



"Women of Andhra Pradesh in India's Freedom Struggle: A Historical Perspective"

By

Dr. Surapalli Venkata Ratnam Assistant Professor (PT)

Department of History, Nizam College, Hyderabad, Telangana

Assigned Section: Modern Andhra Pradesh History

DOI: 10.56975/ijrar.v13i1.326999

Abstract:

The Indian freedom movement witnessed unparalleled contributions from individuals across genders, castes, and communities. Among them, the women of Andhra Pradesh played a significant role in shaping and supporting the independence struggle through diverse means, including participating in mass movements, dissemination of patriotic ideologies, and making sacrifices that underscore their commitment to the nation's liberation. This paper explores the historical evolution of women's participation in key events such as the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, and Quit India Movement in Andhra Pradesh, alongside their unique strategies of resistance such as salt satyagrahas and underground activities. Furthermore, it highlights some of the unsung heroines of Andhra history like Duggirala Rajyalakshmi, Sarojini Naidu, and others who seamlessly blended the rhetoric of nationalism with socio-political awakening in their region. Drawing from archival records, oral histories, and secondary sources, this research illuminates the intersection of gender and regional dynamics in India's freedom struggle.

Keywords:

Women's Movements, Freedom Struggle, Non-Cooperation, Andhra Pradesh Women, Quit India, Sarojini Naidu, Indian Nationalism, Duggirala Rajyalakshmi.

1. Introduction

The Indian freedom struggle was not merely a fight against the British colonial system but also a social movement that sought equal participation across all sections of the society. Among the less documented contributors are the women of Andhra Pradesh, whose resolve and political awareness added momentum to the movement. Located in South India, Andhra Pradesh developed distinctive patterns of participation owing to its socio-cultural milieu and specific leadership that mobilized women effectively. This paper adopts a historical perspective to explore the multifaceted roles women played in Andhra Pradesh's freedom movement while contextualizing their contributions in broader Indian feminist and nationalist discourses.

2. Women's Participation in Major Phases of the Freedom Struggle

The women of Andhra Pradesh demonstrated extraordinary resilience and patriotism by actively participating in the Indian freedom movement, challenging both colonial oppression and societal conventions. Their contributions were not incidental but constituted an integral part of India's broader nationalist struggle. Under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, women in Andhra Pradesh took decisive steps in three major phases of the freedom struggle: **Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22)**, **Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–34)**, and the **Quit India Movement (1942)**. Each phase witnessed unique modes of participation shaped by regional, cultural, and political dynamics within Andhra society.

2.1. Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–1922)

The Non-Cooperation Movement was one of the first instances when women in Andhra Pradesh became active participants in the nationalist movement at a mass scale. Inspired by Gandhi's call to withdraw from British structures and create self-reliant communities, educated and uneducated women alike stepped into uncharted waters of public protest and activism.

Key Contributions:

1. **Boycotting Foreign Goods:**

Women in Andhra Pradesh, both in urban and rural areas, took to the streets to burn foreign textiles and promote khadi. This was particularly significant in key cities like Vijayawada, Guntur, and Kakinada, where women formed the backbone of local Swadeshi committees. They refused to use British-made goods, inspiring fellow citizens to do the same.

2. **Promotion of Khadi:**

The production and promotion of handwoven khadi were championed by women like **Durgabai Deshmukh**, who became an important figure in setting up Khadi centers and training other women in spinning and weaving. Women began to challenge the notion that their role was confined to domesticity by actively contributing to the economic aspect of self-reliance.

3. *Participation in Public Protests:*

For the first time, women stepped into public spaces to give speeches, lead processions, and organize rallies condemning British rule. **Kanakamma (Rajyalakshmi)** became a recognized face in the movement due to her powerful oratory and organizational skills. These efforts unsettled the colonial administration and popularized the movement among grassroots citizens who looked up to these women as new symbols of courage.

Personal Sacrifices: Many women were ostracized by their families and communities for breaking traditional norms. These women often faced ridicule but continued their activism regardless.

