The Journal of Centre for Promotion of Arts and Science
Volume 2, Issue 3, July– December 2026



https://journalcpas.kalavig.com

Legacy of India's Freedom Movement

-Sacrifice of lesser-known sons and daughters-

RAJESH VERMA,
Rajesh Verma is former Deputy Director of Archives, National Archives,
Ministry of Culture, Government of India.
Email: rajeshverma1952@gmailcom.

Abstract

India's freedom movement is often narrated through the ideas and actions of prominent national leaders. This paper foregrounds the lesser-known tribal leaders, women, students, workers, peasants, and revolutionary activists whose sacrifices gave the struggle its broad social base. It traces the movement from early tribal uprisings against colonial land-revenue systems, forest laws, and zamindari exploitation, through the cross-class revolt of 1857–58, to the emergence of organized nationalism under the Indian National Congress. Focusing particularly on Bengal and Maharashtra, the paper examines how regional movements expanded the meaning of Swaraj from political self-rule to dignity, social justice, local autonomy, and economic freedom. It highlights the contributions of figures such as Tilka Manjhi, Birsa Munda, Pritilata Wadedar, Matangini Hazra, Bina Das, Kanaklata Barua, Kushal Konwar, Vasudev Balwant Phadke, Anant Laxman Kanhere, Hemu Kalani, Perin Ben Captain, Hausabai Patil, and Babu Genu. Their experiences demonstrate that the freedom struggle was not solely an elite-led constitutional campaign, but a wide-ranging people's movement shaped by courage, sacrifice, armed resistance, non-violent protest, Swadeshi, and grassroots mobilization.

Keywords

Tribal uprising, First War of independence, British Colonial Rule, Congress Party, National Consciousness, Militancy, Armed Struggle, Young Revolutionaries, , Police, Civil Disobedience, Quit India Movement, Women Freedom Fighters.

1. Introduction

The historiography of India's struggle for independence frequently privileges a centralized narrative, focusing on a select galaxy of national leaders whose speeches and strategies defined the mainstream movement. Leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi, Subhas Chandra Bose, Jawaharlal Nehru, Madam Bhikaji Cama, Chittaranjan Das, Bhagat Singh became household names. Yet behind these familiar names are countless '*unsung heroes'*—tribal leaders, fearless women, student leaders and those who made supreme sacrifices, but whose names are often left out of the mainstream history books. These *heroes* emerging from various walks of life, however, brought unique perspectives, grievances, and methods of resistance to the national stage and, redefined the Freedom Struggle from *Self Rule* to *Swaraj*.

Earliest challenge to British Rule, The Tribal Uprisings,

To understand the Freedom Struggle in perspective, one must first appreciate how the indigenous and tribal communities, were among the earliest to challenge British colonial hegemony. Long before the urban intelligentsia organized formal Political Parties, tribal leaders recognized the existential threat that colonial land revenue policies and forest laws posed to their way of life.

Notable individuals like Tilka Manjhi (1750-1785) in the late 18th century and later Birsa Munda (1875-1900) and Laxman Nayak (1899-1943) mobilized agrarian communities against the oppressive *Zamindari* system of the British. These tribal uprisings were not isolated incidents of unrest; they were foundational and structural challenges to colonial exploitation, driven by a deep-seated desire for local autonomy and socio- economic justice.

First War of independence (1857-58)

This multi-layered accumulated discontent later found wider expression later in the Revolt of 1857. Often dismissed by colonial historians as a mere localized 'Sepoy Mutiny', this pivotal Event was, in reality, India's foundational cross-class rebellion against the hegemony of the British East India Company. While canonical figures like Rani Lakshmibai and Nana Sahib dominated regional battlefields, the structural backbone of this uprising rested on ordinary people. Peer Ali Khan (1812-1857) and Jhalkari Bai (1830-1858), exemplified how the Revolt served as a grand unifying bridge between diverse, ordinary groups—sepoys, peasants, artisans, and small-scale traders—simultaneously revolted over their intersectional grievances (economic drain, cultural insensitivity and loss of livelihood).

The defeat of the First war of Independence (1857-58) did not signify a total failure as it succeeded in shattering the myth of colonial invincibility and, set in motion an enduring template of a passionate urge for freedom from the British hegemony by the subsequent

generations. The birth of the Indian National Congress (INC) in 1885 marked the transition of the Freedom Struggle from a predominantly northern revolt of 1857 into an organized, nationwide movement.

Congress Party and *upsurge of a National Consciousness*

While massive resistance existed before 1885, Congress provided the institutional framework, a national consciousness, and a political strategy required to challenge the British rule in a systematic manner. Prior to 1885, support to rebellions and protests were massive and signalled a clear discontent against the British, but it lacked central planning, a unified political vision, or a clear alternative to British governance.

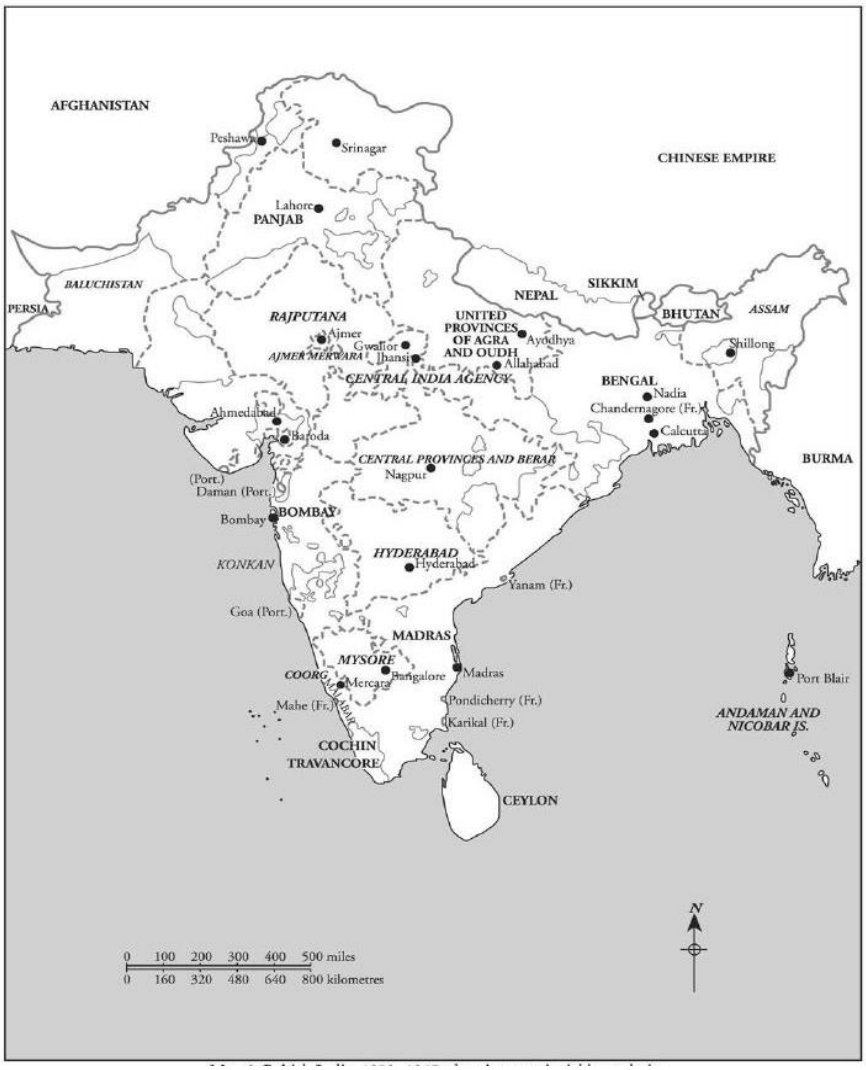
The rise of the Congress Party created a single political forum for leaders from different regions, languages, and backgrounds. It forged a shared identity as 'Indians' rather than regional subjects and expanded the movement from isolated peasant groups or soldiers to the educated middle class, and eventually to the masses.

