

# Participation of Women and Commercial Sex Workers of Medinipur in the Indian Freedom Struggle

Atanu Mitra

## Abstract

Medinipur was one of the leading districts of India in the annals of struggles against British colonialism. These struggles began with the violent Adivasi rebellion, popularly known as 'Chuar Bidroha' or 'Chuar Bidroha' in 1776 to the non-violent Quit India movement called by Mahatma Gandhi in 1942 including the communist party led peasant movement (Tebhaga) of the 1940s. The role of women in general and commercial sex workers in particular of erstwhile Medinipur in the Indian freedom struggle have been discussed in this paper. Commercial sex workers dedicatedly participated in the nationalist movements knowing it fully well that their profession would be harmed. It may be mentioned that almost no study has been done so far to discuss particularly the active role of commercial sex workers of Medinipur in the Indian freedom struggle. Their sacrifice was not recorded so far by our nationalist historians till the beginning of platinum jubilee celebration of Indian Independence. This paper depicts the crucial role played by these women against the ruthless atrocities perpetrated by the British Raj.

**Keywords:** Women, Prostitutes, Commercial sex workers, Swadeshi, Quit India, Civil Disobedience.

## Introduction

Women belonging to all classes of the district took active part in freedom struggle since the second decade of 20th century to 1942 and after. The Swadeshi movement which commenced in 1905, a protest against the Partition of Bengal<sup>1</sup> by Lord Curzon was at first a purely local movement directed against a specific administrative measure concerning only the Province of Bengal. It is a historical landmark in the history of Indian struggle for freedom.

The Non-cooperation Movement and Passive Resistance of 1921-22 and the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930-34, were the main Brahmastras (divine weapon) with which Mahatma Gandhi was supposed to have mortally impelled the British rule in India (Majumdar, 1963). Noted historian R. C. Majumdar narrated the ruthless atrocities of police on the revolutionaries, particularly on the women and the role of women in the freedom struggle of India in his History of the Freedom Movement in India, Vol.-III (Majumdar, 1963: 426). Non-violence was a movement against a highly organized military power. All the oppressive and terrorizing weapons in the armoury of the British government were hurled against the volunteers

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Assistant Teacher, Tarakali Vidyapith, Mahatabpur, P.O. -Midnapore, Dist.- Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal, PIN-721101, India.

of the Swadeshi Movement in Bengal till 1947. The Swadeshi movement was transformed into a great national movement which carried out a successful struggle for freedom of India. The influence of nationalism was clearly seen in the rapid extension of boycott and Swadeshi (Lit. a movement for national independence in India boycotting foreign goods and encouraging the use of domestic products. [https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/swadeshi#:~:text=\(.](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/swadeshi#:~:text=(.)). Many volunteers supplied indigenous goods to the needy people of rural areas with their requirements. The partition of Bengal infused a new spirit of patriotism and was the beginning of women's participation in the nationalist movement on a larger scale. The idea of economic boycott was a weapon to persecute the British to undo the partition gradually receded into the background.

Rabindranath Thakur inaugurated the Rakhi-bandhan, symbolic of fraternal tie, on 16 October 1905. People, irrespective of age, social status and wealth tied the coloured piece of thread on the wrists of brothers by the sisters on 'Partition Day' and women took part in the ceremony. Another rite observed by women on this day was 'Arandhan' (Lit. not lighting oven and stoves to cook foods). Prostitutes of Dhaka and Narayangunj were initiated into the religion of patriotism and accepted the vow of patriotism. They actively participated in the Swadeshi movement, Non-Cooperation movement and No-tax campaigns. Several prostitutes of Barishal had donated their entire savings to the 'Swadesh Bandhab Fund'. More than three hundred prostitutes participated in a mass rally addressed by Mahatma Gandhi at Barishal in 1923 and most of them lastly joined to the 'Kutir Silpashram', a Khadi establishment of Indian National Congress (INC) leaving their profession' (Mukhopadhyay, 2017:106-107).

But there is no supporting evidence in the book. Madhu Kishwar wrote in her article 'Gandhi on Women' in the *Economic and Political Weekly* (Vol. 20, No. 40, 1985) There are quite a few instances of prostitutes, young and old, having giving up their calling and taken to Charka as a means of livelihood, in response to Gandhi's call. This happened in Madaripur and Noakhali districts in Bangladesh. Many commercial sex workers gave up their unworthy professions and joined Indian freedom struggle. Gandhi displayed an insufferable kind of self-righteousness, quit out character, when he heard the form and shape of the movement for the reclamation of 'fallen sisters' was taking at Barishal. These women had been organized there under the banner of Congress to undertake social work like helping the poor, nursing the sick, spreading education to all, promoting spinning and weaving and helping other organizations

involved in Satyagraha. Gandhi lashed out at the organization's documents as an 'obscene manifesto' which advised the women to do humanitarian work before reforming themselves. Even though he admitted that they were intelligent, modest and dignified and that their determination was as firm that of any Satyagraha. He declined to accept their donations unless they give up unworthy professions (Kishwar, 1985:1693).