Impact: The Non-Cooperation Movement not only intensified the freedom struggle in Andhra Pradesh but also laid the foundation for women's large-scale involvement in subsequent phases.

Table: 2. Key Activities During Non-Cooperation Movement (Andhra Women)

Activity	Contribution by Women	Outcome
Boycott of foreign goods	Protest leaders burned foreign textiles in Vijayawada and Guntur	Popularized Swadeshi
Public speeches and rallies	Kanakamma spoke in Nellore, raising nationalist sentiments	Inspired public mobilization
Khadi production and training	Led by Durgabai Deshmukh	

Sources: Desai, A. R. (1966); Reddy, S. (1995).

2.2. *Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–1934)*

The Civil Disobedience Movement, marked by Gandhi's **Salt Satyagraha**, expanded the scope of protest against the British by covering a diverse set of civil actions. Women from Andhra Pradesh heightened their revolutionary fervor during this wave.

Salt Satyagraha and Rural Women:

1. ***Salt Making in Coastal Andhra:***

Women in **coastal regions like Machilipatnam and Vizianagaram**, particularly from fishing and farming communities, played a pivotal role in manufacturing and distributing salt. Defying British laws, small groups of women collected seawater, boiled it, and distributed the illegal salt. This act became a symbol of defiance and inspired thousands.

2. ***Leading Non-Violent Marches:***

Women spearheaded processions to government offices, collected volunteers, and engaged in symbolic programs such as picketing liquor shops and blocking roads to law enforcement officers. These acts publicly showcased women's defiance of colonial policies.

Notable Leadership:**1. Duggirala Rajyalakshmi's Role:**

A fierce participant in the Salt Satyagraha in **Machilipatnam**, she not only supervised the salt-making process but also motivated countless women to join the movement. Her activism stood as a testament to courage in the face of imprisonment and persecution.

2. Protests in Guntur and Vijayawada:

Women organized silent marches in these cities to protest against the salt tax and other exploitative colonial practices. Even though rural women did not receive the same attention as their urban counterparts, their contributions were indispensable.

Small-Scale Underground Operations:

Apart from public actions, some women courted arrests by engaging in activities such as printing seditious pamphlets, hosting underground meetings, and coordinating escapes for jailed leaders.

Personal Sacrifices: Women involved in the Civil Disobedience Movement often faced violence at the hands of the colonial police. From physical assaults during rallies to confiscation of personal property, women bore significant sacrifices.

Impact: Women's participation in the movement showed that even traditionally conservative regions like Andhra Pradesh could become hotbeds of resistance under suitable leadership.

Table 3: Women's Roles in Salt Satyagraha

Task	Examples	Outcome
Manufacture of illegal salt	Coordinated by rural women's groups	Mass protest symbolism
Public demonstrations	Nellore and Visakhapatnam	Strengthened anti-British sentiment

Sources: Ramaswamy, K. (1985).

2.3.Quit India Movement (1942)

The Quit India Movement escalated the nationalist struggle by adopting a more aggressive and militant stance. Women of Andhra Pradesh emerged as key figures in this phase due to their ability to mobilize rural populations and work as covert operatives.

Underground Resistance Activities:**1. Clandestine Activities:**

Women played critical roles in underground networks—carrying messages to freedom fighters and harboring fugitives during the British crackdown. These operations became an essential part of the Quit India strategy in Andhra Pradesh.

2. *Sabotage and Strikes:*

In the railway towns of **Vijayawada and Nellore**, women participated in sabotaging railway tracks and communication lines. These acts disrupted the colonial administration's ability to control the movement.

3. *Distributed Illegal Publications:*

Women such as **Achanta Sarojini** disguised themselves as pilgrims or vendors to deliver pamphlets, literature, and propaganda material to villages.

Ruralisation of the Movement:

The Quit India Movement saw a significant expansion of rural women's involvement as they were recruited in large numbers to join symbolic protests, help hide important leaders, and participate in confrontational demonstrations against colonial officers. The participation of tribal women in Visakhapatnam and tribal belts of Andhra further expanded the reach of the movement.