While Congress preferred a moderate approach, there were thousands who were active members of bodies engaged in vigorous protests and rallies and belonging to militant revolutionary groups. However, only a few undertook the daunting tasks such as shooting the oppressive high officials as a Police Commissioner or a District Magistrate. Names of Matangini Hazra, Pritilata Wadedar, Kushal Kovar, Alluri Raju, Prafulla Chaki, Hemu Kalani, Kanaklata Barua associated with such acts are not as well-known as B. Surya Sen, Ram Prasad Bismil, Bagha Jatin or Chandrashekhar Azad. Their contribution to the Freedom Movement has been no less exemplary.

Bengal and Maharashtra stood out as the twin pillars and vanguards of the Indian Freedom Movement, driving the early intellectual awakening, political radicalism, and armed resistance against the colonial rule in British India (map below). While mainstream politics often relied on constitutional petitions, these two regions pioneered militant nationalism, cultural revivalism, and secret revolutionary networks that fundamentally altered the trajectory of India's struggle for independence.

Until the first quarter of the 20th century, Bengal Presidency included Bihar and Orissa as part of its vast territories. They were separated into the new province of Bihar and Orissa on March 22, 1912. Orissa later got separated from Bihar on April 1, 1936. The Bombay Presidency similarly was a major Province of British India with its capital in Bombay (Mumbai). At its greatest extent, it included present day Maharashtra, parts of modern-day Gujarat, Karnataka, Sindh, and Aden. In this Paper, it is proposed to focus on Maharashtra and Bengal.

British India, 1858-1947



Source: Cambridge University Press, March 2008.

2. Contribution of Bengal to the Freedom Movement

As it is well recognised, Bengal served as the intellectual, cultural, and revolutionary epicentre of the Indian freedom movement. While people like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar stressed upon the importance of rationalism, social reform, and laid emphasis on education, Bankim Chandra's Vande *Mataram*, and Rabindranath Tagore 's *Jana Gana Mana*, gave the nation its defining anthems.

The Partition of Bengal in 1905, ignited the Swadeshi and Boycott Movements, transforming nationalism from elite petitions into a mass movement. Militant nationalism characterised by Armed Resistance and revolutionary extremism was led by

Aurobindo Ghosh, Surya Sen, Bagha Jatin and others through secret Societies like Anusilan Samiti, Jugantar, Bharat Mata Society etc.
The impact of Bengal was felt across India and galvanised the masses, especially the youth who jumped into the National Movement, without worrying about the consequences. Among the *unsung heroes*, the name of Pritilata Wadedar stands out. She was barely twenty years old when she left a promising career and jumped into the revolutionary movement. She is often hailed as '*Bengal's first woman martyr*'.

Born on 5 May 1911, at Chittagong, she studied at Eden College Dhaka, standing first in the Intermediate exams. She continued her education at Calcutta, graduating in Psychology from Bethune College before returning to Chittagong as Headmistress of a local school. Ever since her student days she had been inspired by valiant freedom fighters like Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi and was a keen follower of the revolutionary movement.

In June 1932, Pritilata got to meet the great revolutionary leader Surya Sen at Dhalghat and made up her mind to join the Anusilan Samiti with the resolve to drive away the English from India. Some of the revolutionary fighters objected to a woman being on board, but Pritilata was permitted to join the Samiti since it was felt that women could be useful in transporting weapons as they would not attract as much suspicion as their male counterparts.

As part of Surya Sen's Group, Pritilata was part of several raids and attacks on symbols of British power in India like the Telephone & Telegraph offices and the Reserve Police Lines. But her most defining assignment was the attack on British-exclusive Club called the Pahartali European Club which had long attracted the attention of the revolutionaries. This club reportedly had a board which said, '*Dogs and Indians not allowed*'. The D-Day of the attack on the Club was fixed on 23rd September 1932, and Pritilata was designated as the leader of this attack. All the group members were provided potassium cyanide which they were asked to consume if caught.
On the assigned day, Pritilata dressed up as a Punjabi and barged into the Club, which at that time had about 40 people inside. Some of the British officers started shooting back. During this shootout, Pritilata sustained a serious bullet injury but fearing arrest, swallowed the cyanide pill and paid the ultimate sacrifice for the cause of the nation. Her body was recovered and identified by the police the next day.
Pritilata is remembered as an inspirational woman who showed no fear in the face of adversity. Though her name often fades in mainstream narratives, she remains an enduring symbol of female defiance and fearless patriotism, a reminder that the road to India's freedom was paved by women who fought with as much fire as their male comrades. Bangladeshi writer Selina Hossain called Pritilata an ideal for every woman. Significantly, Pritilata is more visible and woven into the public fabric of Bangladesh than in India.

