



Research Article

## Unsung Muslim Women Warriors of 1857: The First War of Independence in India

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Received : January 19, 2026  
Accepted : March 13, 2026

Revised : February 15, 2026  
Available online : April 02, 2026

**How to Cite:** Razia Sultana. (2026). *Unsung Muslim Women Warriors of 1857: The First War of Independence in India*. *INTERDISIPLIN: Journal of Qualitative and Quantitative Research*, 3(2), 150–160. <https://doi.org/10.61166/interdisiplin.v3i2.152>

**Abstract.** The revolt of 1857 which is called the first war of independence is a foundational stone in the anti-colonial history of the subcontinent of India. However, the existing historiography primarily highlights the participation of male leaders and their military engagement, it does not sufficiently explore women's role and their multifaceted participation and specially Muslim women's sacrifices recognised rarely. This paper describes the role of Muslim women in the First War of Independence of 1857 as political leaders, military participants, organisers, motivators, and martyrs. Muslim women belonging to different social backgrounds, such as royal households, aristocratic families, the middle class, and marginalised groups, and living in diverse regions made significant contributions to the resistance against the British. Their involvement was not only symbolic support, but they also directly participated in governance, battlefield engagements, troop mobilization, intelligence gathering, and logistical coordination. This paper exposes the sacrifices of Muslim women, which have been ignored over time and not mentioned by most historians. The study seeks to restore women to their rightful place in the historical understanding of the 1857 uprising and to highlight their enduring legacy in the history of resistance and freedom.

**Keywords:** Movement, Women, Muslim, Sacrifice, Battle.

## INTRODUCTION

The Mutiny of 1857 was one of the most significant acts of resistance by the people of the Indian subcontinent against British colonial domination. It was not only a revolt of the elite, but a revolt of the people who wanted to get rid of colonial exploitation. It was not a localized military revolt, but a widespread movement shaped by political discontent, economic exploitation, and cultural interference. Historical accounts have focused mainly on the participation of male rulers, soldiers, and religious leaders, while ignoring the sacrifices of women in this transformative struggle.

In this era, women were not passive observers of the resistance against colonial power. Their lives, status, and security had been directly affected by the annexation of territories, the dismantling of indigenous governments, and the destruction of economic and cultural structures. The result of all this was that many women emerged as active soldiers of resistance, and they responded to colonial domination with courage, resilience, and determination. They participated as leaders, strategists, warriors, organizers, nurses, and as symbols of moral authority within the movement.

During that period, women mostly performed only their domestic duties, but this uprising created extraordinary conditions that temporarily destroyed conventional distinctions and moved women forward from their socially prescribed domestic roles. Several women in different regions motivated communities, trained combatants, and confronted colonial forces directly on the battlefield. Their participation did not find an appropriate place in historical accounts, despite their significant contributions, women's roles in the 1857 uprising have remained marginal in mainstream historiography. Colonial records often dismissed or sensationalized their involvement, while later nationalist narratives prioritized male leadership. This omission has resulted in an incomplete understanding of the nature and scope of the resistance movement.

This paper describes that Muslim women who were mostly confined to their houses, after starting this movement, significantly participated in it. They moved forward from their homes to come and fight against British colonial power. It is said that around 250 Muslim women were killed by British rule in resistance against colonial power in the region of Muzaffarnagar. However, most of them do not exist in historical accounts. This paper tries to fill this historiographical gap by giving an account of Muslim women's participation in the War of Independence of 1857 as an integral component of anti-colonial resistance by discussing their diverse roles and experiences.

This paper analyses that women were not merely a supporting hand for their male relatives, but they took part actively in this resistance and gave their significant contribution in shaping the course and character of the uprising. It is necessary to recognise their essential role for a more precise and accurate interpretation of the history of the freedom struggle and the First War of Independence of 1857.

## Background

The Revolt of 1857, remembered by Indians as the First War of Independence, was the result of the oppressive policies of the British East India Company in India. This revolt arose from deep-seated grievances against British rule. The British adopted different policies to expand their control, such as the Doctrine of Lapse, introduced by Lord Dalhousie. These policies created despair among the Indian royalty.

