



Women in The Freedom Movement: A Theoretical Framework for Gendered Historiography of India's Independence Struggle

Dr. Reshma M.Y.

Asst.professor

Kannur university teacher education centre Kasaragod

reshmaym17@gmail.com

Abstract

The historiography of India's independence movement has, until recent decades, been written predominantly as a narrative of male political leadership, relegating the participation of women to a peripheral, ornamental, or domestic position within the larger national narrative. This paper develops a theoretical framework for re-reading women's contribution to the freedom struggle through three intersecting lenses: nationalist historiography, feminist historiography, and subaltern historiography. It argues that conventional historical accounts have systematically under-represented the diversity of women's political agency, spanning constitutional politics, revolutionary armed resistance, Gandhian constructive activism, and unrecorded grassroots mobilisation. Drawing upon archival silences, oral testimonies, and feminist standpoint theory, the paper proposes an integrated gendered-historiographical model that situates women not as auxiliary participants but as co-constitutive agents of India's anti-colonial nationalism.

Keywords: gendered historiography, women's freedom movement, feminist historiography, subaltern studies, Indian nationalism, archival silence

1. Introduction

The Indian freedom struggle (1857–1947) is conventionally narrated through the biographies and decisions of male political leaders — Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, Bal Gangadhar Tilak — whose speeches, negotiations, and imprisonments form the backbone of mainstream nationalist historiography. Within this dominant narrative structure, women appear intermittently: as wives who supported their husbands, as symbolic figures of sacrifice, or as participants in mass marches whose individual agency remains undifferentiated from the collective crowd. Yet the historical record, when examined closely, reveals a far more complex and continuous presence of women across every phase and ideological strand of the independence movement — from the armed resistance of Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi in 1857,



to the revolutionary activity of Bengal's women cadres in the 1930s, to the Gandhian constructive programme led by figures such as Kasturba Gandhi and Sarojini Naidu, and the largely undocumented participation of peasant and tribal women in regional uprisings.

This paper proceeds from the premise that the relative invisibility of women in mainstream nationalist historiography is not a reflection of their actual historical absence, but rather a consequence of the methodological and ideological frameworks through which history has traditionally been written and archived. The marginalisation is, in this sense, a historiographical problem rather than a historical fact. To address it, the paper develops a theoretical framework — termed here “gendered historiography” — that draws upon feminist historical methodology, subaltern studies, and oral history to recover, re-read, and re-theorise women's participation in the freedom movement.

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 outlines the theoretical foundations of gendered historiography. Section 3 examines three competing historiographical traditions — nationalist, feminist, and subaltern — and their differing treatment of women's agency. Section 4 categorises the empirical dimensions of women's participation. Section 5 identifies the structural and methodological problems that produce archival silence. Section 6 proposes an integrated theoretical model, followed by concluding observations in Section 7.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Gendered Historiography

Gendered historiography, as employed in this paper, refers to a critical methodology that interrogates how gender shapes both the production of historical events and the subsequent writing and archiving of those events. It rests on two foundational premises. First, gender is not merely a descriptive category to be added to existing historical narratives, but a constitutive analytical lens that reveals how power, agency, and visibility were distributed differently to men and women within the colonial and nationalist political fields. Second, the absence of women from conventional archives — official correspondence, police records, newspaper reports, and political party documents — does not indicate their absence from historical events, but rather reflects the gendered logic of archival production itself, in which women's actions were less likely to be recorded, named, or attributed independent political significance.

This framework draws substantially on Joan Wallach Scott's contention that gender functions as a primary way of signifying relationships of power, and that historical analysis must



therefore treat gender as an organising category of historical knowledge itself, not merely as a subject area within history. Applied to the Indian context, this means examining not only what women did during the freedom struggle, but how the colonial state, the nationalist leadership, and subsequent historians constructed categories of “political” and “domestic,” “public” and “private,” that determined which of women's actions were recorded as historically significant. A second theoretical pillar is feminist standpoint theory, which holds that knowledge produced from the position of historically marginalised groups offers a corrective vantage point from which the partiality of dominant historical narratives becomes visible. Within Indian historiography, this has translated into a methodological turn toward oral history, personal letters, autobiographies, vernacular periodicals, and family archives — sources that exist outside the official colonial and nationalist record but that document women's political consciousness and action in granular detail.