While she is officially revered in both nations as the first female martyr of the anti-colonial struggle in Bengal, the geographic and geopolitical realities of the 1947 Partition shifted the focal point of her memory. Because the epicentre of her life and ultimate sacrifice is located in modern-day Bangladesh, her legacy is deeply tangible and highly visible there in everyday life. The *Birkannya Pritilata Trust* (*Brave lady Pritilata Trust*) was established in her memory. Educational institutions and schools were named after her. In 2012, a bronze sculpture of Pritilata Waddedar was erected in front of the Pahartali Railway School, adjacent to the Pahartali European Club. Her legacy lives on not only in local folklore but also in history, which is replete with her extraordinary sacrifice.

Pritilata was however only one among the galaxy of the patriotic young generation which had no fear of death. While Pritilata belonged to Chittagong, Prafulla Chandra Chaki was born into a well-to-do Jotedar family on 10 December 1888 in Bogra district of current day Bangladesh, then a part of the Bengal Presidency. After completing his primary education, he came to Rangpur with his elder brother, Pratap Chandra Chaki, whose father-in-law was a reputed person in Rangpur. A rebel by nature, Prafulla was expelled from Rangpur Zilla School in Class IX for taking part in a students' demonstration that violated East Bengal law. He then joined Rangpur National School, an institution founded during the Swadeshi Movement to provide indigenous education free from British oversight.

Here he came in contact with revolutionaries and became a believer and practitioner of revolutionary philosophies. Soon Prafulla joined the local branch of the Anushilan Samiti and came under the influence of leaders like Ishan Chandra Chakravarty. But it was Barin Ghosh, younger brother of Sri Aurobindo who brought Prafulla to Calcutta and enlisted him as a member of *Jugantar Society* and as part of the group for high-risk missions targeting senior British officers. It signalled the start of his revolutionary activities.

His first assignment was to kill Sir Joseph Bampfylde Fuller (1854-1935), the first Lieutenant Governor of the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam. However, the plan did not materialize. Prafulla, along with Khudiram Bose, was then chosen for the assassination of Kingsford, the District Magistrate of Muzaffarpur in Bihar. Khudiram Bose is a well-known name. Very little is known, however, about Prafulla Chandra Chaki. During his previous tenure as the Chief Presidency Magistrate of Calcutta, Kingsford had become very unpopular for passing harsh and cruel sentences on young political workers of Bengal. It was, therefore, decided to kill him. Prafulla took the fake name Dinesh Chandra Ray for this Operation. On the evening of 30th April 1908, the duo was waiting in front of the gate of the European Club in Muzaffarpur for Kingsford's carriage to arrive. When a vehicle came out of the gate, they threw a bomb into the carriage. Unfortunately, there was a mistake in identification, as the vehicle was carrying the daughter and the wife of Pringle Kennedy, a British barrister. Both were killed by the bomb, and the revolutionaries fled.

Prafulla and Khudiram took separate routes to escape. Nandalal Banerjee, a Police Officer who was travelling in the same Railway compartment as Prafulla grew suspicious

of him and attempted to arrest him at the Mokama Railway Station. But Prafulla committed suicide by shooting himself using his own revolver. His head was severed from his body and sent to Kolkata and was identified by Khudiram, who was captured and hanged to death at just 19 years of age. Prafulla Chaki's sacrifice deeply inspired the revolutionary movement in Bengal and across India. He is remembered as a symbol of youthful courage, patriotism, and supreme sacrifice, whose fearless spirit strengthened India's struggle for independence.

The Freedom Movement had no barriers of age or ideology. If Chaki and Pritilata exhibited raw passion of youth, Matangini Hazra combined Gandhian idealism with fierce activism. Not much is known of her early life apart from that she was born in Bengali family of village Hogla, near Tamluk on 19th October 1870. Because she was the daughter of a poor peasant, she did not receive a formal education. She married Trilochan Hazra when she was twelve and was widowed at the age of eighteen.

Deeply inspired by the national movement, Matangini became deeply inspired and influenced by Mahatma Gandhi, and followed his teachings. Fondly called 'Gandhi Buri', she took part in the Civil Disobedience Movement and was arrested for breaking the Salt Act. She was soon released but then participated in the *'Chowkidari Tax Bandha Movement '* (abolition of chowkidari tax) and was arrested again. She was sentenced to six months imprisonment and sent to Baha Rampur Jail. After being released, she became an active member of the Indian National Congress and took to spinning her own *Khadi*. In 1933, she attended the Sub divisional Congress Conference at Serampore and was injured in the ensuing baton charge by the Police. Despite her meagre physical state, and imprisonment, she continued her social work to help the untouchables. Always engaged in humanitarian causes, she worked among affected men, women and children when smallpox broke out in the region as an epidemic.

Matangini's moment of pride, however, came during the Quit India Movement. As part of the protest, members of the Congress had planned to take over various police stations of Midnapore District and other Government offices. This was to be another step in overthrowing the British government in the district and establishing an independent Indian State. Hazra, who was 72 years old at the time, led a procession of six thousand supporters, mostly women volunteers, with the purpose of taking over the Tamluk police station. When the procession reached the outskirts of the town, they were ordered to disband by the Police. As she stepped forward, Hazra was shot once, but she led on the procession from the north of the Criminal Court building even after the firing and continued to advance with the tricolour in her hand, leaving all the volunteers behind.

The police shot her three times. Yet she continued marching despite wounds on the forehead and kept chanting *Vande Mataram* ('Hail to the Motherland') and died with the tricolour held high and flying. Matangini Hazra is not only remembered for her role in the freedom struggle, but also for upholding the importance of women in the life of a nation. She is an epitome of infinite courage and leadership. A Government College for Women,

in Kulberia has been set up to commemorate the memory of the fearless fighter and thus continues her legacy.

On 6th February 1932, in the Convocation Hall of the University of Calcutta, the outgoing British Governor of Bengal Stanley Jackson was delivering a speech to a packed hall of fresh graduates. Unknown to all, a female student had sneaked in with a loaded revolver concealed in her graduation gown. Moments into the speech, the student rose from her seat, rushed towards the dais and opened fire. The student's name was Bina Das popularly known as *Agni Kanya*.

Daughter of a schoolteacher, Bina was from Chittagong in East Bengal (now Bangladesh). She and her family had moved around a fair bit, before settling in Ekdalia in South Calcutta. In Cuttack, where they had lived earlier, Bina's father Beni Madhab Das had been a teacher at the Ravenshaw College, and one of his students had been none other than Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. So, the seeds of revolutionary ideals were sowed early. Bina was then a student at the Diocesan College of Calcutta.

Determined to be part of the Freedom Movement, perhaps inspired by her khadi-wearing, Gandhian father, she rebelled at every chance she got. For her matriculation examination, for instance, when asked to write an essay on her favourite novel, Bina wrote about Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Pather Dabi (The Call of the Road;* 1926*)*. The novel, about a secret Society that wanted to free India from British rule, was banned at the time, and this act of defiance cost Bina her marks.

