



The Local Roots of Nationalism: Indumati Bhattacharya Debashis Bera

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Received: 02.07.2025; Accepted: 12.07.2025; Available online: 31.07.2025

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Abstract

In discussions about women's contributions to India's independence movement, their role remains neglected. Except for well-known heroines like Matangini Hazra, Pritilata Waddedar, Kalpana Dutta, and Beena Das, the names of many female freedom fighters are rarely mentioned, and seldom written about. A close look at local history reveals countless women who, leaving behind home and family comforts, dedicated themselves to the struggle for the nation's freedom. The participation of Midnapore's women in this commitment to liberate the country is remarkable. At subdivision, police-station, and village levels, they led, managed households, marched alongside men – day and night – against the British. Some even endured imprisonment. Yet these women have not entered the spotlight. Even 78 years after independence, they are overlooked. The current generation doesn't know their deeds, and doesn't even know their names. One such neglected heroine is Indumati Bhattacharya, a resident of Jorapukur village under Panskura police station in Tamluk subdivision, Midnapore district.

Keyword: Grassroots activism, Women freedom fighters, Independence movement, Local leadership, Oral history, Gender and nationalism

Research Objectives:

1. To unearth and chronicle the roles played by lesser-known women like Indumati Bhattacharya in Midnapore's independence movement, whose actions remain largely absent from mainstream histories.
2. To examine how women's leadership at village, police-station, and subdivision levels influenced—and strengthened—wider district, state, and national anti-colonial efforts.
3. To investigate the social, cultural, and personal factors—such as patriarchy, education, familial duties, and local norms—that shaped their activism.
4. To evaluate the current level of awareness and public memory regarding these women, and to understand the reasons behind their historical invisibility.

Birth and Childhood:

Around 1888, Indumati Devi was born into a respected Brahmin family in Nanadari (also called Byabatta Hat), a village approximately three miles from Tamluk city. Her father was Jadupati Chakraborty, and her mother was Shashimukhi. Indumati was their second daughter out of four girls. Jadupati was a well-known lawyer at the Tamluk court and, due

to his financial prosperity, owned considerable land and several brick houses in Tamluk town. Being educated and urban, he encouraged his daughters' education.

As there was no girls' school in Nanadari, Jadupati enrolled Indumati in the only girls' school in Tamluk, where she studied up to the fourth grade. From the beginning, Indumati showed remarkable academic talent. In her memoirs, she recalled: "I had won a prize... a sahib gave the prize. I heard he was a small officer".¹ Despite her intelligence, her formal education ended in the fourth grade because child marriage was prevalent in society at that time. Even educated men like Jadupati could not break free from this harmful custom. At age 10, Indumati was married off to Surendranath Bhattacharya of Champadali village in Panskura. As she later wrote: "I liked studying, but when I was studying in fourth grade, only ten years old, I got married".² Sacrificing her academic potential was not unusual in that era. Yet one can take some consolation knowing that she later applied that intelligence to the service of her country.

Revolutionary Inspiration:

Various circumstances awakened a deep respect for her motherland in Indumati Devi's heart. Born into an affluent Brahmin family and raised in a close-knit, progressive home, she later moved into her educated in-laws' household after marriage. In both families, she was encouraged to read newspapers from a young age. This background nurtured her open-mindedness, respect, and patriotism. Although her paternal family was traditionally orthodox, her parents' modern outlook freed her from societal restrictions. Despite the era's lack of focus on girls' education and opposition from some relatives, her father enrolled her in the only girls' school in Tamluk—a decision that planted the seeds of nationalist thought in her mind.

Even after marriage, Indumati Devi enjoyed an environment rich in learning. Her father-in-law, Bhagavati Bhattacharya, was a respected lawyer at the Tamluk court, and her husband, Surendranath Bhattacharya, was a medical student who later became a Sub-Deputy Magistrate. Living in such an educated family awakened in her a strong urge for the nation's liberation.

Sometime later, Surendranath moved from Champadali to Jorapukur, a spot along the state highway between Panskura and Tamluk, near the Jorapukur. There he set up his medical practice. This house eventually turned into a secret hideout (dera) for revolutionaries. Hemchandra Kanungo—who was indicted in the famous Alipore Bomb Case—lived concealed nearby in another house near Jorapukur.³ During her youthful days, Indumati saw revolutionary activities unfold before her eyes. Alongside her household duties, she listened to local Congress meetings and participated in various actions, getting increasingly involved in the freedom movement.