Indian society was also badly affected by the heavy land revenue systems such as the Permanent Settlement, Ryotwari, and Mahalwari. These revenue policies exploited peasants and caused widespread suffering. The British authorities also forced farmers to cultivate cash crops like indigo, which led to famines and the destruction of local industries.

Artisans suffered greatly due to the influx of cheap British goods that flooded Indian markets. This caused unemployment and economic distress. Indian soldiers, too, faced discrimination, as they were denied extra allowances compared to British soldiers.

Moreover, Western education and fears of religious conversion created tension among both Hindus and Muslims. In this way, the revolt reflected the anger of everyone from the Indian royalty to the common people, against the unjust policies of the British.

Afroz Khan says that the most important thing about this revolution was that people started joining it on their own; no call was given anywhere whoever heard that there was a rebellion against the British started joining it on his own level and participated in it whatever he could.<sup>1</sup>

In this uprising, many groups of Indians participated without discrimination of caste, class, or religion. Women, alongside men, played a crucial role in mobilizing people. Among the participants, Muslim women made significant contributions. They not only took part in the revolution but also sacrificed their lives for freedom. Unfortunately, their sacrifices have largely been forgotten.

## Begum Hazrat Mahal: A Great Female Freedom Fighter of the 1857 War of Independence

Begum Hazrat Mahal is a great figure in our history, and she is one of the prominent leaders of the 1857 uprising. She resisted British rule in the War of Independence of 1857. She was against British rule during the War of Independence of 1857. She had a number of qualities such as graciousness, political insight, profound military leadership, and national dignity.

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<sup>1</sup> Afroz Khan, "Asghari Begum, A Fearless Muslim Woman From Thana Bhawan: Unveiling Spirit of the 1857 Rebellion," *New Age Islam*, August 23, 2025,

<https://www.newageislam.com/islamic-personalities/asghari-begum-fearless-muslim-woman-thana-bhawan-1857-rebellion/d/134100>

Begum Hazrat Mahal was born in Faizabad. Her exact date of birth is unknown; it is said that she was born in 1820,<sup>2</sup> but some sources say that she was born in 1830.<sup>3</sup> Her parents gave her the name Muhammadi Khanam. She came to Lucknow and became one of the selected women of the royal court of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. She was very beautiful and intelligent, and the Nawab gave her the title of "Mehak Pari." Later, she entered the harem of the Nawab. She gave birth to a son named Birjis Qadr. After this, Nawab Wajid Ali Shah formally married her and declared Birjis Qadr as his heir. From this period onward, she came to be known as Begum Hazrat Mahal.

The Governor-General of British India, Lord Dalhousie,<sup>4</sup> who lived in India from 1844 to 1856, implemented several policies to expand and strengthen British rule. One of these policies was the Doctrine of Lapse. According to this policy, the British government annexed states that had no legitimate heir. However, Nawab Wajid Ali Shah had a legitimate heir; therefore, Lord Dalhousie adopted a different policy for the annexation of such states. He annexed Awadh on the grounds of misrule. According to him, the condition of Awadh was poor, and its administration was not functioning properly. In February 1856, British forces entered Lucknow and they did care about the treaty of 1806 and treaty of 1837.<sup>5</sup> Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, the last Nawab of Awadh, was deposed by the British and Awadh was declared British territory. The Nawab was sent to Calcutta, where he was kept under house arrest. The Nawab tried to get back his state, but he did not find success, and after some time he accepted a pension.

Begum Hazrat Mahal did not go with Nawab Wajid Ali Shah and refused to leave Lucknow, and she did not accept British rule. Begum Hazrat Mahal raised her son's legitimate claim to the throne. She did not agree to live under British oppression. She was aware of the fact that the freedom of Awadh and the rightful claims of her son could only be secured through struggle and sacrifices.

At that period, in 1857, the revolt had started in the cantonment of Meerut,<sup>6</sup> and its fire spread to other regions of India, and gradually it became a revolt of the people. The leadership of the movement in Awadh was assumed by Begum Hazrat Mahal.

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<sup>2</sup> India Currents. "The Indomitable Begum Hazrat Mahal (1820-1879)." June 11, 2016. <https://indiacurrents.com>.

Forever Muslim. "Braver Than Documented: Begum Hazrat Mahal, Soul of the 1857 Rebellion." Accessed February 2026. <https://forevermuslim.in>.