In 1928, Bina joined the Bengal Volunteer Corps founded by Subhash Chandra Bose. It was at this point that a college classmate, the revolutionary Suhasini Ganguly, inducted her into the Bengal Revolutionary Party. The Group was so secretive that many members didn't know each other's real names. Bina only found out that two of her colleagues Anuja Charan Sen and Dinesh Chandra Mazumdar were part of the group when, on the 25th of August 1930, the duo made a failed attempt to kill Charles Tegart, Calcutta's Police Commissioner, notorious for torturing captured revolutionaries.

As the colonial law enforcement agencies cracked down in the wake of that assassination attempt, the Group scattered. Several members were arrested. It was then that Bina decided to assassinate the Governor of Bengal. She approached Kamala Dasgupta of the Jugantar Party to get her a gun. Kamala's fellow revolutionary Sudhir Ghosh purchased an old-fashioned Belgian, five-chambered revolver for the sum of Rs 280. Bina had almost no experience with firearms. As a child, she had once fired a rifle, and the recoil had nearly knocked her off her feet. With the revolver, she had no practice at all. Yet she went ahead with her plan.

At the Convocation, Bina's first shot whizzed past Jackson's ear while he was still speaking. Jackson, quick on his feet, immediately ducked. Beside him on the dais was Lt Col Hassan Suhrawardy, then Vice-chancellor of Calcutta University who grabbed Bina by the throat, attempting to disarm her. She still managed to fire all the remaining bullets before being wrestled to the ground. Unfortunately, none of them found their mark.

British vengeance was swift, and severe. Bina was arrested; a search of her hostel room revealed more bullets. After a trial lasting only a day, she was sentenced to nine years' rigorous imprisonment. There was sympathy for this 21-year-old who had risked it all for something she believed in. At the Lalbazar Police headquarters, when she had asked for something to eat, an Indian constable served her an elaborate meal of rice, dal, curries and even a wedge of lime. According to her autobiography, when she looked up at the constable in surprise, he whispered, 'I cooked this for you myself'.

In the Court, Bina accepted her fate with calm. In her address to the Court, she said she bore no ill will towards Jackson. 'As a man he is just as good to me as my father, and Lady Jackson just as good as my mother, but the Governor of Bengal represents a system which has kept enslaved three hundred million of my countrymen and women', she added. Her confession, which ran to five pages long and was written in English, was censored by the British colonial administration, but still found itself widely circulated.

In it, she wrote, 'My object was to die, and if to die, to die nobly fighting against this despotic system of Government, which has kept my country in perpetual subjection to its infinite shame and endless suffering – and fighting in a way which cannot but tell... I have been thinking – is life worth living in an India so subjected to wrong, and continually groaning under the tyranny of a foreign Government, or is it not better to make one's supreme protest against it by offering one's life away?'

At the Midnapore prison where she was sent to serve out her term, she started a hunger strike to protest the poor conditions. After seven days, the authorities accepted her demands. It would be seven long years before, in 1939, Mahatma Gandhi was able to secure her release. Upon release, Bina joined the Congress Party and, in 1941, was appointed head of the party's South Calcutta chapter where she fought for workers' rights.

In 1942 as part of the Quit India Movement, Bina called for a public meeting at Hazra Crossing in South Calcutta, in contravention of police orders. As the meeting progressed, a police force swept in to break it up. When a sergeant attempted to hit one of her colleagues with his baton, Bina tried to stop him. For this, she was sent back to prison, this time for three years.

After her release, she served in the Bengal State legislature from 1946 to 1951. In 1947, she married fellow freedom fighter Jatish Bhowmick. But even after Independence, for the revolutionary Bina Das, the struggle was far from over. and she continued to be associated with Workers Unions and was an active Social Worker. Bina would go on to spend some of her time teaching in schools. After the death of her husband in 1986, her life began to change. She isolated herself, refusing to meet even close friends or family. Ultimately, she left Calcutta and settled in Rishikesh (now in Uttarakhand), where she lived in penury. On 26th December 1986, she was discovered by the side of the road, dead. Bina Das was awarded Padma Shri in 1960 for her Social Work and in 2012, she and Pritilata Waddedar were conferred the Graduation Certificates posthumously by the Calcutta University, nearly 80 years after British government withheld them.

The story of Shanti Ghose and Suniti Choudhury remains one of the most extraordinary chapters in India's freedom struggle. In December 1931, just months after the execution of Bhagat Singh, the spirit of resistance across the country had intensified. These two teenage schoolgirls from Comilla shocked the British administration by assassinating British District Magistrate Charles Geoffrey Buckland Stevens. At the time, Shanti was only 15 and Suniti just 14 years old, making them among the youngest revolutionaries to take part in an armed action against the British colonial rule.

Suniti Chowdhury was born on 22 May 1917 in Comilla of Comilla District of Bengal (present Bangladesh) and was a student of *Nawab Faizunnessa Government Girls High School* of Comilla. While in school she was influenced by the revolutionary activities of Ullaskar Dutta, who also lived in Comilla and was recruited into the Jugantar Party by Prafullanalini Brahma.

She was also a member of the Tripura Zilla Chhatri Sangha. Chowdhury was selected as the Captain of the Women's Volunteer Corps of Tripura Zilla Chhatri Sangha. During this time, she was known by the alias of '*Meera Devi*'. She was selected as the "custodian of firearms" and was in charge of training female members (of the Chhatri Sangha) in lathi, sword and dagger play.

Like Suniti, Santi Ghose (also known as Santi Ghosh) was born on 22 November 1916 in Comilla, and was the daughter of Debendranath Ghose, a nationalist and a professor of philosophy at Victoria College of Comilla . In 1931, Santi Ghose became a founding member of the Chhatri Sangha (Girl Students Association) and served as its secretary. Ghose was inspired by Profullanandini Brahma, a student at Nawab Faizunnesa Government Girls' High School Comilla, and joined the Jugantar Party, a militant revolutionary organization which used 'murder' as a political technique to dislodge British colonial rule. She was trained in self-defence with swords, clubs, and firearms.

In 1930, the Civil Disobedience Movement was in full throttle – the Police brutality was equally strong. Both the girls Suniti and Santi witnessed picketing, processions, and the rapid arrests of men and women – experiences that were elevating them to a new plane of nationalist fervour and fearlessness. Suniti had become the Major of the District

Volunteer Corps. She led the parade of girls when Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose was in town to address the student organisation. Prafulla asked Bose about his thoughts on the role of women in the revolutionary movement. Without a pause, Bose replied, '*I would be happy to see you in the front row* '.

