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Women in the Indian National Movement

*Unseen Faces and Unheard Voices,
1930–42*

Suruchi Thapar-Björkert



书馆



WOMEN IN THE INDIAN NATIONAL MOVEMENT

Unseen Faces and Unheard Voices, 1930–42

Suruchi Thapar-Björkert



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Extract | Suruchi Thapar-Bjorkert

India's unseen heroines



CRY FREEDOM: Women volunteers picketed the General Mill at Indore in 1945. "Gandhi tried to use women's traditional qualities to extend their traditional roles into the political sphere".

Nationalist leaders understood the importance of family dynamics in encouraging and inhibiting women's involvement in public activities. Their dual stress on women fulfilling their duties as mothers within their homes as well as serving the nation was important because it enabled women to participate in the public sphere without dismantling the existing family structure and threatening the prevalent domestic ideology. Particularly the personal and

political beliefs of the two Congress Party leaders, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, linked different aspects of domestic ideology and women's public participation. Though the two leaders understood women's roles in different ways, their anticipation of the important contribution of women (from both their own and other families) to the nationalist movement carved distinct negotiable spaces for women's political contribution.

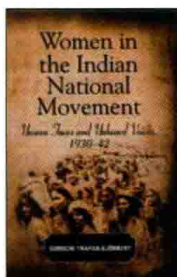
Both leaders recognised the importance of social acceptability of women's public activity undertaken for the nationalist cause. Two incidents became a source of inspiration for the nationalist movement and were representative of the 'sacrificial mother', 'mother India' and 'defender of civilisation'. Nearly half-a-century later, the surviving activists vividly remember the details. A male activist, Ram Krishna Khatri, stated that 'the role of mothers whose sons were killed has never been recognised'. In this context he narrated two incidents which recapitulated the decisive role of

mothers in the nationalist movement. The first took place in 1897 in the Chapekar family. The Chapekars were Chiplunkar Brahmins from the city of Poona. The three brothers from the family, Damodar Hari, Bal Krishan Hari and Vasudev, were hanged for conspiring against and killing a British official Mr Rand. Their mother, Lakshmi Bai, whose name has not been documented in any historical record, projected a brave profile. A wave of sympathy arose for the mother throughout the country and she was referred to as the 'sacrificial mother' who sacrificed her sons for the nation. She was visited by Sister Nivedita, one of Vivekanand's disciples and a participant in reform activities in Bengal, who was greatly impressed by Lakshmi Bai's moral strength.

The second incident relates to an activist named Ram Prasad Bismil, a member of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association who was hanged in Gorakhpur jail on 18 December 1927. This episode was narrated by Shiv Verma, who shared similar political leanings as Bismil. The

night before Bismil was hanged, his mother visited him. Bismil had tears in his eyes when he saw his mother. His mother asked him: 'Ho gaya inquilab? Ho gaya kranti? Kyo kayaro ki tarah aasu baha rahe ho?' ('Is this revolution? Is this revolt? Why are you shedding tears like a coward?') Bismil replied: *Tumhara beta kayar nahi hai. Asu to is liye hai ke tumhari jaisi ma, na tumari jaisi godh milegi* (Your son is not a coward. He has tears because he knows that

he will neither get a mother like you nor a mother's lap like yours). Bismil's mother had never actively participated in formal politics, but her consciousness was kindled by her son's death. In a speech addressed to the nation, she said: 'I have one more son to give to the nation (she raised the hand of Bismil's brother). I want nothing in return for my son's blood'.



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by Suruchi Thapar-Bjorkert
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This study provides an avenue for Thapar-Bjorkert to explore the roles of women in the Indian nationalist movement from 1930–1942. The book also enables her to highlight the impact that these women have had for subsequent generations of Indian women. Rather than focus on women's actions in the public domain, the author explores the contribution of women in the domestic sphere. Thapar-Bjorkert pays particular attention to the nationalist movement in the region of Uttar Pradesh (UP) in order to demonstrate the significance of the role of ordinary middle-class women for the nationalist movement.

