

Role of Artistes in the Indian Freedom Struggle: A Multifaceted Perspective

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Abstract

The Indian freedom struggle is one of the most important aspects in Indian History. The contributions made by different sectors and people account for the independence. This research paper delves into the intricate involvement of artistes in the Indian Freedom Struggle, analysing the profound influence of musicians, painters, dancers, poets, and theatre artists in shaping the socio-political landscape. It initiates by exploring India's diverse artistic traditions, emphasizing the crucial role of artistic expressions in transformative movements. The segment on musicians elucidates how they employed their craft as potent messengers, disseminating messages of resistance through their musical creations. Moreover, in the domain of visual arts, painters are scrutinized for their capacity to capture the essence of the freedom struggle in their works, while dancers are acknowledged for their distinctive contributions in utilizing traditional dance forms as a means of protest. Beyond these primary art forms, poets and theatre artistes are recognized for their roles in stimulating and mobilizing the masses. The paper concludes comprehensively, synthesizing the findings, reflecting on the enduring legacy and impact of artistic contributions, and suggesting potential avenues for future research. Ultimately, this paper underscores the interconnected and pivotal role of the arts in India's quest for independence, shedding light on the often-underappreciated contributions of artistes to historical movements.

Keywords: Indian Freedom Struggle, Artistes, Dancers, Painters, Poets, Musicians.

Introduction

The struggle for Indian independence, a significant epoch in the nation's history, unfolded across numerous years, marked by unwavering endeavours to break-free from colonial dominance (Ramnath, 2019). Originating in the late 19th century and gaining momentum in the early 20th century, this movement employed diverse strategies such as non-violent resistance, civil disobedience, and mass protests (Fischer-Tiné, 2007). It extended beyond political arenas, permeating various facets of Indian society, including art and culture (Bhattacharya, 2014).

The profound impact of artistic expressions during this period cannot be overstated, as artists across different disciplines played a vital role in shaping and amplifying the narrative of freedom (Choudhuri, 2019).

Art, in its myriad forms, has consistently mirrored society, reflecting the aspirations, grievances, and cultural ethos of a people (Dasgupta, 2023). The Indian struggle for independence was no different with artistic expressions serving as potent tools for conveying the collective spirit of resistance against colonial oppression (Banerji, 2010). The artistes are actively engaged with the socio-political landscape, infusing their works with purpose, unity, and a call for change. This study aims to explore the multifaceted contributions of artists in the Indian Freedom Struggle, examining how their creations became driving forces for social and political transformation (Van Der Linden, 2022).

Literature Review

In the pre-independence era, India's diverse cultural tapestry served as both a source of strength and a unifying force. Artistes found themselves at the forefront of a cultural renaissance, employing their craft to instill a sense of national identity and pride while grappling with the challenges of colonial subjugation. Traditional art forms, deeply ingrained in Indian society, were reimagined to carry the torch of independence. Musicians, for instance, drew inspiration from classical ragas and folk tunes to compose anthems that resonated with the aspirations of a free India (Van Der Linden, 2022). Also, musicians played a pivotal role in creating a sonic landscape that echoed the sentiments of masses. Iconic figures like Rabindranath Tagore, through his compositions, not only celebrated the richness of Indian culture but also used music as a means to foster a collective consciousness for the freedom struggle. Tagore's "Vande Mataram", later adopted as a rallying cry during protests, exemplifies the fusion of art and politics, embodying the spirit of a nation yearning for liberation (Choudhuri, 2019).

Simultaneously, the canvas became a battleground for painters seeking to depict the harsh realities of colonial rule and the fervour of the independence movement. Indian painters, influenced by diverse artistic movements, blended traditional techniques with contemporary themes to convey the urgency for change. Abanindranath Tagore, a prominent artist of the Bengal School, used his paintings to evoke a sense of national pride, depicting historical and mythological narratives as a metaphor for the contemporary struggle (Banerji, 2010). Equally, dance with its evocative and symbolic language, emerged as another potent medium of expression during the freedom struggle. Classical dance forms like Bharatanatyam and Kathak, deeply rooted in Indian traditions, were harnessed to convey political messages, and inspire activism. Rukmini Devi Arundale, a pioneering figure in the world of Bharatanatyam, used dance as a form of protest, infusing it with themes of patriotism and resistance (Meduri, 2005). Also, concurrently, theatre artists employed the stage as a platform for social commentary and political critique. The Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), with luminaries like Prithviraj Kapoor, used the medium of theatre to mobilize public opinion and challenge the status quo (Bhattacharya, 2014).