Charles Geoffrey Buckland Stevens, then District Magistrate of Comilla, was a man who would stop at nothing to destroy the Movement. He threw many leaders into prison and harassed every Indian who raised a voice. Fed-up with his tyranny, the Jugantar Party decided to assassinate him. Both Suniti Choudhary and Santi Ghose were assigned this task. On 14th December 1931, Shanti and Suniti visited his residence, dressed as school students and approached the security guard seeking permission to meet Stevens for obtaining his approval on an application to organise a swimming competition at their school.

Stevens granted permission for the swimming competition and looked at the document for signature. It was then that, Ghose and Chowdhury removed automatic pistols which were hidden under their shawls and shot him. Stevens died on the spot. Suniti and Santi were promptly arrested and being minors were sentenced to life imprisonment. However, due to intervention of Mahatma Gandhi, they were released in 1939, following the amnesty negotiations before the Second World War.

After her release from prison Santi Ghose joined the Indian National Congress. and was a member of the West Bengal Legislative Council from 1952 to 1962 and from 1967 to 1968. She was also a member of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly from 1962 to 1964. She also authored a book, *Arun Bahni*. *She* passed away in 1989.

Suniti Choudhary on the other hand put all her efforts later on in her studies, passing in the first division the pre-University examination. She went to Campbell Medical School subsequently for Licentiate in Medicine and Surgery (LMS) and finally secured admission in Calcutta Medical College in 1944. She breathed her last on 12th January 1988.

Freedom Struggle and Legacy of Assam

Women's contribution to the Quit India Movement cannot be complete without mentioning the name of Kanaklata Barua. She became a martyr at the age of seventeen and is hailed as *Birangana* in Assam. She was Born on 22nd December 1924 in the Borangabari village of undivided Darrang district in Assam. She went to school till class three but then dropped out to take care of her younger siblings. Kanaklata's father and her uncles were freedom fighters and had been actively associated with the Swadeshi movement. This background played a very important role in shaping her future and exposing her to the Freedom Movement at a very young age.

The protest by the 'Chaiduar Ryot Sabha' under the leadership of Jyoti Prasad Agarwala in 1931 and the persecution of freedom fighters like Cheniram Das, Mahim Chandra,

Lakidhar Sarma and Mahadev Sarma from her hometown had a great impact on her. She developed a hatred against the British and their colonial rule. This paved the way for her to actively take part in the Freedom movement and participate in the Quit India Movement, which was a turning point in her life. Kanaklata joined the *Mrityu Bahini,* a death squad comprising groups of youth from the Gohpur sub-division of Assam led by leaders like Pushpalata Das, to mobilize local youth and women, inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's call of *'Do or Die'* .

On 20th September 1942, the *Bahini* decided that Kanaklata would hoist the tricolor at the local Police Station. She led a procession of unarmed villagers to do so. The Officer-in-charge of the Police Station warned the procession of dire consequences if they proceeded with their plan. Even after the warning, the procession continued marching ahead when the police fired upon them. Kanaklata died in the firing, but the flag she was carrying with her was taken up by her colleague Mukunda Kakoti who too was shot dead. Kanaklata was only 17 years old at the time of her death.

The tragic martyrdom of Kanaklata Baruah at the tender age of 17 made her a household name in Assam. She has posthumously been given the titles of '*Shaheed'* and '*Birbala'* ('martyr and 'brave woman'). An Indian Coast Guard fast petrol vessel was named after her in 1997, and a statue of her was unveiled in 2011 in a rock garden, which has been named '*Kanak Lata Udyan'* in Gauripur (formally Gohpur). She remains one of Assam 's icons.

Yet another revolutionary Kushal Konwar, whose birthday on June 15th is celebrated every year by the Government of Assam, holds the poignant distinction of being the only martyr in India to be executed by hanging during the final phase of the Quit India Movement (1942–43). Born on March 21, 1905, in Golaghat district of Assam, into a family with a royal Ahom lineage, he was deeply inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, and adopted strict principles of truth, non-violence (Ahimsa), and self-discipline. Such was his devotion that he gave up consuming salt during the Salt Satyagraha.

He served as the President of the Sarupathar Congress Committee, organized local protests, non-cooperation campaigns, and led the national movement forward in Assam. On 8 August 1942, the Congress Working Committee in its meeting in Bombay passed the 'Quit India Resolution'. This Resolution demanded complete withdrawal of the British from the India's soil. Mahatma Gandhi gave the call of *'Do or Die'* to the people of India. The British reacted by arresting Mahatma and all the Congress leaders and putting them in jail. This sparked a widespread mass movement against the British.

Cutting across caste, creed, and religion people came out to the streets shouting the slogan of '*Vande Mataram*'. In spite of Gandhiji's appeal for peaceful non-cooperation, the movement erupted in violence with people burning offices and damaging government properties, disrupting road and telecommunication networks in several places. On 10th

October 1942, in the thick fog of early morning, a group of Indian Independence activists removed sleepers from a railway line near Sarupathar in Golaghat district. A military train passing by got derailed and several soldiers were killed. The police immediately cordoned the area and issued arrest warrants to all Indian National Congress members in the immediate area.

Kushal Konwar who was Secretary of the Congress in the area was named as the chief conspirator of the train sabotage and arrested him with three other colleagues in November 1942 and was lodged in the Jorhat jail. Although there was no proof to link him to the crime, he was charged for the same with the others. While his colleagues submitted mercy petitions and got reduced sentences, Kushak refused any clemency and was hanged on 15 June 1943 in Jorhat Jail.

He sacrificed his life knowing as Mahatma said, 'He alone can be a true *satyagrahi* who knows the art of living and dying'. Kushal Konwar remains an immortal symbol of courage, unyielding patriotism, and moral integrity. His execution by the British colonial government made him the last martyr of the Quit India Movement and one of the most significant figures of Assamese resistance to colonial rule.

3. Contribution of Maharashtra to the Freedom Movement

Maharashtra also played a foundational and multi-dimensional role in shaping India's Freedom Movement through radical social reform, militant nationalism, grassroot mobilization, and revolutionary action. Rebels like Vasudev Balwant Phadke and the Chapekar brothers represented early militant expressions. Reformers like Lahuji Raghoji Salve (1794-1881) and Mahatma Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890) fought against caste oppression and promoted education, laying the egalitarian bedrock necessary for a unified national identity. Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak shifted the nationalist struggle from elite petitioning to mass agitation with his rallying cry, '*Swaraj is my birth right and I shall have it'*. All this was complementing the moderate Congress leadership of Ranade, Gokhale, Dadabhai Naoroji and others.