The book draws on a range of materials including first-person narratives, poetry, cartoons, songs and contributions from women's magazines in the Hindi language to weave together a scholarly composition. The author builds the central tenet of the book through two central chapters: 'Domestication of the Public Sphere' and 'Politicisation of the Domestic Sphere' (p. 85). In the former, Thapar-Bjorkert outlines the ways in which the nationalist movement co-opted women's traditional qualities in order for women to enter the public sphere. Through the construction of nationalist symbols the qualities associated with women were re-negotiated such that mother as 'nurturer of the nation' became mother as 'the defender of civilisation' (p. 89). This shift in the dominant representation of women

enabled the qualities of 'womanhood' such as non-violence (p. 91) and respectability (p. 98) to be incorporated into political activity in the public domain through picketing of foreign cloth shops

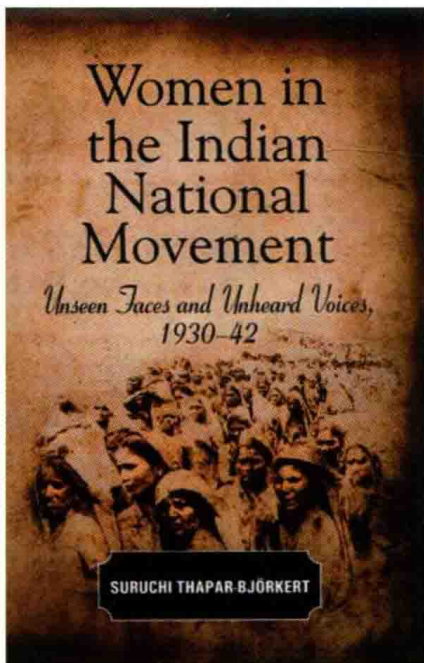
traditional cloth—khadi, or fasting, to supporting their family through hardship, such as the imprisonment of partners and sons, to the clandestine meetings of women's groups, this chapter demonstrates that the domestic sphere is indeed political and, more importantly, it provides an effective site for political resistance.

The book is well situated within the broader themes of nationalism and it provides a cogent argument for analysing the importance of women's contributions to the nationalist movement.

Thapar-Bjorkert provides a well structured argument for the significance of women's participation in the Indian Nationalist movement. By highlighting how the traditional constructions of 'woman' as respectable and adhering to purdah were incorporated into anti-colonial sentiment, the author clearly demonstrates that the domestic sphere was not simply the site of subjugation.

The book makes a significant contribution to analyses of gender and it highlights that small and unseen acts of resistance have long-term

and visible effects on the lives of women involved and their subsequent generations. The text provides a valuable teaching tool for those interested in gender history and it would also make a considerable important addition to those teaching in the area of development, transitional states and feminist studies.



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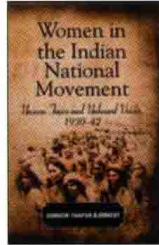
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and to act in violation of the salt law. In the latter chapter, the 'politicisation of the domestic sphere', Thapar-Bjorkert focuses on those women who could not step into the public realm, but who equally participated in the nationalist movement. For these purdah bound women, the domestic sphere offered equal forms of political activity that added to the anti-colonial movement of the time. From the spinning of

Reliving the Roots of Indian Women's Emancipation

The work under review is somewhat pedantic but reveals in spectacular detail a facet of Indian nationalist movement the lives and experiences of ordinary middleclass Indian women who participated in the anticolonial struggle and did play a significant role in shaping its character and direction. It is a subject that has received little, almost no, exposition in standard history books. Despite her rather old fashioned recovery approach to women's history, as reflected by the book's subtitle, (Unseen Faces and Unheard Voices) Thapar-Bjorkert's research has yielded some fascinating evidence, including a more nuanced account of women's activities in a variety of regional settings than was previously available to scholars, at least in English. She thus pioneers the framing of a very important social dynamics that pervaded every domain of life and yet remained, invisible, excepting the role of a few well known elite women, or heroines, as individuals, such as Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattapadhyay, Hansa Mehta, Sucheta Kripalani, Aruna Asaf Ali, and Vijayalakshmi Pandit, not as a class or social division.

Although women's participation in the Congress led nationalist movement and the Khilafat movement in Maharashtra and Bengal beginning from the 1920s was documented by historians to some extent, the role of women of the Hindi speaking heartland, Uttar Pradesh (UP), in the Indian national movement, Thapar-Bjorkert says, has hitherto been a relatively unexplored area. She has therefore primarily focused her research efforts on the participation of 'ordinary' and 'nameless' middleclass women of UP in the anticolonial, nationalist movements in the 1930s and 1940s, portraying how women's lives were affected and reshaped by their involvement in the freedom struggle and also how their involvement



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affected and changed the sociopolitical status quo. She explores and details it with interviews or 'oral narratives', archival materials, events and views recorded by popular magazines, and field studies, and adeptly details the complex process of gradual politicisation of women's domestic sphere and the domestication of the public sphere of politics, paving the way for later movements for women's emancipation.