However, Majumdar mentioned the use of commercial sex workers by the British police against the revolutionaries, In a case at Amritsar 107 suspected persons, not yet criminals in the eye of law were exposed to the burning sun and were obliged to answer calls of nature just where they were. Prostitutes of the town were called to witness flogging. Students had done nothing but were excited (Majumdar, 1963:31).

He gave a terrible description of punishment to the women prisoners who were arrested for their participation in the freedom movement We were informed by women ex-prisoners that in class-C, prisoners were herded with habitual criminals and prostitutes. Many of the women civil disobedience prisoners are young women who have led sheltered lives and the throwing of them into the company of the habituated criminal and prostitute is not only against jail regulations but reprehensible (Majumdar, 1963:455).

The revolutionary movement in erstwhile Medinipur<sup>2</sup> may justly claim an important place in the history of freedom movement in India. The leaders of all rank set the example of sacrificing their life at the service to their motherland. These people did not work in the limelight and had no hope for reward or appreciation by the people. Before the cyclone<sup>3</sup> in 16 October 1942, the British government planned to raid and burn the houses to demoralize the people. The plan after the cyclone was changed to raid and rape the women to bring in their demoralization and disgrace (Das, 1994:262). The intention of the British administration was to defeat and eliminate the women who joined the Quit India Movement. The British police went ahead with their scheme by burning and looting hundreds of houses and raping women between the ages of eight to eighty years. As a result, several women died, committed suicide, fallen ill and had to give birth on the streets, went to jails but never return from protesting against the colonial regime. Most significantly many commercial sex workers of the district also played a major role in the nationalist movement. Their contribution was no less than that ordinary women and men of the district in the freedom struggle of India.

Government of West Bengal has included the role of women in the Indian freedom struggle in history textbook of the school in the revised syllabus at the secondary level (*Swadesh Parichay O Paribesh*, 2015:104-116) from the year 2015. But the role of commercial sex workers of Medinipur was sadly neglected till after the seven decades after independence of India.

### **Mahatma Gandhi and his appeal**

Women's participation expanded gradually and was very limited in the first two movements of 1905 and 1920. Mahatma Gandhi played a key role in offering assurance and confidence to the guardians of women participants and some women were encouraged by their brother and husband (Bjorkert, 2006). He had come to Medinipur on 20-21 September 1921 to deliver speech in a rally at Midnapore College ground. He met especially with the women and inspired them to participate in the Indian freedom struggle of our country (Pal and Maity, 1992:254). By the direction of Mahatma Gandhi, Charusila Goswami formed Mahila Samity with revolutionary ideas to awake the spirit of nationalism among the women.

Again on 6 July 1925, Mahatma Gandhi attended a meeting of Mahila Samity at Medinipur town and appealed them to participate in the freedom struggle (Das, 1994). In the All India Congress Committee (AICC) at Lahore in 1929 Jawaharlal Nehru gave a clarion call for action, 'We have now an open conspiracy to free this country from foreign rule and you, comrades, and all our countrymen and countrywomen are invited to join it' (Chandra et al., 1988:267). Most of the women were illiterate and had hardly limited contact with outside world. Also the Congress nationalist leaders required the political mobilization of women in the nationalist movement because the importance of the movement and its success thrived on selfless contribution and involvement of the women. Suruchi Thapar Bjorkert has not also mentioned the role of commercial sex workers of Medinipur but she wrote in her *Women in the Indian National Movement: Unseen Faces and Unheard Voices, 1930-42* 'During the Civil Disobedience movement, prostitutes from Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh were stopped from joining the movement and were said to be unfit to sit near other ladies by members of district congress committee. Gandhi himself refused to accept the prostitutes as congress members unless they gave up their 'unworthy profession'. Similarly in Barisal, 'fallen sister' who wanted to participate in congress activities were advised by Gandhi to choose alternative professions to facilitate their participation.' (Bjorkert, 2006:98).

When the Village Self-Government Act of 1919 was passed, the Chowkidari tax imposed on the people increased almost seven times more than before. Under this law, the British government tried to collect Chowkidari tax by forming 227 Union-Boards in Medinipur in April 1921. The misery of the common people was increased due to burden of taxation. National movement spread in erstwhile Medinipur in 1921 when Birendranath Sasmal began to organize an extensive anti-Union Board agitation throughout the district with the participation of large number of ordinary people including women and stopped paying taxes. As a result, the government was compelled to cancel the Union Boards for the strong and universal resistance.