Maharashtra served as a critical fulcrum of the Indian National movement, driving political consciousness, ideological diversity, and mass mobilization from the 19th century through Independence. and is popularly called the birthplace of armed revolutionary nationalism in India. Distinct from the constitutional and non-violent methods of the Indian National Congress, the activists in Maharashtra believed in direct action through secret societies, and armed rebellion to overthrow the British rule.

The first name which comes to mind is that of Vasudev Balwant Phadke widely regarded as the *Adya Krantikarak* ('Father of the Indian Armed Rebellion'), who formed the Ramosi Peasant Force in 1879, gathering marginalized communities into a revolutionary militia decades before mainstreaming mass movements began. Phadke was born on 4th November 1845 in Thane district of Bombay. As a child, he preferred learning physical

skills like wrestling and riding over school education. He was, at the same time, one of the earliest graduates of Bombay University, graduating in 1862. After his education, he worked for some government institutions in Mumbai like the Grant Medical College and the Commissariat Examiner's Office. After that, he moved to Pune and took up a job as a clerk in the Military Finance Office. where he met his mentor Lahuji Raghoji Salve, then a prominent social figure based in Pune.

Salve briefed Phadke about the importance of independence from colonial rule and the need of getting backward castes into mainstream independence movement. It was during this period that Phadke began attending lectures by Mahadev Govind Ranade (1842-1901) on how the economic policies of the colonial government were hurting the Indian economy and how this was leading to widespread ill-effects in the society. In 1860, along with well-known social reformers Laxman Narhar Indapurkar and Waman Prabhakar Bhave, Phadke founded the *Poona Native Institution* (PNI) which was later renamed as the *Maharashtra Education Society* (MES). Today, the MES runs over 77 institutions in various parts of Maharashtra.

Deeply moved by the severe famine in 1876-77 in Maharashtra, high taxes and the apathy displayed by the British authorities, Phadke concluded that peaceful petitions were useless and that *Swaraj* (self-rule) could only be achieved through armed struggle. He, therefore, mobilized marginalized local communities—including the Ramoshi, Koli, Bhil and Dhangar tribes—into a dedicated guerrilla militia. To fund the purchase of weapons and aid the starving famine victims, his militia raided British treasuries and wealthy European businessmen.

He even managed to take control of Pune for a brief period during a surprise raid. After the British placed a bounty on his head, Phadke audaciously announced a reward for the capture of the Governor of Bombay. Following a massive crackdown and betrayal by informants, he was captured at a temple in July 1879, sentenced to rigorous life imprisonment, and was sent to Aden (Yemen) to prevent him from becoming a local martyr. In February 1883, he made a valiant escape attempt by breaking his cell door, but was recaptured. He subsequently launched a hunger strike and died in captivity on February 17, 1883. Phadke was a pioneer in many ways in that he was one of the earliest to talk of complete Independence. He was also one of the first revolutionary leaders of the country.

Pandurang Mahadev Bapat, popularly known as 'Senapati Bapat,' remains a fascinating figure of the Indian Independence movement whose revolutionary zeal earned him the nickname *'Senapati'* or '*Commander*' for his leadership qualities. Born on 12th November 1880, Bapat was raised in a lower-middle-class Chitpawan Brahmin family in the Parner town of Ahmednagar district, Maharashtra. Enrolment in the Deccan College in Pune was a turning point in his life. This is where he came across Damodar Balwant Bhide, a member of the revolutionary Chapekar Club, and Professor Francis William Bain, a British who harboured Indian nationalist feelings.

In 1904, after passing out of college, he earned a scholarship and left for England to study at Heriot-Watt College in Edinburgh. During his stay in Britain, he became associated with *India House* which was a famous Centre for overseas Indian revolutionary nationalists. Among its notable Residents were prominent figures like Lala Hardayal, Hemchandra Kanungo, Madan Lal Dhingra, and Madame Bhikaji Cama. Inspired by these leaders Bapat spent a majority of his time learning bomb-making skills instead of pursuing his official studies.

He also came into contact with several revolutionaries from Bengal as well as several Russian revolutionaries who introduced him to Bolshevism. His public speeches against British rule in India, which were very critical and provocative, and his association with the India House in London, resulted in him losing his scholarship. Bapat, had considered blowing up the Parliament in London, but had to return to India in 1908.

On his return to India Bapat went into hiding following the Alipore Bomb case of 1908. Although he was not directly involved, he feared action because he had pioneered the concept of organized armed rebellion against the British Raj. He travelled all over the country educating the people about the ills of British rule. He was ultimately arrested in in 1912 and was sent to jail. On his release in 1915, he joined the staff of *Mahratta* brought out by Bal Gangadhar Tilak. He supported the vision of *Swaraj* and was willing to use force.

From 1921, Bapat led the three-year farmers' protest (*satyagraha*) against the construction of the Mulshi Dam by the Tata company, which is called 'the first recorded organised struggle against [forced] displacement' arising from construction of an irrigation project. The dam was eventually constructed and Bapat was jailed for vandalism of the construction project. On 15 August 1947, Bapat was given the honour of raising the Indian national flag over Poona. He passed away in 1967. In 1977, the Indian government issued a postage stamp to commemorate him. A Bapat Memorial was built at the site of the Mulshi Satyagraha on his birth centenary in 1980.

Anant Laxman Kanhere was another young braveheart who sacrificed his life for the country at just 18 years of age. Born in 1892 into a Brahmin family in Kheda in Maharashtra's Ratnagiri district, Anant moved to Aurangabad (present-day Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar) for his education, staying with his maternal uncle. It was here, in the vibrant atmosphere of the growing nationalist sentiment that Anant came into contact with revolutionary ideas. Anant lived with his friend Gangaram Marwadi, who had already taken membership of the secret revolutionary society *Abhinav Bharat*, and Anant formally joined the ranks of Abhinav Bharat to fight British tyranny.

During this period, Nashik district was under the charge of a District Collector named Arthur Jackson who was notorious for suppressing any protests or rallies calling for independence. He punished the youth who dared to sing *'Vande Mataram'*, and had Babarao Savarkar (elder brother of Veer Savarkar) arrested for publishing patriotic songs, paraded him in shackles through the streets, and had him transported from Nashik. This

hypocritical and cruel conduct turned Jackson into a hated symbol of British oppression and tyranny in the eyes of the revolutionaries. His actions filled Anant and his comrades with burning anger and strengthened their firm resolve to kill Jackson in what came to be known as the Nashik Conspiracy Case.