Indumati Devi's outlook shifted significantly after reading contemporary Bengali literature. She devoured works by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay—authors whose writings inspired a sense of nationalism and social change. Bankimchandra, for instance, had penned the novel *Anandamath* (1882), which introduced the evocative patriotic song "Vande Mataram" and fueled early revolutionary fervor. Sarat Chandra, cited for his deep empathy and depiction of societal issues, also influenced a generation of readers. At home, Indumati eagerly read the weekly magazine *Hitabadi*, which her husband regularly purchased. In her own words, "We got the

weekly *Hitabadi*. I read it cover to cover. My husband encouraged reading at home; he bought many books by Bankimchandra, Rabindranath, and Sarat Chandra".⁴

Surendranath Bhattacharya, Indumati Devi's husband, deeply influenced her nationalist outlook. He consistently expressed *Swadeshi* ideals and anti-British sentiment at home – through both his words and actions. She vividly recalled the simple acts that reflected their patriotic stance, "We never bought imported fine salt. Instead, we bought coarse domestic salt, crushed it, and consumed it. The belief then was that fine salt was imported, while the coarse salt was our own. We wore saris made by Bengal Mill – although cheaper and of lower quality, we felt they were better than British-made ones. I felt a quiet pride and joy in that".⁵

Such choices – boycotting imported goods like salt and foreign fabrics – were central to the *Swadeshi* movement, a nationwide push to reject British products and support Indian-made ones during the struggle for independence. These personal practices stirred a strong sense of *Swadeshi* in her. Influenced by Gandhian honesty and integrity, Indumati Devi embraced Gandhi's call for national service. She later reflected, "The greatest fortune of my life was being able to participate in Gandhiji's movement".⁶

Contribution to the National Movement:

Before Mahatma Gandhi's emergence, the boycott and *Swadeshi* movements had already gained significant momentum in Bengal and across India. Later, under Gandhi's leadership, a nationwide non-violent mass movement – the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22) – began. Following these two movements, a full-scale Civil Disobedience Movement was launched across India. It was during this phase that Indumati Devi's participation in the national movement became evident. In 1930, responding to Gandhi's call, the Civil Disobedience Movement was launched throughout the country. On 11 March, Gandhi announced that he would begin the movement by breaking the salt law.⁷ On 12 March, he set off from the Sabarmati Ashram towards Dandi, accompanied by seventy-eight close associates. On 6 April, he reached the seashore and broke the salt law by making salt.⁸ Indumati Devi participated in this movement as a volunteer of the Indian National Congress. April 6, 1930, marked her first day of direct involvement in the national movement. Following Gandhi's ideals, the Tamluk Subdivision Congress Committee planned to launch the Civil Disobedience Movement by producing salt from the saline water of the Haldi River at Narghat on the same day, 6 April.⁹ Accordingly, a procession started from Tamluk early that morning towards Narghat. Indumati Devi joined this procession. In her own words, she wrote, "I went on the very first day. That morning, volunteers set out from Tamluk town in groups, chanting 'Vande Mataram' on their way to Narghat. A large crowd had gathered since the night before. I, along with many other women, walked behind the volunteer procession up to Narayanpur".¹⁰

In the initial phase of the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–32), Indumati Devi actively participated in several protest marches. Apart from that, she took on various service-oriented responsibilities at home for Congress workers. She secretly operated and maintained a bulletin printing machine. As she recalled, "Our entire house at Jora Pukur practically turned into a Congress office".¹¹ When volunteers arrived from different areas, she would host and feed them.¹² For a period, the local Sub-Divisional Congress Committee printed their bulletins at her house. The printing work was primarily handled by her and her elder son, Kalidas. When the police came for searches, she would hide the bulletins from

their view and help continue the propaganda activities undetected. In her memoirs, she wrote, "For some time, Congress bulletins were printed at our house. The bulletins contained updates about Congress activities. They were sent to Tamluk for distribution. People used to read them eagerly. To avoid detection by the police, the cyclostyle machine was never kept in the same place for long – it was frequently moved to another house or village. Kalidas worked for a long time printing these bulletins".¹³

A few days after joining the national movement, Indumati Devi developed a strong desire to be arrested – she had no objection to going to jail for the sake of *Bharat Mata's* liberation. She was fully prepared to sacrifice her personal freedom for the national cause. On the occasion of Motilal Nehru Day (6 May 1930), a women's procession was planned in Tamluk. Upon hearing the news, Indumati Devi eagerly joined the event. However, she was not arrested by the police on that occasion. Later, on 26 January 1931, she and Indu Devi, wife of Satish Chakraborty of Tamluk, jointly led a procession in front of the Bargabhima Temple, raising the slogan "Vande Mataram" with the aim of energizing and strengthening the march. Despite their bold action, they were not arrested that time either. Her repeated efforts to participate directly in defiance of British authorities reflect both her commitment to the movement and her fearless attitude – especially notable given the era's societal restrictions on women's public participation.¹⁴