<sup>3</sup> Historical Novel Society. "In the City of Gold and Silver: The Story of Begum Hazrat Mahal." Accessed February 2026. <https://historicalnovelsociety.org>.

<sup>4</sup>Before 1858 A.D., the administration of India was in the hands of the East India Company, and a Governor-General was appointed by the Company to oversee British rule in India. Dalhousie was also appointed by the East India Company as the Governor-General in 1848.

<sup>5</sup> According to these treaties, the Nawab ceded the Doab region to the British. He also accepted the permanent stationing of British troops in Awadh and agreed to bear their expenses. In return, the British government formally recognized the Nawab as the King of Awadh.

<sup>6</sup>The British issued Enfield rifle cartridges to both Hindu and Muslim soldiers. However, they refused to use them because it was rumored that the cartridges were greased with cow and pig fat. On 10 May 1857, the soldiers first revolted in the Meerut barracks.

In June 1857, Begum Hazrat Mahal arranged the coronation of her son, Brijis Qadr and declared him the Nawab of Awadh and herself as regent of Brijis Qadr. At that time, he was very young, around twelve to fourteen years approximately. Bahadur Shah Zafar, who was the last ruler of the Mughal dynasty, recognised the government of Awadh and accepted the very young ruler. Thus, the real authority of the state was in the hands of Begum Hazrat Mahal.

After taking authority into her hands, Begum Hazrat Mahal announced the recruitment of troops. She did not remain confined to the palace, but personally attended elite gatherings and also addressed the public of Awadh with a sword in her hand. She gave speeches related to freedom, sacrifice, and patriotism and prepared the people for giving sacrifices for freedom. Both the masses and soldiers were deeply motivated to work against British rule and got ready to sacrifice anything for independence.

Within a short period of time, she succeeded in expelling British rule from many parts of Awadh, and the British forces remained confined to the Residency of Lucknow.

Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah and Mammoo Khan were the principal commanders of Begum Hazrat Mahal's forces, while Nana Sahib, who was a ruler of Kanpur, was also her ally. After defeating the Indian forces at Kanpur, Outram and Havelock came to Lucknow with their troops to relieve the Lucknow Residency and, after fierce resistance, they succeeded in recapturing the Residency in Lucknow on 23 September 1857.

On 25 February 1858, the Awadh forces made an attempt to recapture Alam Bagh; however, it ended in failure. In March 1858, the British launched a full-scale assault on Lucknow with a force of approximately three thousand Gurkha soldiers and succeeded in occupying Musa Bagh, Dilkusha Bagh, and Qaiser Bagh. This campaign was led by Sir Colin Campbell.<sup>7</sup>

When the situation deteriorated severely and further resistance became impossible, Begum Hazrat Mahal departed for Nepal along with her son Birjis Qadr, Nana Sahib, and other associates. The British government offered her a pension and privileges befitting a member of the royal family on the condition that she surrender, but Begum Hazrat Mahal rejected this proposal. Rather than compromising her freedom and dignity, she chose a life of exile.

Begum Hazrat Mahal spent the last years of her life in Nepal. She faced conditions of severe financial hardship and mental distress there; in spite of this, her resolve and courage were never shaken. In the end, this remarkable freedom fighter passed away in 1879. Her grave, which still exists in Kathmandu, Nepal, stands as a testament to her sacrifice, steadfastness, and unparalleled devotion to the cause of freedom.

Begum Hazrat Mahal will always be remembered in the history of the Indian subcontinent as a woman who stood shoulder to shoulder with men against British

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<sup>7</sup>Abida Samsuddin, *Hindustan ki Tahreek e Azadi Mein Muslim Khwateen Ka Hissa*, 1990, Idarah Tahqeeqat e Urdu, Patna, p.31

imperialism and proved that women are in no way inferior in the struggle for independence.