'I am myself a product of that progress,' she writes. *'The opportunities that I have had are due to my grandmother's efforts and her real, if limited, encouragement to my mother. My grandmother's small changes in consciousness may not have altered her status in society, but they did lead to a change in the status of my mother and myself.'* The writer's mother, by the way, is the renowned historian Romila Thapar.

Thus, by shifting the emphasis of history from individual women leaders to the women as a class and studying the small changes in women's everyday life brought about by their various involvement in a male dominated sociopolitical movement, Thapar-Bjorkert creates a vast canvas that portrays the truth in its entirety,

in contrast to its fragmentary images reflected in individual symbols depicted by earlier historians. The book describes the ways in which women's involvement in politics, initially inspired by Gandhi and the satyagraha he launched, eventually eroded the restrictive social practices of the time in UP, such as purdah, gender segregation and norms of respectability. It explores Gandhi's approach to the juxtaposition and demands of domestic obligation and public participation, and narrates the events, processes and dynamics of women making significant contribution to the areas including the salt march, prison experiences, songs, cotton spinning, and underground activities and corollary support of armed revolutionaries. It also informs us that women's participation in the nationalist movement in the Hindi belt was initiated by the Nehru household, who articulated a particular nationalist discourse to middleclass women, a discourse that facilitated the nationalist movement but sidelined the more pressing women's issues.

The book takes readers to the time when Raj Kumari Gupta of Kanpur played a key role in the Kakori dacoity. On being arrested, she was disowned by her inlaws and thrown out of the house. Readers see Basanti Devi, wife of Congress leader CR Das, mobilising women in picketing cloth shops and selling khaddar on the streets in defiance of the government ban on political activities and demonstrations. A significant aspect of women's public participation was to court arrest and be imprisoned. Women also performed clandestine activities such as writing, smuggling literature in and out of prison, as they did within the domestic sphere.

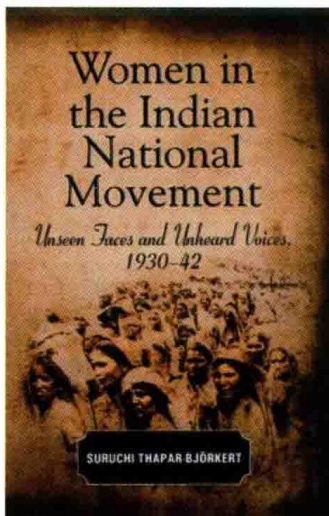
We thank Suruchi for presenting us this valuable account of an important track of our historical roots.

In Women in the Indian National Movement: Unseen Faces and Unheard Voices 1930-1942,

Suruchi Thapar-Björkert uses the dual conceptual optics of 'domestication of the public sphere' and 'politicization of the domestic sphere' to focus empirically on women's contribution in the anti-colonial nationalist movement from the United Provinces. Following major works by Partha Chatterjee (1989), Sumit Sarkar (1997) and Tanika Sarkar (2001), among others, these conceptual tools are now well established in the study of colonial history, culture and politics in India and particularly for the interrogation of how the 'women's question' was addressed by various actors in the social reform and nationalist movements.

To provide a snapshot of a decade long history of Indian women's contribution to the national struggle, Thapar-Björkert uses the feminist methodology of understanding perceptions of women's contributions through their own discourses. The refreshing aspect of this work is how it combines interviews, oral narratives, autobiographies, poetry, cartoons, songs, proscribed literature, letters and contributions from Hindi and Urdu magazines of the period, with a focus on the everyday world of 'ordinary middle class' (mostly upper caste, viz., Bania, Brahmin, Kayastha, and Khatri) women who were unable to cross the domestic threshold but nevertheless experienced and contributed to the nationalist movement. The subtitle of the book, 'unseen faces and unheard voices,' makes sense in this context. The author points out that much has been already written about the contribution of visible and elite women (who were active in the political sphere), compared to these 'ordinary middle class women' in India's nationalist movement. The crucial analytical questions posed by

her are: can the idea of domestic/ domesticated also incorporate the idea of politics/politicization? How important was domesticity for women themselves and in what ways did it enable them to shape their own subjectivities? In other words, how was domestic life organized, given the political upheavals taking place in the public sphere? The memory of middle class Indian women boycotting Manchester manufactured saris in favour of khaddar (hand spun, hand woven fabric), for example, is ensconced in the popular imagination even today.