The INC took up the Swadeshi call at the Banaras Session, 1905, presided over by G. K. Gokhale, supporter of the Swadeshi and Boycott Movement for Bengal. Women were extremely enthusiastic and eager to participate in the movement. But Mahatma Gandhi instructed women to restrict their Satyagraha to picketing against the sale of liquor and foreign cloth (Bjorkert, 2006). He preferred women as leaders of picketing squads. He selected women for this job because of their inherent capacity of non-violence. He felt that the non-cooperation movement of 1921 had personally failed because the man had been entrusted with picketing and violence has crept in. But the women of the district, wearing khadi, would spread the spirit of nationalism in the villages, though khadi was incompetent with foreign mill cloth in terms of durability, comfort and cheapness. Gandhi's hard-hearted publicity in favour of charkha spinning and wearing of khadi was designed to bring the spirit of nationalism into everyone. This was a very remarkable way of reaching out to women and bridging the gap between their private lives and economic political life of the country (Kishwar, 1985:1695). Women of all classes, castes, ages, the intellectuals and the masses participated in the struggle in various ways: from jail-going Satyagraha, picketing, participation in public meetings, demonstrations, hartals, jathas, distributing illegal Patrikas (bulletins), and breaking of government laws. (Chandra et al., 1988:29-30). The technique of extended 'boycott' was to include, apart from boycott of foreign goods, boycott of government schools and colleges, courts and government services. Boycott and public burning of foreign cloths, picketing of shops selling foreign goods, all became common throughout the state. Women refused to wear foreign bangles and use foreign utensils, washermen refused to wash foreign clothes and even priests declined offerings which contained foreign sugar. Women would have found it difficult to join an armed struggle in large numbers. But when it came to undergoing suffering, facing lathi-charges, picketing for hours in the

summer or winter, women were probably stronger than men (Chandra et al., 1988:514). Mostly they were mothers, housewives and widows, who contributed spontaneously for the cause of National Movement (Maity, 2000). Gandhi knew that the Swadeshi vow, too cannot kept fully if women do not help. Men alone will be able to do nothing in the matter (Kishwar, 1985:1695). Satyagraha in the 1930s saw a significant increase of participation of women. They took on leadership roles after their men were imprisoned. The police were particularly brutal with these women, with evidence of molestation, lathicharges and firing and imprisonment. Older women within the prisons were recognized as pillars of support for unmarried women (Bjorkert, 2006). The worst cases of ill-treatment of women and children occurred in the villages and inside the prisons. The women protestors were taken in police lorries with males and left far away in lonely places (Majumdar, 1963).

The Non-cooperation Movement was launched formally on 1 August 1920, which came to an end on 12 February, 1922. Mahatma Gandhi confessed that women were better than men in waging non-violent passive resistance because of their greater capacity for self-sacrifice and patience, less self-seeking, and more moral courage. During 1930-31, Mahatma Gandhi had chosen salt as a symbol of non-violent war against the British. The salt Satyagraha marked in new high watermark of women's participation in the movement. Gandhi succeeded in galvanizing the traditional housebound women as a powerful instrument of political action (Kishwar, 1985:1693). The INC declared in Karachi session in 1931 that women should have complete political freedom and equality, regardless of their status and qualifications in independent India. The All India Women's Conference in 1936 acknowledged the importance of the issue of women's strength in the Indian freedom struggle. The message from Gandhi to the participants in this conference was, 'when women, whom we call abala becomes sabala, all those who are helpless will become powerful' (Kishwar, 1985:1693).

The freedom struggle intensified with the active participation of women joined the salt Satyagraha along with thousands of youth. Thousands of women like Matangini Hazra, Kumudini Daku, Ava Maity, Charushila Jana, Sindhubala Maity, Surabala Basu, Sukhadamoyee Roychowdhuri, Pravabati Maity, Charusila Goswami, Kananbala Pattanayak and so many patriotic women of erstwhile Medinipur played their significant role in the Indian Freedom struggle. The people made determined efforts to destroy government establishments, disrupted communication and dislocated the government's war efforts. During this movement the British

police and military arrested the revolutionaries, tortured them, imposed beatings, vandalized their homes, burnt the houses, shot them and raped and abused women. Paddy fields were burnt and crops were forcibly taken from the owners. The women were dispersed and thrown down by force, the policemen used to molest and tread upon their chests with boots. It may be added that in addition to the brutal assaults the police sometimes resorted to wanton destruction of property. To protect them from the hands of the police and military, women used to hold banti (a sharp domestic implement used for cutting vegetable) as a weapon for self-defense. Bhagini Sena, a trained organization of Satyagrahis for self-protection and self-defense, distributed about ten thousand bantis made by local blacksmith, among the women activists of different villages and towns of Tamluk subdivision (Maity, 2001). At this juncture, many commercial sex workers of undivided Medinipur dedicatedly participated in these nationalist movements along with the women of the rich and aristocratic families (Roy, 2010:267).