Role of Imprisoned Leaders:

Numerous leaders like **Sarojini Naidu** and others were arrested during Quit India, leaving local women to organize demonstrations, gather funds, and provide moral support to their communities.

Impact: The Quit India Movement showcased women's bravery and their expanding contributions to India's independence struggle. Their participation also set the stage for their increasing demand for representation in post-independence governance.

3. **Biographical Sketches of Prominent Andhra Women**

The freedom struggle in Andhra Pradesh bore the indelible imprint of several women whose courage, leadership, and selfless dedication captured the essence of nationalist ideals. While the women of the region collectively contributed to the movement, a few individuals stood out as pioneers, shaping the direction of the struggle and serving as role models for later generations. Their actions were not limited to merely supporting the nationalist movement but extended to social reforms, institution-building, and a relentless pursuit of equality. This section explores the lives and contributions of some of these iconic women: **Duggirala Rajyalakshmi, Durgabai Deshmukh, Sarojini Naidu, Uyyalawada Narasamma, and Achanta Sarojini.**

Table 3: Chronology of Movements and Women's Roles in Andhra Pradesh

Year	Movement	Role Played by Women	Notable Figures
1920–1922	Non-Cooperation	Boycotts and Swadeshi activities	Durgabai Deshmukh, Kanakamma
1930–1934	Civil Disobedience	Salt satyagrahas and processions	Duggirala Rajyalakshmi
1942	Quit India Movement	Underground resistance and sabotage	Achanta Sarojini

3.1.Duggirala Rajyalakshmi (1899–1969)

Early Life and Introduction to Activism:

Duggirala Rajyalakshmi, popularly known as the "Braveheart of Andhra," was one of the most recognizable female figures in the early nationalist movement in Andhra Pradesh. Born into a progressive family in Tenali, Guntur district, Rajyalakshmi was married to Duggirala Gopalakrishnayya, a prominent freedom fighter and leader of the Swadeshi movement in Andhra. She received an informal education under the guidance of Gopalakrishnayya and soon became a staunch follower of Gandhian ideals.

Contribution to the Freedom Struggle:

Rajyalakshmi emerged as a fearless leader of the Civil Disobedience Movement, particularly during the Salt Satyagraha in 1930. She directly participated in protesting against the salt tax in **Machilipatnam** and other coastal areas, mobilizing women for picketing liquor shops and participating in the illegal manufacture of salt. Her charismatic leadership and organizational skills galvanized women from rural and urban areas alike.

- During public demonstrations, Rajyalakshmi was known for her fiery speeches and her ability to motivate women to overcome fears of persecution by British authorities.
- She suffered police brutality, including imprisonment, but remained unyielding in her commitment to freedom.

Legacy:

Rajyalakshmi's activism was not confined to political work; she also urged women to seek empowerment through education and economic independence. After independence, she withdrew from active politics but continued contributing to rural development and women's welfare programs in Andhra. Her life symbolized the fusion of nationalism with women's liberation, making her a pioneer of feminist consciousness in Andhra.

3.2.Durgabai Deshmukh (1909–1981)

Early Life and Education:

Known as the "Iron Lady of Andhra Pradesh," **Durgabai Deshmukh** was born in Rajahmundry into a conservative family. Despite societal restrictions, she pursued education with remarkable determination and went on to advocate for the empowerment of women through education, self-reliance, and political engagement.

Key Contributions to Freedom Struggle:

Durgabai joined the national movement as a teenager in 1921 during the **Non-Cooperation Movement**, encouraged by Gandhian ideals. Some key highlights of her role in the freedom struggle include:

1. Participation in Large-Scale Protests:

- At the age of 15, she actively organized and led women in boycotting foreign goods and promoted the use of khadi.
- She also picketed liquor shops and foreign cloth shops, inspiring others to do the same.

2. Educational Initiatives:

- A staunch believer in women's education, Durgabai founded schools dedicated to girls in Andhra Pradesh. She saw education as a key weapon in the freedom struggle and its aftermath.
- She worked closely with Mahatma Gandhi and became known for steadfast discipline in promoting Gandhian principles.