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These questions are empirically answered with reference to women's own spoken and written words. The author shows how constraining social customs such as purdah and gender segregation were re-invented and made into enabling ones within the confines of the domestic space. This in

turn politicized women's subjectivities. Existing historical works reveal that the domestic space was permeable to nationalist politics in the public sphere and shaped by anti-colonial nationalist requirements. The novelty of Thapar-Björkert's work consists in exploring the significance of domesticity to the Indian nationalist discourse and civic-political life not only among male nationalists but from women's standpoint as well. She argues that it is myopic to view colonial and nationalist discourses as rendering women 'domesticated and not political subjects'.

Mining through interviews, poetry, autobiographies and songs, Thapar-Björkert recovers the 'invisible' (from the public sphere) contributions of women in the nationalist movement who remained in the domestic space. She delineates five main ways in which these women participated in public spaces and thus accorded political significance to the domestic sphere: constructive practices like spinning khaddar, sacrificing for the family, acting as supportive wives and mothers to activists, serving as pillars of support and strength in families facing economic and emotional predicaments (often due to the imprisonment of male family members for anti-colonial activities), and conducting secret activities, particularly for revolutionary groups such as the Hindustan Republican Socialist Party. The author presents numerous examples demonstrating how women re-aligned their domestic roles to accommodate the nationalist cause. This challenges the common place notion that political activism has to involve engagement with formal political machinery. Besides, Thapar-Björkert questions another taken for granted notion that invisibility from the public sphere translates into 'oppression' and 'inequality' in the domestic private space. Thus, she draws attention to a crucial epistemological and

methodological issue, in arguing that feminist analysis should become more nuanced in understanding women's experiences in different cultural and historical contexts. In the decades of the 1930s and 1940s, Thapar-Björkert argues, the domestic space emerged as a site of both contestation and subordination for women.

The book starts off with an exhaustive discussion on the imbricated issues of nationalism, gender, and sexuality from various schools of Indian historiography and Anglo-American and Indian feminist scholarship. The metaphors of extended family, women as desexualized nurturing mothers, non-violent, sublimated, and ever-ready to self-sacrifice, were effectively used in the mainstream nationalist movement to facilitate upper caste elite and middle class women to step out from the domestic sphere and enter the political arena.

The social reform movement and struggles for women's education were integral part of a 'modernizing' India and the agenda of 'the emancipation of women' had deep anti-colonial and nationalist roots. The concept of 'new woman' was modeled after the ideals of Victorian (patriarchal) domesticity and genteel Hindu mythological figures such as Sita. The 'new woman' (a model of femininity) would be modern (progressive) without giving up her gender specific roles (becoming westernized). An article in Stree Darpan argues, "...when those [educated and trained] women were the Indian mothers, heroes and rishis (sages) were born and now out of child mothers, cowards and social pygmies come forth" (quoted in Thapar-Björkert, 2006: 230). This androcentric argument, steeped in the ideologies of son-preference and anti-colonial nationalism, aptly demonstrates the complicated imbrications of nationalism and the 'women's question' in India. However, many radical women's voices about domesticity also reverberated in that period: "... [time] has washed away man's god like position and women's position as a slave. Now both will have to behave like human beings" (quoted in Thapar-Björkert, 2006: 232). Feminist readings of women's

contribution to the Indian nationalist movement, including this work, unfold the presence of ambiguity in the discourse of the 'women's question.' The obvious 'Hinduness' of conceiving the nation as Bharatmata (Mother India), the eclipse of womanhood under motherhood as part of the project of nation building and the need for intelligent and educated companions for the bhadralok (a respectable man), smitten by the Victorian ideal of companionate marriage, all of these notions evince the ambiguity embedded in that discourse. Thapar-Björkert painstakingly exposes these ambiguities and keeps alive the debate that they necessarily provoke.

One question that remains somewhat unclear is how the author defines the category, of the 'ordinary middle class' women. The distinction offered by Thapar-Björkert, in terms of women's non-visibility in the public domain, seems less convincing, particularly as the concept of middle class (and even Indian middle class with its unique complexity of caste hierarchy enmeshed with class inequality) is a widely discussed sociological concept and the adjective, 'ordinary,' lacks the analytical rigor that one expects in a conceptual category.