The Colonial rule itself was basically responsible for the growth of Indian nationalism. On 31 December, 1929 just after the midnight, the Congress took the resolution of purna swaraj (complete freedom) was heartily welcomed by all the people of erstwhile Medinipur and they decided to hoist the National Flag in the morning with blowing of conch shell and mass meeting. On 2 March, 1930 Mahatma Gandhi wrote to the Viceroy communicating his decision to launch the Satyagraha campaign by manufacturing salt. On 10 April, Gandhi had an appeal in the Young India to the women of India to take up the work of picketing and spinning and its effect was marvelous. Braving all sorts of disgrace and humiliation, many women played a prominent role in the Swadeshi and Boycott movement, Non-cooperation movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, Salt Satyagraha, No-Tax campaign and Quit India Movement in different parts of the country including Medinipur.

They broke the salt law, organized processions and meetings, and picketed shops selling foreign cloth and liquor. At many places they led the movement, came forward to hoist the national flag on government buildings and some of them were killed or committed suicide. Police opened fire on the salt Satyagrahis at Pratapdighi under Patashpur police station on 1 June, 1930 and killed three Satyagrahis. It was the first firing on the salt Satyagrahi in Medinipur (Das, 2013:204). Urmilabala Paria of Keshpur, Kokila Dutta of Kharagpur and Satyabati Devi of Terpekhia died by the brutal acts of police. Urmilabala Paria was the first woman martyr of erstwhile Medinipur (Das, 2007). Binodini Sau of Nandigram committed suicide on 1st October

1931. Matangini Hazra of Tamluk including 10 volunteers and Shashibala Dasi of Keshpur died by police firing in 29th September and 10th November, 1942 respectively (Pal and Maity, 1992:383). More importantly, the women gave full support to men in villages during the underground activity as well as in picketing, salt manufacture etc. and also gave shelter and food to the participants of the movements. Apart from taking out processions and holding demonstrations, women also organized training camps and Political Prisoner's Relief Fund and collected a large amount of money, which was used for treatment, training and education of the freedom fighters known as satyagrahi (who fights for revelation of the truth). Nemai Sadhan Bose in his book *The Indian National Movement – An Outline* (1974) mentioned the anxiety of the then Home Secretary to the government of India. The Secretary confessed to the famous anthropologist Verrier Elwin, 'Nothing had disturbed him more than the great awakening among Indian women and the part they had begun to play in politics' (Bose, 1974). The Bengal Chief Secretary wrote to the Government of Bengal: 'One particular problem has arisen recently which is difficult, the problem of how to deal with women who are taking an increasing part in public demonstration on behalf of Civil Disobedience' (Pal, 1996:36). As a result, the number of women prisoners in Medinipur went on increasing rapidly. The prison authority had to face great trouble for accommodating the female prisoners. As the number of women prisoners increased, the Sub-Jail adjacent to Hijli Jail had been converted into a jail for female prisoners (Pal, 1996:38).

In its meeting on 21 January, 1931, the AICC gave a summary of the brutal measures. In a letter to the residents of erstwhile Medinipur dated 2 February 1931, Mahatma Gandhi wrote I have made myself acquainted with your condition to the extent it was possible without a local visit. I tender my congratulation for your courage and patience with which you have borne your sufferings. Out of such sufferings will form a nation pulsating with life? Earthly possessions are no compensation for loss of liberty. It is a matter of joy that you have preferred deprivation of these to that of your liberty. I hope you will not neglect the duty of manufacturing the salt (Das, 1980:239).

On the same day Jawaharlal Nehru wrote from Allahabad Among the many places which have provided martyrs for the cause of Indian Freedom, Medinipur occupies an honourable position. It was fitting that special mention is made of it in the resolution of remembrance passed on the anniversary of Independence Day. I should like to tender my respectful



congratulation to the brave men and women of district who have suffered so much for the cause. Freedom will come to us of that there is no doubt and when the dust of the struggle subsides we may forget many of the little episodes, connected with it. But we can never forget the shining examples of heroism and sacrifice of Indians and specially India's women and we cannot forget that has happened in Medinipur (Das, 1980:239).

### **Torture on women**

The hellish torture on women who participated in the movement by the police and the military began in the 1930s and the dreadful things happened right after the Quit India Movement. From 1930 to 1944, at least 500 women were raped in Medinipur district. 76 women in several villages of Mahishadal and 75 women in Patashpur were raped and outraged (Pal and Maity, 1992:386). Only in the Contai Sub-division, 228 women were raped by the army (Roy, 1955:384). On 9 January 1943, 600 police and soldiers raped 44 women in Masuria, Dihim Masuria, Chowk-Gazipur, Chandipur and Laksha village of Mahishadal.

Binodini Sau of Neturia was raped by a gang of policemen on 1st October 1930 which led her to commit suicide. Rasi Das of Kulapara died after being raped by three Pathan Police personnel. Sindhubala Maity of Chandipur died on 18th January 1943 as she was gang-raped twice on 27th October, 1942 and 9th January, 1943 (Pal, 1996:200). Even the ladies of retired government servants were not exempted from molestation and brutality of police.