On 21 December 1909, a grand function was organised for Jackson at the Vijayanand Theatre in Nashik to bid him farewell on his transfer on promotion. A popular Marathi musical drama was being staged in his honour. During the interval, Anant stepped forward and fired four shots at Jackson from his pistol at close range killing him instantly. Though Anant tried to swallow poison and shoot himself as planned; he was overpowered by the police before he could do so.

A note titled 'Murder for Murder', was later found on him. Anant openly admitted his role in the Court, declaring that he had carried out this act to avenge the oppression by the British. On 29th March 1910, Anant Kanhere was sentenced to death and on 19th April 1910, he was hanged along with his colleagues in the Thane Central Prison. The British authorities, fearing public unrest, refused to hand over the bodies to the grieving families, and secretly cremated the martyrs at Thane Creek and scattered their ashes into the sea so that even the ashes were denied to their loved ones. Anant's fearless act sent shockwaves through the British administration and inspired countless young hearts to join the revolutionary struggle. Today, the '*Hutatma Anant Kanhere Maidan*' in Nashik stands as a living tribute to his memory.

Freedom Struggle and Legacy of Sindh

Like other provinces in Maharashtra, Sindh played a key role in the Indian freedom movement, marked by fierce revolutionary zeal. Choithram Partabrai, Jairamdas Daulatram, Acharya J.B. Kripalani Kiki Behn, Ganga Behn played significant roles in the Freedom Movement. But one name which stands out prominently is that of Hemu Kalani (1923-43) popularly called *Bhagat Singh of Sindh,* another gem among the young brigade who became a martyr at the age of nineteen. Hemu was born in a Sindhi family at Sukkur in Sind Division of Bombay Presidency in British India on 23 March 1923. (His birthday coincides with the day Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru were hanged.).

As a young man he was deeply influenced by *Swadeshi Movement* and campaigned with his friends for boycott of foreign goods. He soon became a leader of *Swaraj Sena*, a student organisation affiliated with the All India Students Federation (AISF) set up in August 1936 at Lucknow. Hemu was drawn to revolutionary activities and started participating in acts of protests with the aim of driving out the British from the Indian subcontinent. He joined the *Quit India Movement* when it began in 1942 and was actively involved in spreading the movement in Sindh.

Support for the movement in Sindh became such that the British colonial authorities had to send military detachments to control the unrest. It was during this time that Hemu came to know about a train that was carrying British troops and ammunition. It was moved towards Sukkur to suppress the local protest. He, therefore, drew up a plan to remove the metal fishplates from the railway tracks and derail the military train. Unfortunately, for him, he was caught by the Railway guards and the British police in this act. Despite facing severe physical torture during interrogation, Hemu refused to reveal the names of his co-conspirators or fellow revolutionaries. He was then condemned to death by a Military Court under 'martial law' for waging war against the British Crown. Hemu was thus hanged on January 21, 1943, at the age of 19, being one amongst the youngest martyrs of the Indian Independence Movement.

Women were not far behind in making their presence felt in the Freedom Struggle. Perin Ben Captain is a typical example. She was an exceptionally versatile Indian freedom activist whose life bridged two distinct eras of resistance: the early, radical underground movements in Europe and the mass based non-violent Gandhian Satyagraha's in India. As the granddaughter of the well-known nationalist leader Dadabhai Naoroji (the 'Grand Old Man of India'), her heavily nationalist lineage shaped her destiny.

Born in 1888, Perin was a highly educated woman for her era, studying at the University of Mumbai before moving to Paris, where she secured a degree in French from the prestigious Sorbonne University. While in France, she became a core member of Madam Bhikhaiji Cama's tight-knit ring of radical Indian expats. She thus aligned with European anti-imperialist forces, even collaborating with Polish *émigré* organizations that were revolting against Russian Czarist rule.

She was believed to be actively involved in the dramatic plan to help Savarkar escape British custody after his arrest in London. Alongside Madam Cama, she attended the Egyptian National Congress in Brussels in 1910 to forge cross-border solidarity against British Imperialism. After returning to India in 1911, Perin had the opportunity to meet Mahatma Gandhi and was influenced by his ideals. By 1919, she started working with him, fully embracing the Swadeshi Movement by 1920 and wore only khadi.

Alongside her sisters (Khurshedben and Nargisben), she famously went door-to-door in Mumbai's neighbourhoods selling hand-spun khadi cloth to undercut British textile dominance. In 1921, she helped establish the Rashtriya Stree Sabha, a nationalist Women's Front dedicated to mobilizing the housewives and workers of Bombay for the freedom struggle. During the Civil Disobedience Movement, Perin stepped into major leadership roles. In 1930, she was elected as the first woman President of the Bombay Provincial Congress Committee.

During the heightened crackdowns, she served on several emergency "War Councils" that directed the protests in Mumbai. She was also on the front lines of the *Salt Satyagraha (1930)*, marching daily to the Bombay shores alongside leaders like Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay to evaporate sea water in cement pans. They packed the resulting

illegal salt into tiny packets and auctioned them off publicly to fund the movement. Because of her visibility, her name constantly surfaced in the Confidential Daily Surveillance logs sent by the Bombay Police Commissioner to the Colonial Government. Subsequently, she endured several harsh prison sentences for her participation in the 1930s protests. When the colonial government banned the primary nationalist organizations, her *Sabha* was reconstituted as the *Gandhi Seva Sena*, and Perin served as its Honorary General Secretary.

After 1947, she was made part of the National Planning Committee constituted by the Indian National Congress under the chairmanship of Jawaharlal Nehru. Within the Sub Committee on 'Women's Role in a Planned Economy', she co-authored policies demanding absolute social, economic, and marital equality for women in the future independent nation. In recognition of her immense sacrifices and decades of service, the Government of India awarded her the Padma Shri in 1954. She passed away in 1958.

Another indomitable revolutionary freedom fighter from Maharashtra was Hausabai Patil (often revered as Hausatai) who played a pivotal role in India's anti-colonial struggle. As the daughter of the legendary revolutionary Krantisinh Nana Patil (1900-76), she inherited a fierce legacy of defiance against oppressive rulers. Operating primarily in the Satara and Sangli regions, between 1943 and 1946, she was part of the armed, underground resistance that challenged the British administrative machinery.