### **Begum Azizan: A Courageous Female Freedom Fighter**

Begum Azizan was one of the bravest women of the Indian subcontinent who participated in the resistance against the British forces and took up arms alongside men to get rid of British imperialism during the War of Independence of 1857. She was a courtesan lady,<sup>8</sup> therefore she also known as the name “Azizan Bai” and has a distinguished place in history due to her courage, military skill, and unparalleled sacrifices of the 1857, the first war of Independence

Begum Azizan was born in 1832 in Lucknow<sup>9</sup> and lived there in her early years. Her ancestors also belonged to Lucknow, but she spent most of her life in Kanpur. Her father’s name was Husain Khan and her mother was Hamida Begum. In her early years, she resided at Sarangi Mahal in the company of the renowned performer Umrao Jan Ada of her time, and later she moved to Kanpur.

During the 1857 uprising, when Kanpur was one of the major centers of resistance against British imperialism, Nana Sahib and Tantia Tope, who were the prominent leaders of that region, gathered a powerful force and started fighting against colonial authority. Begum Azizan was a staunch opponent of British imperialism and a devoted supporter of Nana Sahib Peshwa, for whom she was prepared to make every possible sacrifice.

Begum Azizan had exceptional skills in swordsmanship and horse riding. She not only acquired military training herself but also trained other women in the use of arms and horseback riding. In this manner, she organized a disciplined group of women who actively participated in both combat operations and auxiliary services.

When the revolt of 1857 failed and the British got success in re-established control over Kanpur, they started to arrest the rebellions, Begum Azizan was also arrested along with other freedom fighters. Begum Azizan was presented before a British officer, she was a very adorable and graceful lady, after seeing her the British officer was impressed by her courage and beauty. The officer offered her release on the condition that she confess her guilt, but Begum Azizan rejected this proposal outright. She was a real fighter, rather than choosing cowardice or pleading for mercy, she accepted martyrdom for the sake of her country.

Consequently, Begum Azizan was executed by firing squad along with other rebels.<sup>10</sup> Her fearlessness, courage, and steadfastness in the face of the enemy were such that she became an inspiring symbol of bravery and martyrdom in history.

The sacrifice of Begum Azizan (Azizan Bai) stands as a vivid testament to the extraordinary role played by women in the War of Independence of 1857. Her life conveys a powerful message: in the struggle for freedom, gender, social status, or

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<sup>8</sup> In nineteenth-century India, courtesans (tawaifs) occupied a distinct social and cultural position. They were not merely entertainers; rather, they were highly educated women trained in classical music, dance, poetry, etiquette, and languages such as Persian and Urdu.

<sup>9</sup> Abida Samsuddin, op.cit., p48

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p 51

societal restrictions cannot become obstacles when courage, honor, and determination are present.

### **Asghari Begum**

Begum Asghari Begum, who was also a freedom fighter, was born on 5 July 1811 in Thanabhawan (Muzaffarnagar district, Uttar Pradesh).<sup>11</sup> She belonged to a respected, educated, and courageous family. By temperament, Asghari Begum was exceptionally fearless and resolute.

When the flames of the War of Independence of 1857 spread across the region, even her home was not left untouched by the turmoil of the period. Her son, Qazi Abdul Raheem, was among the revolutionary leaders of Thanabhawan.<sup>12</sup> Begum Asghari Begum not only supported her son but also personally began preparing for active participation in the struggle. Unlike many women of her time, who remained confined to their homes and household duties, she openly assisted the rebels.

She encouraged several other women and motivated them to join the struggle. She also trained them in the use of weapons. From 1857 to 1858, she remained active on various fronts across Uttar Pradesh. Seeing her determination and steadfastness, many people were inspired to join the rebellion.

At the Chinhat front, she defeated British forces and shot a British officer named Henry Lawrence.<sup>13</sup> When the revolt was eventually suppressed, Asghari Begum was arrested and put on trial. The British government judge sentenced her to death by being blown from a cannon. The judge expected that this sentence would instill fear in her, but she smiled and said, "You cannot give me any punishment greater than this." This reply was unexpected by the judge; he then altered the sentence and ordered that she be burned alive.<sup>14</sup> Even this horrific punishment failed to shake this brave lady, and thus this great freedom fighter was burned alive. But it is very sad that this brave lady's sacrifice has been forgotten in the pages of history, despite the immense courage and commitment she displayed to the cause of freedom.

### **The Green-Clad Elderly Female Freedom Fighter (An Unidentified Woman)**

One of the most courageous and brave women participants in the War of Independence of 1857 was an old woman who wore green garments, dressed in male attire, and covered her face. She came on horseback. Her identity, place of origin, and destination remained unknown; no one knew who she was, where she came from, or where she disappeared to.