During the Quit India in 1942, the police and soldiers of Patashpur Police Station raped and outraged 75 women of nearby villages from 25 November, 1942 to 22 January, 1943 (Pal and Maity, 1992:174). In his History of Medinipur (1994) Narendra Nath Das described the most woeful and humiliating story of rape and molestation, 'In four cases, four military men raped one unfortunate woman while in three cases two military men and in two cases three military men raped one woman' (Das, 1994:260). Kshudibala Maity and Basantabala Maparu, both were mother of three sons, Subasini Das, suffering from cholera, Snehabala Mukhopadhyay, a widow, Raimoni Paria of Chandipur were gang-raped by the police and army. Sachindra Kumar Maity, a historian and freedom fighter mentioned clearly in his paper Role of women in the freedom struggle of Medinipur (W.B.), 'During the long period of National Movement in Medinipur many hundreds of mothers and sisters were gang-raped under the dictation of Indian Police Officers. When we were fighting for freedom in Medinipur, we used to call them as

‘women-eaters’ (Maity, 2000:27). Some of the women were mothers of 6 to 15 days old babies and some were minors. One woman jumped into a pond and committed suicide. Even women, boys and children were not spared. A 13 year old girl was raped by several soldiers while lying in front of a bayonet in the Pratapdighi camp of Patashpur Police station under Egra Sub-division. A lower caste woman was stabbed when she tried to prevent the policemen from torturing the women. A large number of women who have been raped in the Patashpur area have applied to Bengali Provincial Hindu Mahasava to arrange for their purification according to Hindu Sastra (Das, 1994:262).

The story of the role of these patriotic women would be incomplete, if we do not record the inhuman physical torture meted out by the Indian police officers along with the soldiers of the British-Raj. Severe police brutality started in the erstwhile Medinipur from March 1930, when Civil Disobedience and the Salt Satyagraha Movements began. Police arrested several volunteers at Pichhabani in Contai and Narghat in Tamluk although the movement was intensified. Degree of state repression increased when additional police forces arrived. Narendra Nath Das, a freedom fighter noted in his *‘History of Medinipur’* (Volume- II, 1994), ‘A lot of female picketers had been arrested by the police, put into lorries, taken out into the interior jungle areas and left to find their way back home’ (Das, 1994:143). Puntibala Nayak of Sutamata, Sushilabala Pradhan of Mahishadal, Kunti Das of Hadia who were in their advanced stage of pregnancy, gave birth to child after the brutal torture of police. In front of Sub-divisional Officer, Contai, police twisted the breasts and molested one Ambu, in advanced stage of pregnancy at Subarnadighi on 24 May, 1930 (Das, 1994). Children were not also spared from oppression. Eventually, after torturing the family members the police would burn down the house. Mahatma Gandhi wrote to Jawaharlal Nehru, ‘Measures in Medinipur have however dazed me. The measures appear to be worse than the Punjab massacre in 1919’ (Maity, 2001). The fact that it became impossible to control the movement was evident from the report of the Secretary to the Government, H. W. Emerson, on 16 June 1930, sent to the Governor of Bengal (Pal, 1996:9). The Home Minister of the Bengal Council, W. D. R. Prentice described In Medinipur there is a great disorder due to the civil disobedience movement. They started with salt, subsequently there have attacked on the police, murdered and attempted to burn a house in which the police were staying. There have been boycotting of chowkidars, and now there is the ‘No-tax Campaign. (Das, 1994:143).

On July 14, 1942 the AICC adopted a resolution demanding immediate end of the British rule in India with a motto of 'Do or Die'. This became famous as the 'Quit India movement'. At a time of terrible misery in public life, on August 8, 1942 at a meeting of the AICC in Mumbai, Mahatma Gandhi launched Quit India Movement. He proclaimed, 'We shall do or die. We shall either free India or die in the attempt. We shall not live to see the perpetuation of our slavery' (Bose, 1974).

On 9 August, 1942 many prominent leaders including Mahatma Gandhi were under arrest. Thousands of women spontaneously came out to hold demonstrations, organize strikes, and went to jail. Many of them took the leaderships under the most adverse circumstances. Gandhi remarked, 'When the history of India's fight for independence comes to be written, the sacrifice made by the women of India will occupy the foremost place' (Vimala, 2014:36). Linlithgow, Viceroy of India, privately described the uprising on 31st August 'by far the most serious rebellion scenes that of 1857, the gravity and extent of which we have so far concealed from the world for reasons of military security' (Sanyal, 1988:21).

The Civil Disobedience movement was memorable for the part played by the women, the youth, the students and the masses. They formed 'Samar Parishad' (War council) and 'Sangram Shibir' (War camp) in Contai and Tamluk (Bhakta, 1989). A separate volunteer forces 'Bidyut Bahini', 'Mukti Bahini' were also formed. Subsequently 'Bhagini Sena' was formed by the women volunteers in Mahisadal and Sutahata. These groups were imparted special training in military warfare, guerrilla tactics, sudden attack and self-defense (Sanyal, 1988:46). In protest against the atrocity of the police throughout the district, a meeting was held on 24 September 1942 at the house of Congress leader Manmatha Nath Das in Kolkata.