A major significance of this study is that it explores women's contribution in the anti-colonial struggle from the United Provinces, "[which was] an extremely conservative society steeped in repressive social norms and high rates of female illiteracy" (Thapar-Björkert, 2006: 255). This region is relatively less researched for women's contribution to the nationalist movement, compared to other regions such as Bengal and Maharashtra. Another interesting point made by Thapar-Björkert is that the distinct bilingualism (Urdu and Hindi) of the United Provinces, which originated in its ethnic, religious and historical specificity, was reflected in anti-colonial cultural productions. For instance, the Hindi/Urdu periodical *Viplav* was published from Lucknow and Lahore. In the aftermath of the Babri Masjid demolition and the phenomenal rise of Hindutva politics in Uttar Pradesh in the 1990s, this bilingual aspect of cultural production from the United Provinces

needs further attention by scholars in order to expose the indigenous roots of tolerance and pluralism in colonial India.

Nationalism is a significant context for understanding the development of middle class-upper caste values and ideas that are predominant in feminist thought and women's movement in India. Feminist historiography from India continues to tease out the redefinitions of patriarchy and gender during the anti-colonial struggle. Thapar-Björkert's work is a useful contribution in this area. Given the enormous regional diversity within India, it will particularly enrich our knowledge of the region-specific dimensions of these issues. The distinctively post-colonial feminist dimension to this scholarship is also worth emphasizing. The classical early feminist pronouncements on the domestic sphere as "static and timeless" and in particular that "the home has not developed in proportion to our other institutions, and by its rudimentary condition it arrests development" (Gilman, 2002[1903]: xv; 10) are challenged in the colonial context of India. In colonial India, the domestic space was not only politicized by both men and women, albeit differentially, but profane everyday symbols from the domestic domain, such as salt and the charkha (wooden spinning wheel) were endowed with 'national sacredness.' This in turn was one of the pivotal forces that helped in the mobilization of women in the last two decades of the Indian National Congress led nationalist movement. The active participation by women in the nationalist movement played a crucial role in sensitizing the framers of India's Constitution about women's rights and gender justice in the post-colonial period. That said, a feminist critic needs to remain vigilant about the intrinsic limits to this kind of mobilization of women for the nationalist cause. Throughout the text, Suruchi Thapar-Björkert evinces this feminist vigilance.

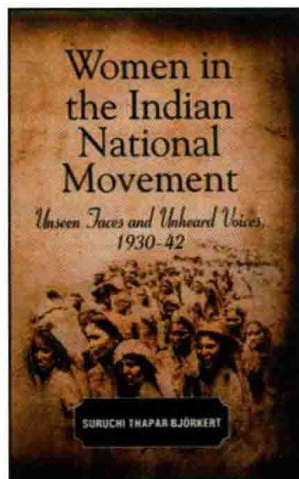
Independence women: brave but forgotten

India's freedom struggle saw mass participation at an unprecedented scale and many of these participants were women. Unfortunately, several of them have remained invisible to this day, unknown and unsung. The few women freedom fighters who made it into history books invariably came from elite or middle class backgrounds and their male relatives had often encouraged them to join the movement. In contrast, there were innumerable ordinary women, with no formal education or very little schooling, coming from poverty-stricken, conservative homes, who got involved in the struggle with undaunted spirit and great commitment.

Raj Kumari Gupta was one of them. Born about a century ago, in the little known Banda zilla of Kanpur, she and her husband worked closely with Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the father of the nation, and Chandra Shekhar Azad, a revolutionary and leader of the Hindustan Socialist Republic Association. Her crucial contribution to the Kakori dacoity case barely figures in the narratives of freedom. Raj Kumari, who was given the charge of supplying revolvers to those involved in the Kakori operation, apparently hid the guns in her underwear and set out in khadi clothes to deliver them, with her three-year-old son in tow. On being arrested, she was disowned by her husband's family and thrown out of her marital home.

There is also the case of Tara Rani Srivastava. She was born in Saran, near Patna, Bihar, and participated actively with her husband, Phulendu Babu, in the 1942 Quit India movement. On Gandhi's call, Phulendu assembled a massive crowd of men and women in front of the Siwan police station to hoist the national flag on its roof. Although they had just got married, Tara and Phulendu stood in the front of the crowd and

raised slogans. As Phulendu cried, Inquilab, Tara Rani repeated the word in a higher register. Phulendu soon fell



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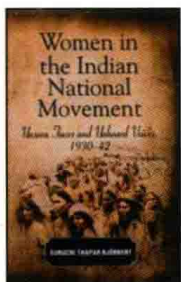
to police bullets. Tara Rani was not deterred. Demonstrating exemplary courage, she bandaged his wounds and marched with the national flag straight towards the police station. By the time she returned, her husband had died.

