

Department of Liberal Arts, IIT Bhilai  
presents  
***Freedom at Midnight***  
*Women's voices and the Indian freedom struggle*  
A national conference

17 February 2023

**Concept Note & CFP**

The political, social, and economic decolonisation of India has been studied from multiple perspectives. Prominent nationalists in the early twentieth century had different visions pertaining to a self-reliant and resurgent India, including Gandhi and his idea of swaraj, Nehru's dream of an economically strong India, Malaviya's vision of free and compulsory primary education for all, and Bose's idea of complete freedom with a classless society and state socialism. Along with these male stalwarts, this era also saw the rise of women nationalists in the socio-political sphere who had their own visions regarding freedom. From Annie Besant's idea of all India home rule to Sarojini Naidu's idea of women's empowerment to Kamla Devi Chattopadhyay's idea of poorna swaraj, women conceptualised freedom and independence in ways which were unique and transformational in their own right.

However, women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were often represented as having homogenous identities, uniform political consciousness, attitudes, and opinions (Thapar, 93). The construction of women's identities and their deification by many of the leading nationalists led to further marginalisation of their voice in the domains of political discourse and initiative (Jain, 1655). Although under the influence of Gandhi women started to actively participate in the freedom struggle from the 1930s (Chatterjee, 41), scholarship on this subject until 1975 confined their roles to being helpers of their male counterparts. It was only from the late 1970s that women's role in the nationalist struggle began to be reviewed and re-evaluated through a gendered perspective (Patil, 1180).

As many scholars have established (Chatterjee, 41) (Jain, 1657), rather than being passive recipients women were active agents in not only determining the course of the freedom struggle but also creating new identities for themselves by actively participating in the political and intellectual arena in order to obtain freedom. For many of these pioneers, freedom meant unshackling the bonds of not only colonisation but also patriarchy. Public figures like Sarojini Naidu sought to induce patriotism by bringing into play her nationalist and creative instincts in poems like "An Anthem of Love" (1912) and "The Gift Of India" (1917), while others like Begum Rokeya imagined feminist utopias in texts like *Sulatana's Dream* (1908), where women enjoyed unrestricted access to public life without any social or religious strictures. The momentum for reform drew, in fact, from the works of early stalwarts such as Gangabai Yagnik, who wrote about different ways of self-employment in her work *Hunar Mahasagar* (1860), and Pandita Ramabai, who emphasised self-reliance for women and pressed for opening of the teaching profession to Indian women in *The High Caste Hindu Woman* (1887), a seminal work of gendered socio-cultural critique. The lives and works of these and many other Indian women of this era are a strong

testament to the discursive constitution of womanhood in active dialogue with—and against—patriarchal notions of womanhood vis-à-vis a rapidly and multifariously evolving nationalist consciousness.

Focussing on women's contributions to the Indian freedom struggle and their self-fashioning in their own works and voices, in this conference we aim to examine the ideas of freedom and independence articulated by Indian women from the late nineteenth to the mid twentieth century. We are interested primarily in the literary culture of this period, though analyses of the same may be complemented by references to material and visual cultures as well. Participants may frame their proposals around the following points of interest:

- Constitution and consolidation of womanhood
- Authorial vis-à-vis political agency
- Politics and poetics of the working woman
- Iconography of Bharat Mata
- Gendering of literary genres and registers
- Agitation, mobilisation, and women
- Global influences and solidarities

Participants can consider a range of literary genres, including novels, short stories, poetry, letters, speeches, and life writings, to name a few. The texts under consideration may be in any Indian language, or in English/English translation. **Proposals of not more than 300 words in MS Word format** accompanied by bio-notes of 50 words are invited by **30 September 2022** to **dept\_la@iitbhlai.ac.in**. Selected presenters will be intimated by 30 October 2022, following which **working papers of 3000 words** will be due for submission by **15 January 2023**.

Conference Committee:

Dr Anubhav Pradhan, Assistant Professor  
Dr Sonal Jha, Assistant Professor  
Ms Nidhi, Doctoral Scholar

## Works Cited

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