Satish Samanta, Ajay Mukherjee, Sushil Dhara and other leaders decided in the meeting to attack the government offices in the district on 29th September (Dash and Roy, 1989). Hitesranjan Sanyal wrote in his paper 'The Quit India Movement in Medinipur' that the leaders of the war councils of Contai and Tamluk decided to organize mass action to destroy the government administration and paralyze the administration between 28 and 30 September in 1942. Mass action against the government was launched in seven police stations at Bhagwanur, Khejuri and Patashpur, Mahisadal, Tamluk, Sutahata and Nandigram. During the night of 28 September, the main roads were cut, telegraph posts were uprooted, telephone lines were cut, railway tracks and signal, railway stations buildings, post offices and even post boxes, dak-

bungalows were damaged, records were burnt. Purna Raut, the Postmaster of the Terpekhia post office, always helped the British police. During the attack on Nandigram Police station, he hid in a house of commercial sex worker at Nadigram in fear. She grabbed him and handed him over to the revolutionists. The excited revolutionists set fire to the post office with the help of that postmaster. Patashpur and Khejuri police station attacked on the night of 28th September and Mahisadal, Bhagwanpur, Sutahata and Tamluk Police Stations were attacked on 29th September. The District Magistrate admitted in a report dated 13 October, 1942 that the moral of the rebels was high and the combined Civil and military action was only partially effective (Sanyal, 1988:51).

Under the direction and persuasion of District Magistrate Niaz Muhammad Khan and Tamluk Sub-Divisional Magistrate Wazir Ali Shaik, in reprisal, the British police and army resorted to arbitrary arrests, rampant, mass shooting, brutal rape, looting, arson and torture took place. Women were the main target of police brutality. The police used to encircle a village, forcibly removed the men folk between the age of 10 and 80 under arrest and detained them various places till afternoon in order to carryout searching enquiries into individual houses. The detained persons were beaten mercilessly till senseless. In the meantime the soldiers committed rape and outrage upon the women inmates (Das, 1994:260).

The British police also set fire to the remaining houses of the villages which were already devastated by the cyclone of 1942. As a result, epidemic and famine took place. The whole district was agitated for independence. A significant feature of the Quit India Movement was the emergence of what came to be known as parallel governments in some parts of the country. The Tamralipta Jatiya Sarkar (National Government) came into existence on 17 December, 1942 in Tamluk Sub-division of Medinipur. It was dissolved on 8 August 1944 in obedience to the direction of Gandhi (Majumdar, 1963:654). In 14 August, 1944, Recharad Casey, the Governor of Bengal, informed the Viceroy Lord Wavell, that the government's position in Tamluk was 'still difficult', indeed there had been a further 'deterioration' and the Jatiya Sarkar continued to command considerable public sympathy. Casey felt that the situation in Tamluk was 'clearly intolerable' (Sanyal, 1988:56).

Mahatma Gandhi came to Mahishadal on December 25, 1945 and investigated the incidents of police atrocity for six days. When Satish Samanta, the Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Tamralipta Jatiya Sarkar reported the act of violence by the colonial ruler. Mahatma Gandhi

declared in a prayer meeting, 'I do not know what the British would have done if I had been here. What you have done is heroic and glorious' (Pal, 1996:33). Jawaharlal Nehru remarked in his *Discovery of India*, 'If the reaction of the crowd was natural, so also, in the circumstances, was the reaction of the government. It had to crush both the impromptu frenzy of the mob and the peaceful demonstrations of other people and, in the interests of its own self preservation, attempt to destroy those whom it considered its enemies (Nehru, 1946:489).

The Quit India movement, the high point of struggle for freedom caused alarm to the colonial ruler. In a letter to the Additional Secretary (Home), Government of Bengal on 30 September, 1942, District Magistrate himself admitted the failure of his administration to contain the upsurge at the beginning, 'The August campaign, with its tentacles scattered around, posed a serious threat to the alien state. Through its well-established organizational network, the Congress popularized the cause of the Quit India among the peasants to take 'a vow to drive the British out of their motherland' (Chakrabarty, 1992).

In Medinipur, there were an informal network of communication between the villagers and the revolutionaries in the movement. S.G. Taylor, the Deputy Inspector General of Police of the Burdwan range, expressed his helplessness, though a huge force with them, because 'the area was extensive, communications not very good and the local people was either engaged in the revolution or too terrorized to help us'. In a letter to the Commissioner, Burdwan division, on 11 October, 1942, District Magistrate confessed, 'as soon as the (armed) forces reach a village, the rebels somehow or the other comes to know of it and desert the village'. In his letter to J.C. Irwin, personal secretary to the Bengal Governor, A. Gordon, the Inspector General of Police, Bengal, also confessed the situation of the British troops engaged in arresting 'the front leaders' of the movement, in the context of a well- devised communication network (Chakrabarty, 1992:81). But Chakrabarty has not mentioned the role of commercial sex workers in his article *Defiance and Confrontation: The 1942 Quit India Movement in Medinipur* (1992).