She would emerge unexpectedly and urge people to rise against the British, igniting in their hearts a passion for freedom. She also attacked enemy forces and then vanished. This elderly freedom fighter possessed exceptional proficiency in the use of firearms and the sword. She carried out attacks on British troops, killed several

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p 51

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 52

<sup>13</sup> Afroz Khan, op cit.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

soldiers, and returned safely. Her impassioned speeches and audacious actions inspired many people, and they were motivated to join the struggle.

One day in July, during intense fighting, she was wounded and subsequently captured by the British. She was sent to Ambala. After being sent to Ambala, how the British government treated her and how she was executed is not mentioned in historical records; however, it is certain that she was subjected to severe torture.

A British lieutenant, Hudson, wrote about her in his diary: "She was skilled in the use of weapons and possessed physical strength equal to that of five men."<sup>15</sup> British soldiers referred to her as the "Joan of Arc of India,"<sup>16</sup> an appellation that acknowledged her fearlessness and extraordinary bravery.

### **Moondar (Bodyguard of Rani Lakshmibai)**

Moondar was another courageous woman of the uprising of 1857. She served as the personal bodyguard of Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi.<sup>17</sup> On 8 June 1857, she sacrificed her life while protecting Rani Lakshmibai at Sarai of Kota near Gwalior.<sup>18</sup> Her martyrdom stands as clear evidence that women displayed extraordinary bravery on the battlefield as well.

### **Jameela**

She was also a brave woman who took part in the uprising of 1857. She belonged to a Pathan family. When the upheaval of 1857 began, she resisted the British government, and she also used weapons, but unfortunately, she attained martyrdom in 1858.

### **Bibi Khatun**

Bibi Khatun was among those women who actively participated in the uprising of 1857. She continued her opposition relentlessly until, in 1858, the British authorities arrested her and sentenced her to death by hanging. Her only "crime" was her refusal to accept subjugation under colonial rule.

### **Sakina Begum**

Sakina Begum was born in 1840 in Farrukhabad and belonged to a learned and respected family. During the uprising, her son was abducted by the British. Through prolonged struggle and tireless efforts, Sakina Begum eventually succeeded in locating and recovering her son.<sup>19</sup> This episode serves as a stark illustration of the inhumane measures adopted by the British government to suppress the rebellion.

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<sup>15</sup> Khurshid Mustafa Rizvi, *Jang e Azadi 1857*, p. 187-188.

<sup>16</sup> Abida Samsuddin, *op.cit.*, p. 47

<sup>17</sup> Manmohan Kaur, *Role Of Women In Freedom Movement (1857-1947)*, Sterling Publishers Private Ltd. Delhi, p.68.

<sup>18</sup> Salim, Saquib. "Less Known Muslim Women Freedom Fighters." *Heritage Times*, March 8, 2025. <https://www.heritagetimes.in/less-known-muslim-women-freedom-fighters/>

Abida Samsuddin, *op.cit.*, p. 51

<sup>19</sup> Khwajah Ikram, *San Sattavan Ki Gumnam Mahilayein*, Prakashan Sansthan, New Delhi, 2008, p. 265

### **Nazneen**

Nazneen belonged to the Sayyid family, historically associated with the Delhi Sultanate.<sup>20</sup> When the rebellion erupted in Delhi, she aligned herself with the freedom fighters. Initially, she participated in combat alongside a Pathan soldier named Dilawar Khan. She was skilled in the use of weapons and also performed guard duties at the fort. On one occasion, she discovered an explosives tunnel near the fort, which revealed that Dilawar Khan had betrayed the rebels and colluded with the British. Enraged by this betrayal, Nazneen killed Dilawar Khan with her sword. Subsequently, this brave woman also laid down her life in the cause of freedom.<sup>21</sup>

### **Basti Begum**

Basti Begum was the daughter of the last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar. She too played an active role in the War of Independence of 1857. She was also a talented Urdu poet. Following the failure of the uprising, the British government exiled her in 1858.<sup>22</sup>

### **Farhat Jahan**

Farhat Jahan belonged to a wealthy family but she was fond of dance and she got training in dance and used to perform in the gatherings of the Red Fort. However, when the uprising of 1857 began, she abandoned her artistic career and devoted herself to the struggle for freedom. She was proficient in swordsmanship and horsemanship, confronted the enemy on the battlefield, and was martyred while fighting.<sup>23</sup>

### **Habiba**

Habiba was also a courageous female freedom fighter of the War of Independence of 1857. She was born in 1833 in a village in Muzaffarnagar and belonged to a Muslim Gujjar family.<sup>24</sup> She participated in several battles against the British in Muzaffarnagar and its surrounding areas, astonishing all with her courage.

