



## **Beyond Salt and Symbolism: Women's Political Resistance and the Transformative Role of Gender in the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930 marked a decisive phase in India's struggle against British colonial rule. The Lahore Congress of 1929 declared complete independence, paving the way for mass resistance under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership. His strategic defiance of the Salt Laws served as a catalyst for nationwide mobilisation, particularly drawing women into active political engagement. Despite initial apprehensions, women's participation extended beyond symbolic gestures to direct confrontation with colonial authority, including protests, picketing, and defying repressive laws. British responses, such as brutal assaults, imprisonment, and legislative curtailments, sought to suppress women's agency but instead strengthened their resolve. Prominent figures like Kamla Devi Chattopadhyaya emerged as key leaders, challenging British policies through both national activism and international advocacy. Their resistance, including resignations from official positions and courtroom defiance, underscored their commitment to dismantling colonial legitimacy. Women's radical involvement in the movement not only challenged British rule but also reshaped India's socio-political landscape, ensuring their continued role in future nationalist struggles and laying a foundation for gender-inclusive political activism in independent India.*

## INTRODUCTION

A turning point in India's fight for freedom, the Civil Disobedience cause of 1930 signalled a marked rise in the nationalist cause. Unlike past demonstrations, this movement aimed to question British rule by mass involvement, calculated disobedience, and symbolic acts of resistance. Fundamentally, Mahatma Gandhi's leadership turned the fight into a moral and political conflict with colonial control. But the movement was influenced by other players, including women who were essential in its implementation and durability, not just by Gandhi's vision. Women participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement neither in a minor or incidental capacity. At a period when conventional gender roles aimed to confine females to home settings, it was a deliberate affirmation of their political agency. Women enthusiastically engaged in demonstrations, picketing, the breaking of salt prohibitions, and colonial rule opposition, therefore broadening the influence of the campaign. Their participation in the fight revealed a more general change in Indian culture wherein nationalist goals started to interact with changing conceptions of social justice and gender equality.

The movement was famous also for its deliberate use of peaceful opposition. Initiated by Gandhi, the Salt March was a legendary event highlighting the financial abuse ingrained in British control. An indispensable product, salt's levy turned into a potent emblem of colonial tyranny that inspired many areas of society into action. Recognising the importance of this protest, women not only helped to make and market salt but also organised protests, underwent police assault, and may have been imprisoned. Their acts showed the force of civil disobedience in opposing both limited social standards and colonial authority. The British answered the movement quickly and forcefully. Brutal repression greeted protesters: lathi charges, widespread arrests, punitive legislation meant to stifle dissent. Particularly targeted were women, subject to public humiliation, incarceration, and physical abuse. Still, these harsh policies did not discourage; rather, they served to increase their will. Their resistance against colonial violence highlighted their dedication to the nationalist cause and established a standard for next movements for political and social transformation. Women's involvement in the Civil Disobedience Movement is significant for reasons other than just their direct contributions. Their participation changed the conversation on women's place in public and political life and questioned accepted patriarchal rules. Women's ongoing activity in the independence struggle and post-independence nation-building activities originated in the sacrifices they made during this time. It also underlined how closely nationalist movements and female rights are entwined and how the war for independence was also a battle for more general social revolution.

The study aims to examine the critical role of women in the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930. It seeks to analyse their contributions, the challenges they faced, and the broader impact of their participation on both the nationalist movement and women's socio-political status in India. The research also aims to highlight how women's involvement in civil disobedience set the stage for their future political engagement.

The study employs a historical and qualitative approach, drawing upon primary sources such as letters, speeches, and government reports, along with secondary sources including books and journal articles. Archival research and content analysis of contemporary newspaper reports will be used to reconstruct the experiences of women participants. Oral histories and memoirs will also be examined to provide a more nuanced understanding of their motivations and struggles during the movement.

Declaring total independence as its ultimate goal, the Indian National Congress assembled in December 1929 in Lahore, hence changing its political aims and therefore negating the former demand for Dominion Status. This deliberate change in direction was not just a rhetorical claim but also a premeditated action to heighten the fight against British colonial control. The midnight proclamation on December 31, 1929, was not an isolated incident but rather the forerunner of a methodical, regimented effort meant to inspire popular engagement.

Ordering its members to abstain from elections, the Congress proclaimed January 26, 1930, Independence Day—a symbolic protest of resistance against British control. The Congress made sure the Civil Disobedience Movement would be carried out with strategic thought by giving Mahatma Gandhi the power to start it at his will. Gandhi's choice of the Salt Laws as the main point of opposition was not random; it was deliberate, aimed at a product essential to everyday living and revealed the intrinsic economic injustice of



British taxation laws. The choice to contest the Salt Laws highlighted the more general case that British control was exploitative at its root, unfairly burdening the underprivileged parts of society.