Need & Significance

The significance of artistic expressions during the Indian Freedom Struggle extended beyond traditional domains to encompass poets and theatre artistes. Poets, through their verses, became

the voice of the marginalized, articulating the collective anguish and aspirations of the people. Notable poets like Allama Iqbal and Faiz Ahmed Faiz, through Urdu poetry, stirred the hearts of the masses, advocating for a free and inclusive India (Ramnath, 2019). Keeping these aforesaid expressions, there is a need to understand the role of artistes in Indian freedom struggle. This in turn will provide a better picture of India's independence and post-independence transformation.

Objective

To understand the role of artistes in the Indian freedom struggle

Method of Study

The entire study is based on secondary data sources, which included books, journals, online sources, websites, etc. The present research has adopted historical research method and descriptive research design for discussing the observations accordingly.

Observations & Discussion

The observations are indicated under broader headings and are discussed below with relevant literature.

Role of Musicians in Indian Freedom Struggle

India's rich musical heritage is a testament to its cultural diversity, featuring a mosaic of classical, folk, and devotional traditions that have organically evolved over centuries (Koskoff, 2001). The classical music of India exhibits distinctive characteristics such as the intricate rhythms of the Tabla, soulful melodies of the sitar, and the intricate patterns of the veena, falling broadly under two main traditions: Hindustani and Carnatic (Manuel, 1993). The Hindustani tradition, prevalent in the northern regions, reflects Persian and Central Asian influences, while the Carnatic tradition, dominant in the south, carries a distinct Dravidian flavour. These time-honoured traditions, imbued with spiritual and cultural significance, laid the groundwork for the musical expressions that played a pivotal role in the Indian Freedom Struggle.

Music, being an art form that transcends linguistic and cultural barriers, emerged as an effective medium for conveying emotions and messages. During the Indian Freedom Struggle, musicians assumed the role of messengers of resistance, leveraging their artistry to articulate the sentiments of the masses. The potency of music lies in its ability to evoke strong emotions and create a shared experience among listeners (Freitag, 1991). Musicians, serving as cultural ambassadors, harnessed this emotional power to instill a sense of patriotism and solidarity among the people, fostering a collective consciousness crucial for the success of the freedom movement (Hughes, 2002). Also, Ustad Allauddin Khan, a master of sarod and a visionary composer, made significant contributions to the freedom struggle through his creation of Raga Sangeet. Raga Sangeet, a genre blending classical Indian music with elements of folk traditions, emerged as a potent tool for conveying messages of resistance against colonial rule (Bor, 2001). Khan's compositions, infused with patriotic dedication, resonated with the masses, inspiring a sense of unity and pride. The evocative nature of Raga Sangeet allowed it

to transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries, serving as a unifying force in the fight for independence.

M. S. Subbulakshmi, an iconic Carnatic vocalist, utilized her mellifluous voice to echo the sentiments of the freedom struggle. Her renditions of devotional songs and patriotic hymns became anthems of the movement, providing solace and inspiration to those fighting against colonial oppression (Hughes, 2002). Subbulakshmi's ability to infuse her performances with deep emotion and spiritual fervour made her a symbol of national unity. Her concerts served not only as musical events but also as platforms for disseminating messages of resistance and resilience (George, 2016). Moreover, Birendra Krishna Bhadra, a radio artist, left an indelible mark on the freedom struggle through his iconic rendition of "Mahishasura Mardini". It was broadcasted during Durga Puja and this program became a cultural phenomenon conveying the message of the triumph of good over evil (Alonso, 2023). The program's powerful narration, coupled with evocative musical compositions, metaphorically symbolized the victory of Indians against British oppression. Bhadra's contribution exemplifies how even non-traditional forms of music, like radio broadcasts, became potent tools for inspiring resistance.

Role of Painters in Indian Freedom Struggle

The historical narrative of visual arts in India is intricately woven with its diverse cultural and religious heritage, spanning across centuries. The evolution of Indian art reflects a myriad of influences from dynasties, empires, and cultural amalgamations, resulting in a diverse panorama of artistic expression. Art, beyond its aesthetic value, has functioned as a dynamic instrument for social and political commentary (Chatterjee, 1993). The tradition of painting in India embraces a spectrum of styles, ranging from the ancient murals of Ajanta and Ellora to the intricacies of Mughal miniatures. The essence of visual arts in India lies in its capacity to convey intricate narratives, portray historical events, and mirror the prevailing socio-political ethos. Painting, in particular, has served as a compelling means of storytelling, offering artists a platform to convey messages that transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries (Mitter, 2017). With the momentum of the Indian Freedom Struggle, artists became integral to the movement, feeling compelled to lend their skills to the cause of independence.