#### **The heroic role of Matangini Hazra and other women**

Matangini Hazra took part in the national movements since 1905. She was arrested several times. On 29th September, 1942, she was leading a procession to capture Tamluk police station under the guidance of Ajoy Kumar Mukherjee (Maity, 2015). Matangini marched towards the town from the northern side of Tamluk with the Tricolour Indian flag in one hand and a conch

in the other in her determination to follow Mahatma Gandhi's policy of 'Do or die' on that day. The soldier shot her in both hands and forehead. Matangini fell into the ground with the flag in her hand. She kept the honour of the flag intact. M. M. Basu, Additional District Magistrate, reported to J. R. Blair, Chief Secretary, Government of Bengal, in a letter dated 2 October 1942, 'The mob in Tamluk Sub-division is apparently not afraid of (police or military) firing.' Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India, inaugurated a bronze statue of Martyr Matangini Hazra at Alinan of Tamluk to pay her respect on 23rd January, 1973.

### **Participation of women in the Tebhaga Movement**

Bimala Majee a freedom fighter sought to abolish the zamindari (feudal landlord) system through the Tebhaga Movement in Bengal. Their demand was that the jotedars (landlords) should have to pay the sharecroppers tebhaga (two-third) of the yield instead of the petty half that they were paid before. The movement witnessed large scale participation of women who sought to fight against the oppression of feudal-patriarchy. She played a key role in organizing the peasant women into the Nari Bahini (Women's militia) in the Tebhaga Movement. Village women spontaneously joined their Nari Bahini, facing rifles with brooms, pestles and knives (Custers, 1986:100).

### **Role of the 'Biplabi' to incite volunteers**

'Biplabi', a Bengali weekly was published in Tamluk from September, 1942 to August, 1944 without any interruption. The Weekly dealt with police atrocities in various police stations in the district. It widely brought out the brutality of military police and soldiers like gang-rape and other torture put on the local women to stimulate the people against the British ruler (Chakrabarty, 1992).

### **Participation of commercial sex workers in the freedom struggle**

One by one Sabitri, Satyavati, Kamala, Kamini, Aarti, Sarala, Kamini, Keyarani, Chamatkarini, Rajbala who were commercial sex workers, could no longer sit and watch the oppression of the British on the revolutionaries. Out of the dark life, they dedicatedly joined the struggle. (Roy, 2010:235). They helped the National movements in many ways. They used to give shelters to the volunteers in their bedroom and fed them. They also nursed the injured volunteers and protected them from arrest by informing them about the movement of the police in advance.

### **The heroic stories of Sabitri and Satyabati**

Sabitri Devi was a commercial sex worker in the fish market of Tamluk. On April 6, 1930, after being inspired by the public speeches of the Congress leaders she joined the nationalist movement knowing it well that this would endanger her profession (Roy, 2010:267). She was even successful to bring two women, named Subhadra and Binoda, of her profession to her side. They actively participated in the Civil Disobedience movement in the district. The symbolic value of the movement touched the everyday life of women (Kishwar, 1985:1696). People were often harassed and humiliated by the British police and excise department for manufacturing of salt. The Civil Disobedience movement began with a call to break the salt act. The campaign began on 6 April, 1930 as volunteer movement at the two major centers of Pichaboni and Narghat. (Sanyal, 1988:34). Jyotirmoyee Ganguly, Charushila Goswami and others addressed a public meeting of the salt law violation movement at Narghat on 18 April disbanding under section 144 of the Indian Penal Code by Administration. District Magistrate James Peddie appeared with armed force to stop the movement. Jyotirmoyee Ganguly said, 'Those who are ready to give blood, come forward, others may go back'. Sabitri Devi came forward and said 'I am ready to give my blood'.

About eight hundred women came forward with her to break the law. The police recklessly attacked them on the instructions of Peddie. A 10-year-old boy was seriously injured by police. Sabitri Devi rushed and nursed him with motherly love (Pal, 1996:152). The heroic role of Sabitri in the movement for occupation of Tamluk Police station led by Matangini Hazra is still in memories of the people of the district. Hundreds of protesters were badly injured and were lying on the ground uncared for. Ignoring the police firing, Sabitri ran out of the brothel and gave water and nursed the injured near Shankar Arah Bridge. Inspired by the bravery of Sabitri the other commercial sex workers came forward with sticks in their hands to resist and the policemen had to retreat (Pal, 1996:152). She also used to supply the revolutionaries with the knowledge of advanced plan from the British Police officer by acting out the thrill of love with them with utmost secrecy. However, She did not get her pension. She finally spent her last life in slum. She died on March 20, 1994. The Shankar Arah Bridge in Tamluk was named 'Sabitri Bridge' in 2004 to pay her homage. Satyavati, a commercial sex worker of Terpekha played an important role in the freedom struggle of the district. She was extremely brave like other freedom fighters. At night, many policemen used to come to Satyavati for entertainment. She