Third, the framework incorporates insights from subaltern studies, particularly the proposition that the colonised subject's political consciousness cannot be adequately recovered through elite archival sources alone, since such sources were produced by and for power. Where subaltern studies historians such as Ranajit Guha focused primarily on peasant insurgency, gendered historiography extends this insight to argue that women — across class, caste, and regional positions — constituted a doubly subordinated subaltern category: subordinated by colonial rule and by the patriarchal structures of indigenous society and the nationalist movement itself.

3. Three Historiographical Traditions

3.1 Nationalist Historiography

The earliest and most influential accounts of the freedom struggle were written within a nationalist historiographical tradition that privileged the consolidation of a unified national narrative over the documentation of internal social differentiation. Within this tradition, women's participation was acknowledged primarily in instrumental terms — as evidence of the moral and civilisational strength of the nation, or as testimony to the success of Gandhi's mobilisational strategy in bringing women out of domestic seclusion into public protest. This framing, while important in expanding the public visibility of women during the 1920s and 1930s, tended to subsume women's agency



within a male-authored narrative of national awakening, in which women were mobilised by, rather than co-authors of, the nationalist project.

3.2 Feminist Historiography

From the 1970s onward, a body of feminist historical scholarship began to challenge this instrumental framing. Scholars undertook the painstaking recovery of women's autobiographies, organisational records of women's associations, and biographical studies of individual women revolutionaries and reformers, in order to demonstrate that women's political consciousness in the period was not derivative of male nationalist leadership but possessed its own ideological genealogies — rooted variously in social reform movements, religious revivalism, and emergent feminist consciousness influenced by international suffrage movements. This scholarship reframed women's participation from a story of mobilisation to a story of agency, while also drawing attention to the limits that nationalist leadership placed on women's political demands, particularly the postponement of feminist concerns such as suffrage and personal law reform in the interest of national unity.

3.3 Subaltern and Intersectional Historiography

A third historiographical strand, emerging from the 1980s subaltern studies project and subsequently enriched by intersectional feminist scholarship, has sought to move beyond the recovery of prominent individual women to examine the participation of peasant women, tribal women, and women of marginalised castes whose involvement in the freedom struggle rarely produced any documentary trace at all. This scholarship treats the absence of evidence not as an absence of agency but as a methodological challenge requiring oral history, folk-song analysis, and local administrative records — including police surveillance files, which paradoxically often provide the most detailed evidence of subaltern women's political activity precisely because the colonial state treated such activity as a security threat.

Together, these three traditions do not represent a linear progression but a set of overlapping and sometimes contradictory lenses, each of which illuminates a different dimension of women's historical participation while also reproducing its own exclusions — feminist historiography, for instance, has been critiqued for its



disproportionate focus on educated, upper-caste, urban women, a gap that subaltern and intersectional approaches have sought to address.

4. Dimensions of Women's Participation

Building on this theoretical groundwork, the historical record of women's participation in the Indian freedom movement can be organised into four broad, overlapping categories.

4.1 Armed and Revolutionary Resistance

The earliest visible instance of women's armed resistance is Rani Lakshmibai's defence of Jhansi during the 1857 uprising, but a more extensive tradition of revolutionary participation developed in early twentieth-century Bengal and Punjab, where women such as Bhikaji Cama operated as organisers and propagandists from exile, and later figures including Pritilata Waddadar, Kalpana Dutt, and Bina Das participated directly in armed revolutionary action against colonial officials. This strand of participation is historiographically significant because it directly contradicts the trope of women as passive supporters, demonstrating instead a willingness to undertake the same risks of violence and imprisonment as male revolutionaries.

4.2 Gandhian Constructive Politics and Satyagraha

A second and numerically far larger category of participation occurred within the Gandhian framework of non-violent civil disobedience, in which women such as Kasturba Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Nehru, and Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit assumed prominent organisational roles in the Salt Satyagraha, the Quit India Movement, and the boycott of foreign cloth. Gandhi's explicit framing of non-violent resistance as compatible with, and even drawing upon, qualities he associated with women's social role lent ideological legitimacy to mass female participation, while simultaneously embedding women's political role within a gendered moral economy that some feminist historians have argued constrained the scope of women's political identity to that of the self-sacrificing nationalist mother-figure.

4.3 Constitutional and Institutional Politics

A third category comprises women who entered formal constitutional politics, including legislative councils, the Indian National Congress leadership, and later the Constituent Assembly. Figures such as Sarojini Naidu, who became the first woman



president of the Indian National Congress in 1925, and Sucheta Kriplani, later the first woman chief minister of an Indian state, represent a trajectory of institutional political participation that paralleled and reinforced the mass mobilisational role of women in civil disobedience.