In the era of the Indian Freedom Struggle, artists played a pivotal role in depicting the harsh realities of colonial rule, the passion of nationalist movements, and the collective yearning for freedom. Also, their artworks became visual chronicles, capturing the spirit of resistance and the determination of a nation striving for self-rule. Drawing inspiration from the daily lives of the people, artists depicted scenes from vibrant street protests to serene villages, translating these experiences onto their canvases. Numerous prominent themes surfaced in the paintings of this period, portraying the struggles of the common man, the sacrifices made by freedom fighters, and the unity among diverse communities against colonial oppression. These artistic expressions functioned not only as documentation, but also as means to evoke emotions, instill patriotism, and mobilize public support for the cause. Also, Jamini Roy emerges as a notable artist whose work left a lasting impact during the freedom struggle. Renowned for blending traditional Indian folk art with modernist techniques, Roy's paintings often portrayed scenes from rural life, celebrating the simplicity and resilience of the common people. His dedication to indigenous artistic forms and themes resonated with the nationalist sentiments of the time (Mitter, 2017).

Abanindranath Tagore, a pivotal figure in the Bengal School of Art, used his artistic prowess to articulate the socio-political aspirations of the nation. His iconic painting, 'Bharat Mata,' symbolizing the Motherland, became an emblem of the freedom struggle. Tagore's work transcended mere artistic expression; it became a symbol of national identity, invoking a sense of collective pride and determination (Kumar, 1999). Although born later, Amrita Sher-Gil made an indelible mark on the art scene during the closing stages of the freedom struggle. Her realistic and poignant portrayals of Indian life, particularly the struggles of rural women, added a social dimension to the artistic narrative. Sher-Gil's work served as a commentary on societal issues and contributed to the broader discourse on independence and social justice (Sundaram, 2010). Thus, examining the impact of these artistes revealed that their contributions extended beyond gallery spaces. Their works permeated public consciousness, becoming a source of inspiration for those at the forefront of the freedom movement. The paintings served as visual rhetoric, effectively conveying the urgency and righteousness of the cause. The role of painters in the Indian Freedom Struggle, as depicted through their canvases, was multifaceted. Beyond being illustrators of historical events, they were interpreters of the collective consciousness, capturing the zeitgeist of a nation in its quest for freedom. Their works became potent tools of persuasion, influencing public opinion and fostering a sense of national identity during a crucial juncture in India's history.

Role of Dancers in Indian Freedom Struggle

India, with its rich and diverse cultural heritage, is home to a plethora of traditional dance forms that have evolved over centuries (Sengupta, 2018). These dance styles not only showcase the artistic brilliance of the subcontinent but also embody its deep-rooted cultural, mythological, and spiritual traditions. Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Odissi, Kuchipudi, Manipuri, Kathakali, and Mohiniyattam are some of the classical dance forms that have thrived, each possessing unique characteristics, movements, and thematic foundations, contributing to the vibrant tapestry of Indian performing arts (Bose, 2006).

During the Indian Freedom Struggle, dance emerged as a potent form of dissent against colonial rule. Dancers, recognizing the emotive power of their art, started incorporating political themes into their performances, subtly challenging the prevailing socio-political narrative. The performative nature of dance allowed for nuanced expressions of resistance, providing artists with a platform to convey messages of unity, nationalism, and the desire for freedom (Bose, 2006). Moreover, these classical dance styles, such as Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Odissi, Kuchipudi, Manipuri, Kathakali, and Mohiniyattam have evolved over centuries, encapsulating the essence of Indian mythology, spirituality, and social expression (Sengupta, 2018). They serve as repositories of cultural heritage, embodying the diverse traditions that form the fabric of the Indian subcontinent.