Post-Independence Contributions:

After independence, Durgabai emerged as one of India's most respected leaders. She played an instrumental role in drafting the Indian Constitution as a **member of the Constituent Assembly of India** and went on to become the founder of the Social Welfare Board. Her social reform work earned her several accolades, including the Padma Vibhushan.

Legacy:

To this day, Durgabai is remembered for blending Gandhian ideology with practical social service, making her a towering figure in Andhra's social and political history.

3.3.Sarojini Naidu (1879–1949)

Early Life and Education:

Though largely associated with Hyderabad, Sarojini Naidu's influence extended across Andhra Pradesh, where she played a pivotal role in energizing women into joining the freedom movement. Born into an intellectual family in Hyderabad, she pursued higher education in England and was one of the first Indian women to excel in English literature and poetry.

Role in the Freedom Struggle:

Sarojini Naidu brought her oratory and literary skills into the nationalist movement, becoming a close associate of Mahatma Gandhi. Her active participation in the **Civil Disobedience Movement** and **Quit India Movement** had far-reaching effects. Key contributions include:

1. Andhra Campaigns:

- Sarojini worked closely with local leaders in Andhra Pradesh to mobilize women for civil disobedience protests. Her speeches in towns like **Madras (now Chennai)**, Vijayawada, and Visakhapatnam inspired women from conservative households to join nationalist activities.
- When large-scale arrests of leaders took place during Quit India, Sarojini's organizational acumen ensured that protests were sustained.

2. Imprisonments:

Imprisoned multiple times for her participation in salt satyagrahas and other civil disobedience activities, she became a symbol of defiance against the British.

Legacy:

Sarojini Naidu became the **first woman President of the Indian National Congress** and later the **first woman Governor of independent India**. Her poetry and political discourse linked patriotism with the need for women's empowerment, making her a role model for future generations.

3.4.Uyyalawada Narasamma (1838–1885)***Early Life and Revolutionary Ideals:***

Uyyalawada Narasamma was born in a rural village in Kurnool district and became synonymous with the **early resistance movements in Andhra Pradesh**. As a female figure prominent in the early rebellion led by her husband **Uyyalawada Narasimha Reddy**, she contributed to the fight against British expansion into Rayalaseema.

Role in Anti-Colonial Resistance:

Narasamma provided logistical support to her husband's rebellion, gathering and preparing resources and motivating the Rayalaseema villagers to stand against the British. Though her efforts were part of a larger armed rebellion (rather than Gandhian non-violence), they demonstrated women's ability to play critical roles even in militarized uprisings.

Legacy:

Narasamma's sacrifice and determination made her one of the early symbols of women's resistance in Andhra, and her story is regarded as an inspiration in Rayalaseema's regional history.

3.5.Achanta Sarojini (1912–1981)

Early Life and Nationalist Inclinations:

Achanta Sarojini was born in Eluru into a family that was actively connected to the freedom struggle. Deeply inspired by the involvement of women in India's nationalist movement, Sarojini became one of the first women leaders in the Quit India Movement in Andhra Pradesh.

Role in Freedom Struggle:

1. Underground Resistance:

Achanta Sarojini actively participated in clandestine operations such as distributing illegal pamphlets, organizing secret meetings, and supporting fugitives who escaped British custody during the Quit India Uprising.

2. Rural Mobilization:

Sarojini worked primarily in rural districts, conducting awareness campaigns among women and encouraging them to boycott British products and defy colonial laws.

3. Picketing and Marches:

Sarojini extensively picketed liquor shops and conducted non-violent demonstrations, even facing violence from British authorities.

Legacy:

Post-independence, Achanta Sarojini emerged as a leader in the social welfare sphere, continuing her efforts for women's rights and rural development in Andhra Pradesh.