Whether these women can be considered as revolutionaries or not, there can be no denying that they fought against great personal odds for the freedom of the country. They displayed great resolve despite seeing their children ascend the gallows. It is said that the night before activist Ram Prasad Bismil, a member of the Hindustan Socialist Republic Association, was to be hanged on December 18, 1927, in Gorakhpur jail, his mother came to see him. On

seeing her, Bismil's eyes became moist, but his visitor remained calm. She had never actively participated in politics but she understood the underlying importance of her son's passionate espousal of revolution. Bismil's mother did not beg for mercy to be shown towards her son. Instead, she is believed to have told Bismil not to shed tears like a kayar (coward). Bismil is then said to have answered saying that he was crying, not because he was a coward, but because he would not have a mother like her. Steeled by her son's death, she is believed to have said in a speech subsequently that she was ready to give another son to the nation. Saying this, she had raised the hand of Bismil's brother.

Given domestic constraints, many women found it difficult to get directly involved in public action, but they contributed in their own ways. Many took to spinning the charkha as a mark of support for the Swadeshi movement. Others acted as secret envoys and messengers - passing on proscribed material, helping fugitives from the law shift from one place to another, and ensuring that they were fed and looked after.

As Suruchi Thapar-Bjorkert observes in her book, **Women in the Indian National Movement Unseen Faces and Unheard Voices, 1930-42**, *"Reinterpreting Indian nationalist history required going beyond archival, official and unofficial sources."* On oral narratives, she says, *"As a methodological tool, these narratives revealed the individual subjectivities of participants in the nationalist movement. Documenting these life histories opened a new world before me: a world more real than officials records."*



Women in the Indian National Movement

A long overdue attempt to bridge the gap between biographies of the Sarojini Naidus and Sucheta Kriplanis and the masses of Indian women inspired to participate in the national movement by Mahatma Gandhi. Thapar-Bjorkert has compiled voices of the little women who participated in that struggle between 1930 and 1942.

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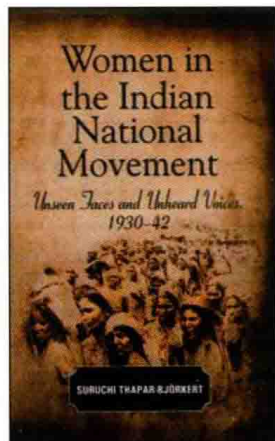
The Telegraph

3 November 2006

Letters, poems and guns

This book tells the story of the hundreds of women, forgotten by most historians, who participated in the Indian national movement at the local level. Instead of recounting the contributions of national leaders such as Sarojini Naidu, Vijaylakshmi Pandit, Sucheta Kripalani and Aruna Asaf Ali, it focuses on women like Raj Kumari Gupta of Kanpur, who worked with Gandhi and Chandra Shekhar Azad. She was also a part of the notorious Kakori Dacoity, in which

she supplied revolvers hidden in her underwear. On being arrested, she was disowned by her in-laws. The history of "politicization of the domestic sphere" is constructed out of archival resources, oral narratives, poetry, cartoon, vernacular magazines and private correspondences, making this book a valuable addition to cultural and gender narratives of the struggle for independence.



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Unsung heroines of Independence

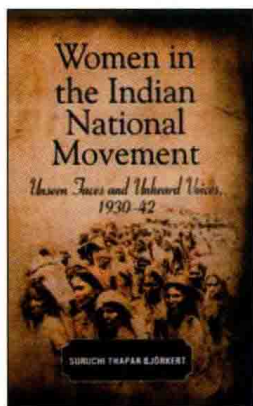
Women's participation in the freedom struggle, barring a few cases, has received little attention in post-1947 male-centric historical records



Making history: Women picketers preparing for a protest in Madras in 1930. Photo: The Hindu Archives

Though India's freedom struggle saw a significant participation of women, unfortunately several of them have remained invisible to this day — unknown and unsung. The few women freedom fighters who made it into history books invariably came from elite or middle class backgrounds and their male relatives had often encouraged them to join the movement. In contrast, there were innumerable ordinary women, with no formal education or very little schooling, hailing from poverty-stricken, conservative homes, who got involved in the struggle with undaunted spirit and great commitment.

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