Kathakali, a dance form originating from the southern state of Kerala, became a vehicle for dissent during the freedom movement. Known for its elaborate costumes, distinctive makeup, and dramatic storytelling, Kathakali dancers used their medium to depict stories of valour and resistance against oppression, capturing the imagination of audiences and inspiring them to stand against colonial rule. Particularly, Kathakali, originating from Kerala, integrated elements of traditional stories, often drawing on themes of valour and resistance. Dancers utilized intricate facial expressions, hand gestures, and body movements to communicate narratives of defiance, inspiring audiences to join the struggle against colonial rule (Zarrilli,

1984). Among the influential figures integrating dance into the freedom movement, Rukmini Devi Arundale stands out as a trailblazer in the revival of Bharatanatyam, wherein Rukmini Devi aimed to infuse classical dance with a sense of national identity. In the 1930s, she founded Kalakshetra, an academy dedicated to the preservation and promotion of traditional arts. Also, through her performances and educational initiatives, Rukmini Devi significantly contributed to the cultural rejuvenation associated with the freedom movement and efforts in popularizing Bharatanatyam (O'Shea, 2005).

Similarly, Uday Shankar, a revolutionary figure in modern dance, used his innovative choreograph as an approach by blending traditional Indian dance with Western influences. His dance dramas, notably "Kalpana", integrated themes of resistance and social change, illustrating the potential of dance as a medium for mobilizing public sentiment against colonial oppression. His collaborations with political leaders and activists showcased the potential of dance as a medium for mobilizing public sentiment against colonial oppression (Abrahams, 2007). Moreover, Kelucharan Mohapatra, a luminary in the world of Odissi, utilized his artistry to foster a sense of cultural identity and pride among the masses. His dance compositions often portrayed tales of bravery and heroism, indirectly challenging the imperialistic narrative imposed by the British (Singer, 1997). Also, the intricate movements of Odissi, combined with Mohapatra's storytelling, created a powerful narrative resonating with the sentiments of a nation striving for independence. Similarly, Amubi Singh, an exponent of Manipuri dance, made significant contributions to incorporating regional dance traditions into the freedom movement. Through his performances, he celebrated the cultural diversity of India, reinforcing the idea that the fight for freedom was a collective effort transcending linguistic and regional boundaries (Bandopadhyay, 2012). In furtherance, Singh's dance became a symbol of unity, emphasizing the strength derived from the diversity of India's cultural heritage. These dancers, among others, not only showcased the aesthetic beauty of traditional Indian dance but also harnessed its emotive power to instill a sense of patriotism and resistance against colonial rule. Their artistic contributions left an indelible mark on the cultural landscape of the Indian Freedom Struggle (Gandotra & Jain, 2023).

Role of Other Artists in Indian Freedom Struggle

Artistes across diverse domains, including music, painting, and dance, played pivotal roles in the Indian Freedom Struggle. Among them, poets and theatre artistes emerged as influential communicators, acting as sources of inspiration and mobilization for a shared cause. Indian poets, renowned for their poignant verses, served as voices of dissent and patriotism during the quest for independence. Tagore, an eminent figure in Indian literature, authored verses that deeply resonated with the prevailing spirit (Collins, 2013). His collection of poems, notably those from 'Gitanjali,' stirred emotions and kindled the passion for independence (Tagore, 2005). Also, Bharati, through his Tamil poems, evoked nationalist sentiments in South India (Frost, 2006). These poets were not just writers; they sparked a passion that transcended literary boundaries, becoming a driving force for transformation. The potency of poetry lay not solely in its literary grace but also in its accessibility to a broad audience. As poets crafted verses mirroring the aspirations of the nation, their impact on public sentiment was profound.

Theatre emerged as a dynamic medium for political expression during the Indian Freedom Struggle. Accomplished playwrights and actors leveraged the stage to convey compelling messages and critique colonial rule. In this context, Mumbai's Prithvi Theatre, established by

Prithviraj Kapoor, emerged as a center for nationalist fervour. The plays staged at Prithvi Theatre frequently addressed social and political issues, subtly challenging the British Raj (Mishra, 2008). The iconic play “Deewar”, penned by Kapoor himself, explored the conflict between loyalty to the nation and allegiance to the colonizers (Anand, 2016). Such theatrical productions engaged audiences emotionally and intellectually, contributing to an elevated political consciousness. In Bengal, the IPTA (Indian People’s Theatre Association) played a pivotal role in utilizing theatre as a tool for social and political change and plays such as “Nabanna”, written by Bijon Bhattacharya, portrayed the struggles of peasants against oppressive policies. IPTA’s performances were not merely entertainment; they were a call to action, urging people to question the status quo and assert their rights. Theatre’s capacity to reach a diverse audience made it an effective vehicle for political discourse (Vahali, 2020).