4.4 Grassroots and Subaltern Mobilisation

The fourth and historiographically most under-documented category comprises the participation of peasant women, tribal women, and working-class women in regional uprisings and local satyagraha movements, frequently without any formal organisational affiliation. Matangini Hazra's leadership of a procession during the Quit India Movement in Midnapore, where she was shot by colonial police while continuing to hold the national flag, exemplifies this category — a form of participation that entered the historical record largely because of the dramatic circumstances of her death rather than because such participation was otherwise documented or organisationally visible.

5. The Problem of Archival Silence

A central methodological challenge for gendered historiography is what feminist historians have termed “archival silence” — the systematic under-representation of women's political activity in the documentary sources upon which historical narrative construction conventionally depends. This silence operates through several mechanisms. First, colonial administrative and police records, while extensive, were structured around the documentation of organised, named, identifiable political activity, a category from which much of women's grassroots participation — conducted informally, often anonymously, and outside registered political organisations — was effectively excluded. Second, nationalist organisational records, including those of the Indian National Congress, were themselves produced and maintained predominantly by male leadership, with women's contributions frequently subsumed under the names of male relatives, husbands, or organisational umbrellas rather than recorded as independent political action. Third, the conventions of nationalist biography and hagiography that shaped the early historical memorialisation of the freedom struggle tended to privilege individual male leadership narratives, further marginalising women's collective and less individually attributable forms of participation.



The methodological response to this silence, as developed within feminist and subaltern historiography, has been to expand the category of legitimate historical evidence beyond official archives to include oral testimony, family correspondence, vernacular autobiography, folk songs and oral narrative traditions associated with regional uprisings, and — counterintuitively — colonial police surveillance records, which often documented women's political activity in greater detail than nationalist sources precisely because the colonial state regarded such activity as a security concern requiring close monitoring. This expanded evidentiary base does not fully resolve the problem of archival silence, since oral testimony recovered decades after the events in question carries its own methodological limitations of memory and retrospective reconstruction, but it nonetheless allows historians to partially reconstruct dimensions of women's participation that left no trace in official records.

6. Towards an Integrated Theoretical Model

Drawing together the preceding analysis, this paper proposes an integrated theoretical model for the gendered historiography of India's independence struggle, structured around three interlocking analytical moves. First, a move from recovery to re-theorisation: rather than treating the documentation of individual women's contributions as historiographically sufficient in itself, the model insists on re-examining the categories — “political,” “public,” “leadership” — through which historical significance is assigned, since these categories were themselves constructed in ways that systematically undervalued forms of action more commonly undertaken by women. Second, a move from singular to intersectional analysis: the model insists that gender cannot be analysed as an isolated category but must be examined in conjunction with class, caste, religion, and region, since the historiographical visibility of women in the freedom movement correlates strongly with their social position, with educated upper-caste urban women disproportionately represented in both contemporary records and subsequent historical scholarship relative to peasant, tribal, and lower-caste women. Third, a move from archival dependence to methodological pluralism: the model treats oral history, vernacular literature, material culture, and even silence itself as legitimate and necessary objects of historical interpretation, rather than as supplementary curiosities to be appended to an archive-based narrative.



This integrated model does not claim to resolve definitively the historiographical problem of women's relative invisibility, but it offers a framework through which future research — particularly regional and local-level studies — can systematically interrogate the relationship between gender, archival production, and historical memory in the context of anti-colonial nationalism.

7. Conclusion

The participation of women in India's struggle for independence was neither marginal nor derivative; it spanned constitutional politics, revolutionary action, Gandhian non-violent resistance, and largely undocumented grassroots mobilisation across the social spectrum. The relative invisibility of this participation within mainstream nationalist historiography reflects not the absence of women's political agency but the gendered logic of archival production and historical narrative construction. A gendered historiography — drawing upon feminist historical methodology, subaltern studies, and intersectional analysis — offers a theoretical framework through which this invisibility can be systematically addressed, treating archival silence itself as historical evidence requiring interpretation rather than as a gap to be passively accepted. Future research within this framework should prioritise regional and vernacular-language sources, oral history projects with surviving family members of women participants, and comparative analysis across caste and class lines, in order to construct a more complete and theoretically grounded account of women's role in shaping the political history of modern India.

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