Gandhi's March 12, 1930 march to Dandi was classic civil resistance. His detention on April 6 served as a trigger for national mobilisation as much as an indication of official repression. The immediate effects were seen in the shape of mass hartals, active manifestations of opposition rather than just quiet protests. Originally turned away from active engagement because of Gandhi's concerns about their involvement, women aggressively claimed their right to join the movement. Their conviction that national conflicts should not be limited by gender exclusions captures the evolving social awareness of the era. Women participated actively in disobedience of the Salt Laws, in violation of forest rules, and in public rallies, therefore transcending just symbolic actions. The colonial reaction went beyond just preventative measures to include harsh punitive acts. Section 144, the Press Ordinance, the Unlawful Instigation Ordinance, and the Intimidation Ordinance show the degree to which the British government aimed to criminalise justified political criticism.

Based on the caning of two ladies on their naked backs in Bengal and the merciless attack on a procession headed by Smt. Swaroop Rani Nehru in Allahabad, the repression was not indiscriminate; it targeted women especially. These acts were calculated deterrents meant to discourage women from political involvement, not just examples of colonial cruelty. Still, these policies strengthened women's determination rather than inspiring terror. Reflecting the degree of government abuses, Delhi's lathi charge wounded 10 women, including Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's mother-in-law, while three women in Madhya Pradesh were killed for violating forest rules.

The revenge went beyond the streets. High-ranking women in colonial administrative systems deliberately left their roles, therefore directly undermining the validity of British authority. Along with her rejection of the Kaiser-I-Hind Medal, the resignations of Muthulakshmi Ammal from the Legislative Council, Mrs. Hansa Mehta and Kamabbi Lakshman Rao from their positions as honorary magistrates, and Miss Dixon from the Central Legislative Assembly, were direct challenges to colonial legitimacy rather than passive resistance.

Kamla Devi Chattopadhyaya made very remarkable contributions. She was not just a symbolic leader but also a real participant in the independence fight. Her political acumen was evident in her support of civil disobedience, demands for a parallel administration, and honest defying of colonial laws. Her choice to fight the colonial administrative system directly rather than just claim her political rights was to contest the Madras Legislative Assembly elections in 1926. The worldwide reach of the Indian nationalist movement was shown by Kamla Devi's foreign activity, especially her attendance at the 1929 International Congress of Women's League for Peace and Freedom in Prague. She aimed to get support from all around by telling the world about the situation in India and thus exposing British colonialism on a worldwide scene. Her dedication to an uncompromising fight is shown by her extreme posture at the Ahmedabad Youth Conference in 1929, when she demanded instant civil disobedience and the founding of a parallel administration.

Her leadership going through the Civil Disobedience Movement transcended words. Acts of resistance that directly challenged British power included her participation in planning picketing actions, attending large demonstrations, and actively confronting the colonial government by selling salt on High Court grounds in Bombay. Her later arrest and court opposition—where she angrily sold salt and pushed the judge to join the Satyagraha—showcase the movement's extreme radical character. Her six-month sentence and penalties under the Salt Act reflected the colonial state's contempt of rebellious women. Her post-release actions concentrated on structural opposition via the Hindustani Seva Dal, a volunteer training program for national service. Kamla Devi's attempts in teaching women in literacy, cleanliness, child-rearing, and political education show a systematic approach to long-term opposition unlike past movements without institutional continuity.

Women's resistance is shown in Bombay by the participation of Jaishri Raiji, Hansa Mehta, Perin Captain, Sofia Somjee, Lilavati Munshi, Maniben Patel, and Khurshedben, among others. Their leadership in picketing campaigns, educational projects, and demonstrations against foreign products was not just auxiliary but also a cornerstone of the movement, not only supporting The colonial reaction to their disobedience—including lathi charges, incarceration, and cruel jail conditions—showcases the degree to which the British



government saw women's involvement as a major danger. Maniben Patel's treatment as a "C" class prisoner and the appalling circumstances under which female inmates were housed highlight the harsh policies the colonial authority used to stifle women's political activity. The Civil Disobedience Movement was a multifarious, multi-layered battle in which women were indispensable, not a single event. Persistent pushback, official resignations from government posts, and bold political acts methodically destroyed the claim that colonial persecution may discourage women. Therefore, the movement aimed not only on opposing British control but also on reforming Indian society by including women into active political involvement. Women's radicalism of their engagement during this era set the stage for their ongoing involvement in later nationalist campaigns, hence defining the boundaries of India's freedom movement.

## CONCLUSION

With women playing important roles of resistance, the Civil Disobedience Movement defined India's liberation fight. Their involvement challenged established gender roles and colonial control fundamentally, not just symbolically. Women demonstrated their agency in the nationalist cause by means of violation of salt restrictions, picketing, public protests, and strategic resignations, therefore changing the conversation on political activity. Women persisted in spite of cruel persecution including lathi charges, arrests, and punishing colonial laws. The efforts of the British government to stifle their involvement only strengthened their loyalty. Leaders like Kamla Devi Chattopadhyaya and many others made sacrifices that represented changing awareness in which national efforts could not ignore female equality. Along with driving the need for freedom, the movement changed society's view of women's political participation. It cleared the path for continuous female engagement in next liberation campaigns and nation-building after independence. Their battle is clearly seen in the ongoing fight for political representation and gender justice in contemporary India. Therefore, the Civil Disobedience Movement was a fundamental turning point in India's path towards an inclusive and equal society as much as a political revolt against colonial control.

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