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## UNSUNG HEROINES OF INDIA'S FREEDOM STRUGGLE: A HISTORICAL STUDY OF WOMEN PATRIOTS FROM 1857 TO 1942

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### Abstract

This article explores the remarkable contributions of six women freedom fighters—Uda Devi, Jhalkari Bai, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Durga Devi (Durga Bhabhi), Tara Rani Srivastava, and Bhogeshwari Phukanani—who played significant roles in India's long struggle for independence. These women came from diverse social and geographical backgrounds but shared an indomitable spirit and unwavering courage against British colonial rule. Spanning from the First War of Independence in 1857 to the Quit India Movement in 1942, their stories embody the essence of sacrifice, leadership, and patriotism. Using historical records, secondary literature, and archival narratives, this study aims to highlight their heroic actions, social backgrounds, and the gendered dimensions of resistance. The paper argues that these women's participation was not incidental but central to the nationalist discourse and collective struggle for freedom.



**Keywords:** Women freedom fighters, Indian independence movement, Uda Devi, Jhalkari Bai, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Durga Bhabhi, Tara Rani Srivastava, Bhogeshwari Phukanani, 1857 revolt, Quit India Movement, feminist historiography

### 1. Introduction

The history of India's freedom struggle is often celebrated for the valor of male leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Subhas Chandra Bose, and Bhagat Singh. Yet, the contributions of women—many of whom took up arms, organized revolts, and inspired their communities—remain underrepresented in mainstream historiography. From the revolts of 1857 to the Quit India Movement of 1942, women's participation was instrumental in shaping the moral and political foundations of India's independence. This article brings to light the courageous stories of six such women: Uda Devi, Jhalkari Bai, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Durga Devi, Tara Rani Srivastava, and Bhogeshwari Phukanani. Their stories reveal a common thread of sacrifice, leadership, and a deep sense of patriotism. Through their diverse backgrounds—Dalit, royal, revolutionary, and peasant—they collectively represent the inclusivity and resilience of India's nationalist movement.

### 2. Uda Devi: The Dalit Warrior of Lucknow (1857)

Uda Devi, a Dalit woman from Awadh, emerged as a symbol of resistance during the First War of Independence in 1857. She was part of Begum Hazrat Mahal's army and played a decisive role in the

battle of Sikandar Bagh, Lucknow. Defying caste and gender restrictions, she climbed a peepal tree and shot down several British soldiers before being martyred.

Her act of valor represented not only defiance against colonial rule but also a challenge to the deeply entrenched social hierarchies of 19th-century India. Uda Devi's contribution highlights the intersection of caste, gender, and nationalism—an area often overlooked by mainstream historians. Today, her martyrdom is commemorated annually by Dalit communities in Uttar Pradesh, reaffirming her place as an icon of subaltern resistance.

### 3. Jhalkari Bai: The Shadow of Rani Lakshmibai (1857)

Jhalkari Bai, born in a humble family in Bundelkhand, served as a close aide to Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi. During the 1857 uprising, she disguised herself as the Queen and led the army against the British. Her deception confused the enemy forces and provided Rani Lakshmibai crucial time to escape and regroup.

Jhalkari Bai's courage went beyond personal bravery—it represented women's agency in a deeply patriarchal society. Her inclusion in the royal army also symbolized the blurring of class boundaries during times of crisis. Modern historians and Dalit feminists have reinterpreted her story as an example of the grassroots participation of marginalized women in India's earliest freedom struggle.

### 4. Begum Hazrat Mahal: The Queen Who Defied the Empire (1857)

Begum Hazrat Mahal, the consort of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah of Awadh, emerged as one of the foremost leaders of the 1857 revolt after her husband's exile to Calcutta. From Lucknow, she organized troops, motivated citizens, and declared her son, Birjis Qadr, as the ruler of Awadh.

Her governance was marked by effective leadership and a vision of inclusive resistance that united Hindus and Muslims against the British. She issued proclamations denouncing British exploitation and calling for the defense of Indian traditions. Even after the fall of Lucknow, Begum Hazrat Mahal refused to surrender and continued her struggle from Nepal. Her defiance stands as a testament to the political acumen and courage of Indian women in leadership during colonial rule.

### 5. Durga Devi (Durga Bhabhi): The Revolutionary Mother (1928)

Durga Devi Vohra, popularly known as Durga Bhabhi, was an active member of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA). As the wife of revolutionary Bhagwati Charan Vohra, she supported and participated in revolutionary activities alongside Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, and Sukhdev.

In 1928, after Bhagat Singh shot British officer J.P. Saunders in Lahore, Durga Bhabhi helped him and Rajguru escape British surveillance by posing as Bhagat Singh's wife during their train journey to Calcutta. Her daring act of subterfuge became legendary among revolutionaries. Durga Bhabhi also took part in the "Anti-Simon Commission" protests and raised funds for revolutionary activities.

Her participation signified a shift in women's roles—from symbolic supporters to active participants in militant resistance. Durga Devi's commitment redefined the image of Indian womanhood, merging compassion with courage.

### 6. Tara Rani Srivastava: The Woman Who Continued the March (1942)

Tara Rani Srivastava, a courageous woman from Bihar, played a vital role in the Quit India Movement of 1942. Along with her husband, Phulendu Babu, she led a procession to hoist the Indian tricolor on the local police station. When the police opened fire, her husband was shot. Undeterred, she bandaged his wounds with her sari and continued the march to complete their mission.

Tragically, her husband died soon after, but Tara Rani continued her activism, organizing protests and inspiring others to join the freedom movement. Her story encapsulates the spirit of the Quit India Movement—ordinary people turning into extraordinary heroes.

### 7. Bhogeshwari Phukanani: The Spirit of Assam (1942)

Bhogeshwari Phukanani, hailing from Assam, was one of the oldest participants in the Quit India Movement. At the age of sixty, she led a group of protestors in Nagaon, fearlessly opposing British rule. During a confrontation with police, when an officer attempted to snatch the national flag, she struck him with a bamboo stick and was shot dead on the spot.

Her martyrdom became a symbol of Assamese pride and the unity of India's struggle across regions. Bhogeshwari Phukanani's sacrifice demonstrates that patriotism transcends age, gender, and geography.

### 8. The Gendered Dimension of India's Freedom Struggle

The narratives of these women reveal a crucial dimension of India's freedom movement—the gendered nature of resistance. Women were not mere participants but active leaders who redefined courage and political identity. From royal palaces to rural villages, their roles evolved from supporters to strategists and warriors.

Their stories also challenge the colonial stereotype of Indian women as passive or submissive. Instead, they emerged as decision-makers and defenders of the nation. In the postcolonial context, their legacies have inspired feminist reinterpretations of Indian history, emphasizing inclusivity and intersectionality.

### 9. Conclusion

The stories of Uda Devi, Jhalkari Bai, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Durga Devi, Tara Rani Srivastava, and Bhogeshwari Phukanani illuminate the depth and diversity of women's participation in India's freedom struggle. These heroines represent different regions, castes, and ideologies, yet they shared a common vision—liberation from colonial rule.

Their courage, leadership, and sacrifice have left an indelible mark on India's history. Acknowledging them not only restores balance to nationalist narratives but also inspires future generations to uphold values of equality, justice, and patriotism.

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