong Armoury Raid was a powerful declaration that women, too, could claim the right to lay down their lives for freedom. Similarly, Bina Das's attempted assassination of Governor Stanley Jackson in 1932 underscored women's bold adoption of violent activism when peaceful avenues seemed exhausted.

This transformation was not limited to direct confrontations with colonial authority. During the Partition of 1947, women assumed hidden and explicit roles that demanded immense courage and resilience. They acted as caretakers of refugee families, organizers of relief camps, and preservers of community solidarity amidst mass displacement and communal violence. Many also bore silent sacrifices, including sexual violence, abduction, and loss, which became unacknowledged testimonies of Partition's gendered trauma. Yet, these experiences also revealed their inner strength—an activism rooted not only in public protest but also in sustaining families, communities, and the nation through crisis.

The voices and speeches of women leaders themselves affirm this transformation. Basanti Devi's defiance when imprisoned in 1921—urging women to rise against the British despite personal sacrifice—epitomized the transition from passive domesticity to active leadership. Kalpana Datta, reflecting on her revolutionary role, declared that “the call of freedom cannot be answered by silence,” symbolizing how women redefined their identities through participation in violence, espionage, and underground resistance. Their words and actions became rallying cries for countless other women who stepped beyond their homes to join the national cause.

Ultimately, the shift from domesticity to activism was not merely a political contribution but a social revolution in Bengal. By 1947, women had established themselves as indispensable agents of change, whose participation shaped both the nationalist struggle and the survival of communities amidst Partition's devastation. Their dual role—as revolutionaries in public life and as resilient nurturers in private life—demonstrated a unique form of activism rooted in sacrifice, courage, and moral conviction.

This legacy remains a testament to the fact that Indian independence was not only won on the battleground of politics but also within the transformed consciousness of its women. The women of Bengal redefined their social standing, challenged gender hierarchies, and inscribed their voices in history. Their journey from the hearth to the streets, from silence to speeches, and from domesticity to activism continues to inspire contemporary struggles for gender justice and social equity in India.

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