saw that no one would come to free her from the dark world. So, she decided to use her profession to indirectly help the freedom fighters (Pal, 1996:152). By acting out the thrill of love, she would know the plans of the police in the moment of weakness and would inform the Congress leaders. She informed the revolutionaries of many important plans of the police in advance and protected them from police attack. She felt that it was a great honor to sacrifice her life for the country instead of living like a coward. She joined the public movement. One day at a meeting in Terpekhia Bazar, when the workers were injured due to police torture, she took care of them with motherly love. Police arrested her on 11 February, 1932 when she joined the Salt Satyagraha and No-Tax campaign in Ashadtala and Bayal. Police tortured her by injuring her genital organ. She was sentenced three months rigorous imprisonment. After her release from jail, she attended the conference in Amdabad on 19 August. There, Mr. Mofozzal, Officer-in-Charge of Nandigram police station brutally kicked her, grabbed her hair and dragged her near a pond. Finally the barbaric police officer threw her on the ground and kicked her in the lower abdomen and genitals with boots. She was found unconscious and admitted to the hospital. She died there after suffering severe pain for more than a month. She was the first martyr as a commercial sex worker in the Medinipur (Roy, 2010:268).

#### **How a freedom fighter organized the commercial sex workers?**

Before independence, there were many brothels in Medinipur. In the localities named Bibgunj, Sujagunj, Sangatbazar, Ranagali, Ganakgoli in this district headquarter. Bankim Pal of Barh Manikpur in Medinipur town was engaged in secretly exchanging information to save the revolutionaries from the hands of the police by organizing commercial sex workers.

He was the 'Mastermashai' (Teacher) of all commercial sex workers like Kamini, Keyarani, Khandi, Arati, Chamatkarini, Rajbala, Rekha, Saralabala, Kamala and other commercial sex workers of Medinipur (Roy, 2010:235). He used to send the commercial sex workers from house to house to raise money for the revolutionaries and sold local salt in the town with the help of these sex workers by deceiving the police. The plan to assassinate Andrew Henderson Leith Frazer, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, was adopted in the house of Kamini and Rajbala (Pal & Maity, 1992:386). Among the few women of Medinipur town who showed sympathy for helpless Kshudiram Basu was a commercial sex worker. Kshudiram was arrested for the Muzaffarpur conspiracy case and was sentenced to death. Only this woman went to Muzaffarpur to meet Kshudiram to save him from the British police where he was hanged on



11 August, 1908 (Bhowmik, 2018). These commercial sex workers in attractive dresses gathered to inattentive around the police personnel in the play ground where the Magistrates were present. During the independence movement, the revolutionaries made a blueprint for the assassination of three British District Magistrates in a brothel in Sangatbazar. That was why the names of two commercial sex workers Rajbala Devi and Kamini Devi were in the list of accused in the police register (Roy, 2010). The master plan to assassinate three District Magistrates of Medinipur, James Peddie, Robert Douglas and B. E. J. Burge was adopted in a brothel of these sex workers and the plan was successful on 7th April, 1931, 30th April, 1932 and 2nd September 1932 respectively (Das, 1980). Bankim Pal sometimes used them in the guise of revolutionaries. He also used the guise of bridegroom to befool the police to achieve his aim. District Magistrate Peddie liked to play football. So, at the time of assassination, they were instructed to gather a crowd on the playground and distract the police with their gestures. They were also responsible for helping the revolutionaries escape. Many commercial sex workers of Medinipur like Sabitri, Satyavati, Rajbala, Kamini, Kamala, Keyarani, Khandi, Arati, Chamatkarini and others dedicatedly participated in the freedom struggle movement and were transformed into heroines.

### **Conclusion**

The Indian national movement was undoubtedly one of the biggest mass movements that modern India has ever seen. The women of Medinipur played an important role in the Indian freedom struggle. Most of them joined the freedom movement because, like men, they were inspired by nationalism and wanted to see the end of British-Raj. Women's active role in the freedom struggle together with their courage and organizing ability led the nationalist leaders to grant women political equality. The barbaric acts of police on the women could not suppress them from participating in the movement. Many commercial sex workers of Medinipur dedicatedly participated along with the women of the rich and aristocrat families to strengthen the nationalist movements. This struggle could not become successful without the active participation and dedicated support of such brave and patriotic women. Hundreds of such patriotic women of Medinipur crowned the columns of our national history. But we rarely heard their voice. Most of the revolutionaries have passed away in most cases unwept, unhonoured and unsung. Glorious contributions of such few women are narrated in this paper just to understand their lives and character. In the eve of Platinum Jubilee celebration of India, we should have to show due honour and respect to those men and women who sacrificed and suffered for the country by

perpetuating their memory by compiling a faithful record of their struggle.

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