Hausabai Patil was born on 12th February 1926 in the Satara region (modern-day Sangli district) of Maharashtra. Her early life was marked by personal tragedy. When Hausabai was just three years old, her mother passed away. Because her father, Krantisinh Nana Patil, was deeply involved in anti-colonial agitations and spent years either in prison or operating underground, he was frequently away from home. As a result, Hausabai was raised primarily by her grandmother who nurtured her on the progressive ideologies of Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj, and Mahatma Gandhi. Instead of traditional folk stories, she grew up listening to the ideals of equality and the necessity of throwing out the British Raj.

At the age of seventeen Hausabai became a member of the '*Toofan Sena'* (*Whirlwind Army*), which served as the armed wing of the *Prati Sarkar - a parallel, underground government established in Satara in 1943* after declaring independence from the British rule. Headquartered in Kundal, the *Prati Sarkar* ran a functional, alternative governance system across more than 600 villages, managing its own market systems, food supply chains, and courts.

As part of the *Toofan Sena*, Hausabai got engaged in high-risk guerrilla operations, including Armoury and Treasury Raids, shifting weapons away from British forces to arm Indian revolutionaries, disrupting British Infrastructure, attacking colonial postal trains and setting ablaze *dak bungalows* (government rest houses). Beyond Satara, Hausabai's courage took her into foreign-occupied territories.

In 1944, she participated in a dangerous underground mission to liberate the revolutionary leader Baal Joshi from a Portuguese jail in Panaji, Goa. Despite being a young and lactating mother, she left her toddler behind with family to cross the heavily patrolled border. At midnight, she floated across the Mandovi River, balanced on top of a wooden box, while her fellow comrades swam alongside her. As per the plan, she passed on the message – tucked inside her hair bun - to Bal Joshi to escape from the prison of the Portuese. Bal Joshi eventually succeeded in escaping from the jail.
After independence, she remained an active voice for farmers, agricultural labourers, and marginalized communities, participating in peasant movements. She passed away on September 23, 2021, at the age of 95, in Karad, Maharashtra, leaving behind a rich legacy of the Freedom Movement.
Very few people in this country are even aware of Babu Genu, a young martyr who was killed in the most gruesome manner by the British at a young age of 22 years. Babu Genu was born in 1908, into a poverty ridden family in the Pune district of Maharashtra. His father was a farmer; the only prized possession of the family was a bullock. His father passed away when he was only 2 years old. His mother was left with the uphill task of running the family. She left her sons back in the village and moved to Bombay to earn a livelihood as a domestic help. Although Babu could not afford a formal education, this did not deter him from understanding the ground realities facing the country.
Babu Genu soon joined his mother in Bombay and sought to support her, as a casual labourer in factories. Meanwhile, he also got in touch with a few leaders of the Freedom movement, who explained the Struggle in its true perspective. Very soon, Babu Genu was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi and the principles of non-violence and *Satyagraha*, enunciated by him. He joined the Indian National Congress and took active part in the Freedom Movement.
Even at a young age Babu Genu was able to realise that commercial interests were the driving force behind the British rule. If the British could be economically crippled, their rule would collapse. It was this aspect of the struggle that Babu Genu focused on, as a strong advocate of Swadeshi goods, which led to his eventual martyrdom in 1930. On 12th December 1930, George Frazier, a cloth merchant from Manchester, was given police protection while transporting foreign-made cloth from his shop in old Hanuman galli to Bombay Port. Despite swadeshi activists begging him not to move the truck, the police forced them aside. At Kalbadevi Road, Babu Genu stood in front of the truck, but the police ordered the Indian driver to run him over. When the driver refused, the English officer took the wheel and crushed Babu Genu to death sparking widespread anger, strikes, and protests throughout Bombay.

Babu Genu's sacrifice is remembered as one of the most powerful examples of ordinary workers participating in India's struggle for independence through the Swadeshi movement and civil disobedience. Although his story remains far less known nationally than those of many other freedom fighters, he has been honoured by naming different

landmarks in Mumbai and Poona such as *Shahid Babu Genu Road* in South Delhi, *Babu Genu Ground* in Navi Mumbai and *Babu Genu Chowk* in Pune.

3. Conclusion

The above narrative attempts to show how the unknown and unsung freedom fighters of India provided the collective backbone, resilience, and grassroots foundation of the national movement. Although the focus in this paper has been on Bengal and Maharashtra, such heroes were active in other states as well Who can forget Chittu Pandey, the 'Tiger of Ballia', Karu Bhagat of Jhansi, Vanchinathan of Tamil Nadu, Tangaturi Prakasam popularly known as *Andhra Kesari*, Kartar Singh Sarabha (whom Bhagat Singh described as his mentor) and scores of others whose bravery is legendary. While prominent leaders shaped the overarching political strategies, hundreds of nationalists including, tribals, youth, and women activists transformed the resistance from an elite political debate into a massive, unstoppable popular movement.

Note:

Archival records documenting the post-1857 era up to independence in 1947 shift away from East India Company military courts toward structured British Raj intelligence surveillance, reports court trials, sedition files, and intercepted underground letters. These can be found in *the National Archives of India* as well as various *State Archives*. The *Internet Archive (Historical Volumes)* contains valuable digital versions of municipal records and comprehensive historical directories, such as *Forgotten Heroes of India's Freedom Struggle*. The Ministry of Culture centralised *Unsung Heroes Database* and cross-references on regional freedom fighters across specific eras exist from 1857 to 1947.

Suggested Readings:

Great Revolutionary Freedom Fighters of India: Unsung Heroes & Stories of Struggle (1857–1947) by Prof. K.L. Johar, Rigi Publications, 2025.

Forgotten Heroes of India's Freedom Struggle: A Who is Who by Prabha Chopra and P.N. Chopra, Agam Prakashan, 1992.

The Last Heroes: Foot Soldiers of Indian Freedom by P. Sainath, Penguin Viking, 2021.

Forgotten Patriots: Colonial Regime and Unsung Heroes of the Indian National Movement by Amit Suman, Manohar Publications, 2024.

Freedom Fighters of India: Untold Stories of Courage, Sacrifice, and the Hidden Heroes of the Indian Independence Movement by Jyothi Veera, Kindle e book, 2026.
Unsung Tribal Freedom Fighters of India by Sushil Sarkar, Viking, 2026.
Struggle for Freedom: Some Great Indian Revolutionaries by M .Srivastava, K. Jayaswal Research Institute, Patna, 1988.