When the British government eventually reasserted firm control, Habiba was arrested and, along with other women freedom fighters from Muzaffarnagar, was executed by hanging. At the time of her execution, she was only twenty-five years old, yet her sacrifice immortalized her in the annals of history.

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<sup>20</sup> The Sayyid dynasty ruled the Delhi Sultanate from 1414 A.D. to 1451 A.D. as its fourth dynasty. Their 37-year reign helped stabilize Delhi after Timur's invasion, but it ended when Bahlul Lodi seized power.

<sup>21</sup> Tausif Ahmad and Imtaiz Ahmed, "Lost in the Annals of History: Women in the Revolt of 1857," *TIJER – International Research Journal* 10, no. 3 (March 2023). P.73.

<sup>22</sup> Abdul Lateef, *Roznamachah Abdul Lateef (Persian)* translated by K. A. Nizami ( Urdu ) , Delhi, p.225

<sup>23</sup> K.S. Santha, *Begus of Awadh*, Bharti Prakashan, Varanasi, 1980, pp. 180-192

<sup>24</sup>Abida Samsuddin, *op.cit.*, p. 52.

### Rahimi

Rahimi is also counted among the women of Muzaffarnagar who played an active role in the War of Independence of 1857. She belonged to a Rajput family. She organized women, trained them in the use of arms, and provided every possible form of assistance to the freedom fighters. She herself participated alongside soldiers on various battlefronts.<sup>25</sup>

### Alia Begum

Aliya Begum was also one of the freedom fighter women. She organised a small group of women and gave them military training. For two years, she and her small troop fought against the British. Her troop was small in size, but they put up a valiant battle against the British soldiers. She remained in regular contact with Nana Sahib and Tantya Tope.<sup>26</sup>

These are only a few names of those Muslim women who participated in the First War of Independence in India in 1857. Besides them, there were many other women whose stories of bravery have been buried in the pages of history. Today, even their names are unfamiliar to the people. However, the sacrifices of all these women proved to be significant for the freedom of India.

### CONCLUSION

After the failure of the uprising of 1857, Rahimi was arrested and executed. Her martyrdom serves as compelling evidence that women were in no way inferior to men in the struggle for freedom and were equally capable of courage, leadership, and sacrifice.

These accounts collectively highlight the diverse and significant roles played by women in the War of Independence of 1857, demonstrating that their contributions extended far beyond symbolic support and included direct participation, leadership, sacrifice, and martyrdom.

The War of Independence of 1857 was not only a significant political and military uprising against British colonial rule, but also a powerful expression of collective resistance in which Muslim women played an inspiring and often under-recognised role. The participation of courageous Muslim women in this revolt demonstrated that the struggle for freedom was not confined to male warriors and leaders alone.

Muslim women from different backgrounds came forward with remarkable determination, challenging both colonial oppression and the traditional limitations imposed upon them by society. These women not only supported the revolt morally, but also took up arms, resisted British authority, and endured imprisonment, torture, and even execution for the cause of independence. Their unwavering opposition reflects the depth of their courage and their refusal to accept colonial subjugation.

In conclusion, the contributions of these brave women serve as powerful evidence that the uprising of 1857 was a broad-based national movement in which

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.52.

<sup>26</sup> Tausif Ahmad and Imtaiz Ahmed, p.73

women played an essential role. Their courage, sacrifices, and determination enriched the spirit of resistance and left a lasting legacy in India's freedom struggle. Although many of their stories remain forgotten or only briefly mentioned in historical narratives, their heroic actions continue to inspire future generations and deserve greater recognition in the history of India's fight against colonial rule.

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