Unlike written literature, which might be confined to the literate elite, theatre transcended barriers of education and class, bringing the message of freedom to the grassroots. Considering the varied audiences and their diverse cultural contexts, it becomes imperative to assess how socio-economic factors influenced the reception and effectiveness of artistic expressions. In this context, the musicians, as cultural ambassadors, used the universal language of music to transcend linguistic barriers and communicate messages of resistance. Dancers like Rukmini Devi Arundale employed classical dance forms to embody the spirit of the freedom movement. Moreover, her dance forms evolved into cultural treasures, with institutions like Kalakshetra preserving Rukmini Devi Arundale’s legacy (Chakraborty, 2019). Similarly, painters such as Nandalal Bose and Abanindranath Tagore harnessed visual arts to evoke nationalist zeal on canvas, wherein the paintings depicting the struggle are celebrated for their artistic merit and serve as historical artifacts (Banerji, 2005).

The patriotic poets like Rabindranath Tagore and Subramania Bharati expressed the aspirations and frustrations of a nation yearning for independence through poignant verses and their poetic verses resonate in contemporary times, encapsulating the timeless essence of a nation’s quest for freedom (Sunder Ranjan, 2021). In furtherance, theatre artists brought political messages to life on stage, fostering a sense of collective identity whereas the influence of theatrical performances is evident in the continued use of theatre as a means of social and political commentary (Fisher, 2023). Furthermore, prominent figures like Bismillah Khan and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay played significant roles in mobilizing the masses through their compositions. The impact of these artistic contributions extends beyond the freedom struggle. Compositions like “Vande Mataram” continue to be revered as cultural icons (Banerjee, 2020). While the impact is undeniable, understanding the full extent of artistes’ contributions requires further research. Future studies should explore regional variations and the intersectionality of different art forms during the Indian Freedom Struggle. Additionally, a comprehensive study could examine how social, economic, and cultural factors influenced the effectiveness of artistic forms of resistance. Exploring the interplay between artists and political leaders could provide insights into the strategic use of cultural expressions to advance the cause of independence.

Suggestions

An in-depth analysis of the impact of economic and social variables on the way artistic messages received will shed light on the complexities of audience engagement, adding depth to our understanding of the socio-cultural landscape of the time. The dynamic relationship

between artistes and political leaders is a fact that warrants further examination. In furtherance, the understanding on how cultural expressions have been strategically employed to advance political agendas will provide valuable insights into the synergy between the realms of art and politics. Also, investigating the motives, collaborations, and conflicts between artists and political figures will enrich our understanding of the intricate dance between culture and governance. In addition to this, assessing the enduring socio-cultural impact of artistic contributions to the freedom struggle is crucial for understanding the lasting imprint of these expressions. Thus, by exploring how artistic contributions continue to shape the cultural fabric of modern India, researchers can bridge the temporal gap between the historical moment and its contemporary reverberations. This longitudinal perspective offers a holistic understanding of the enduring influence of artistic activism. In our pursuit of a more comprehensive understanding of the role of artistes in historical movements, there lies a vast terrain yet to be explored. To deepen our comprehension and unravel the intricacies of artistic activism during the Indian Freedom Struggle, future research should consider the following avenues.

Conclusion

The diverse role of artists during the Indian Freedom Struggle has profoundly impacted the nation's history. Moreover, the overall observation is that musicians, painters, dancers, poets, and theatre artistes are instrumental in shaping public sentiment, fostering unity, and expressing dissent against colonial rule. Their collective contributions form a rich tapestry that weaves together cultural and political threads of a transformative era. A nuanced exploration into the regional variations in artistic contributions is imperative. The diverse cultural landscapes of different Indian states undoubtedly influenced the nature and impact of artistic expressions in the quest for independence. Thus, by delving into the specificities of regional artistic activism, the researchers can uncover unique narratives that contribute to a more inclusive historical account. The collaborative efforts between musicians, painters, dancers, poets, and theatre artistes played a pivotal role in fostering a holistic and synergistic approach to nationalist sentiments. Unravelling the intricacies of this intersectionality is crucial for a more nuanced understanding of how different art forms complemented and enriched each other during the freedom struggle. Investigating these collaborative dynamics promises insights into the collective strength of artistic activism. In conclusion, the artistic contributions of musicians, painters, dancers, poets, and theatre artistes during the Indian Freedom Struggle form a mosaic of resistance, resilience, and cultural expression. Furthermore, their legacy endures, inspiring exploration into the intricate relationship between art and historical movements, paving the way for a more nuanced understanding of the role of artistes they played in shaping the course of nations.

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