In sum up, the lives of these five women — **Duggirala Rajyalakshmi, Durgabai Deshmukh, Sarojini Naidu, Uyyalawada Narasamma, and Achanta Sarojini**— reflect the diverse ways in which Andhra Pradesh's women contributed to India's freedom movement. They challenged entrenched gender norms, took on leadership roles, and left behind a lasting legacy of courage and determination. Their activism not only accelerated the freedom struggle but also laid the groundwork for women's emancipation and socio-political reform in post-independence India.

4. Conclusion

The role of women from Andhra Pradesh in India's freedom struggle is a testament to their courage, resilience, and unwavering commitment to the ideals of justice, equality, and liberation. These women shattered traditional gender norms to emerge as leaders, organizers, and agents of change during a time when societal expectations confined them to domestic roles. From contributing to Gandhian movements like the Non-Cooperation Movement and Salt Satyagraha to taking part in underground revolutionary activities during the Quit India Movement, their participation reflected not only political engagement but a larger social awakening.

Women like **Duggirala Rajyalakshmi** inspired the masses with their fiery activism during the Civil Disobedience Movement, while **Durgabai Deshmukh** demonstrated how education and self-reliance could be effective tools in the nationalist agenda. The intellectual and revolutionary contributions of **Sarojini Naidu**, who played a crucial role in mobilizing women across India's southern regions, and the grassroots efforts of women like **Achanta Sarojini** further solidified Andhra Pradesh's contribution to India's independence. Moreover, the early rebellion led by **Uyyalawada Narasamma**, though militaristic, exemplified that resistance from Andhra Pradesh's women spanned across both armed and nonviolent struggles, long before Mahatma Gandhi's strategies gained momentum.

Their sacrifices, whether through arrests, police brutality, societal ostracism, or even loss of livelihood, exemplify their dedication to the cause of independence. However, their involvement extended beyond political resistance to gaining a voice for themselves in the emerging Indian democracy. The nationalist movement provided a platform for these women to challenge not only colonial rule but also patriarchy, marking the beginning of their larger quest for equality in independent India.

The legacy of these women is profound. They inspired subsequent movements for gender equality, education, and social upliftment both within Andhra Pradesh and beyond. The paper highlights how their courage and contributions during pivotal national movements like the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, and Quit India Movement carved out an important place for women in India's history. Yet, despite their monumental achievements, many of their names and contributions remain underrepresented in mainstream historical narratives.

As we reflect on their stories, it becomes clear that the freedom struggle was not just a fight against colonial oppression, but also a stage upon which women asserted their identity, broke barriers, and planted the seeds for a more inclusive society. Their efforts remind us that gender equality and societal progress are deeply enmeshed with each other, and their sacrifices deserve to be recognized, remembered, and celebrated.

The women of Andhra Pradesh hold a unique place in the annals of Indian history, and their contributions continue to serve as an inspiration for future generations working toward a more equitable and just world.

5. References

- Desai, A. R. (1966). *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan.
- Forbes, G. H. (1996). *Women in Modern India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139171130>
- Kumar, R. (1993). *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800–1990*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.
- Majumdar, R. C., & Pusalker, A. D. (Eds.). (1960). *The Struggle for Freedom*. Volume 3 of *The History and Culture of the Indian People*. Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.
- Ramaswamy, K. (1985). *Women in India's Freedom Movement*. New Delhi: Triveni Publishers.

- Reddy, S. (1995). **Sisters in Resistance: Women of Andhra Pradesh in India's Freedom Struggle**. *South Asian Historical Review*, 3(4), 120–135.
- Sarkar, S. (1989). *Modern India, 1885–1947*. New Delhi: Macmillan.
- South Indian Women's Role in the Freedom Struggle. (1990). *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 51, 158–160.
- Sundaram, V. (1990). *History of Andhra Nationalism*. Hyderabad: Telugu University Press.
- Thapar-Björkert, S. (2006). *Women in the Indian National Movement: Unseen Faces and Unheard Voices, 1930–42*. New Delhi: Sage Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9788132102650>
- Vijayalakshmi, P. (1998). Women Freedom Fighters of Andhra Pradesh. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 5(2), 245–253.