By the mid-phase of the first Civil Disobedience Movement, the agitation had become so widespread and intense that the British government panicked and ordered the closure of all Congress offices.¹⁵ As part of this crackdown, two rooms of the Jora Pukur house – where Surendranath Babu used to run his dispensary – were locked, and the entrance was barricaded with thorny bamboo fencing and guards. Concerned about the inconvenience this caused to the local people, Surendranath Babu set up a temporary dispensary in a nearby *atchala* (a traditional open-sided shed) and continued providing medical services to the community.¹⁶ In 1931, following the Gandhi-Irwin Pact, the first phase of the Civil Disobedience Movement came to an end. All political prisoners were released.¹⁷ Though the momentum of the movement slowed, Indumati Devi remained actively involved in Congress activities. At the request of sub-divisional Congress leader Ajay Kumar Mukherjee, she took up the task of enrolling new members into the Congress. Following the instructions of the senior leadership, she went from village to village, visiting homes to recruit members with great dedication. She later recalled, "I enrolled many members. For the first time, I went from village to village, visiting people's homes. Everywhere I went, I received a warm welcome. I didn't have to persuade anyone too much to join the Congress".¹⁸

Indumati Devi's involvement in the national movement did not remain confined to enrolling members for the Congress by going from village to village. Over time, she began to emerge as a prominent public figure. She started delivering speeches at various public meetings, reflecting her growing confidence and leadership in the Congress political arena. In one such notable public gathering, she shared the stage with prominent leaders like Ajay Mukherjee and Urmi Devi in Tamluk – an indication of the recognition she had begun to receive within political circles. Her increasing participation in such events signalled a significant shift: from a behind-the-scenes activist to a vocal, visible leader.¹⁹

During the second phase of the Civil Disobedience Movement (1932–34), the tax refusal movement in Midnapore gained considerable momentum. Compared to the first phase, the agitation in Tamluk grew much stronger during this period.²⁰ Activities like processions,

picketing, rallies, and intimidation of government employees became more frequent and assertive. As a result, in early 1932, the British government once again declared the Congress an unlawful organization.²¹ To ensure the continuity of Congress activities at the sub-divisional level, the local leadership in Tamluk formed the Tamluk Subdivisional *Samar Parishad* (Struggle Council).²² The aim of this council was to strengthen Congress organization at the rural level and to lead the ongoing resistance. It was decided that one director would oversee operations at a time. If that director was arrested, another would be chosen to take their place. In this system, Indumati Devi was elected as the fourth director of the council. She recounted, "The first director was Srinath Babu, the second was Lakshmidi, the third was Prabhavati Maity, and I was the fourth director".²³ She further wrote, "I was secretly happy. Now I would finally go to jail".²⁴

After being appointed as a Director of the Tamluk Subdivisional Samar Parishad, Indumati Devi suffered from a bout of chickenpox's,²⁵ which left her physically weak and unable to participate in active organizational work for a period. Her absence, however, began to affect the strength and momentum of the Congress organization in the region, as she held a key leadership role. Recognizing this, her capable son Shyamadas Bhattacharya urged her to resume her duties. He said, "Mother, now you must go out".²⁶ This call was not just emotional but strategic – it meant she had to travel from village to village, revitalize the Congress network, and mobilize public support for the movement once again. Determined to resume her responsibilities, Indumati Devi decided to start her campaign in her own police station area, Panskura, focusing on rebuilding grassroots support. Shyamadas took charge of planning the details of the tour. She recalled, "Shyam prepared a travel itinerary for us".²⁷

In this episode, Indumati Devi dutifully served as the Director of the Congress Samar Parishad. She toured nearly all the Congress offices within the Panskura police station area. Her journey was undertaken on foot, by bullock cart, and even by palanquin. During the journey, she stayed overnight at the homes of Congress workers. Her companions on this tour included her husband Shyamadas Bhattacharya, Mahadev Majhi of Panskura Station, Manorama Pattanayak of Chakdaha village, and other Congress workers. The journey commenced with a procession from Kolaghat Station, reached by train from Panskura Station. From Kolaghat, they traveled through Keshapat to Mansapukur, where they stayed for four to five days, conducting door-to-door Congress campaigns. From Mansapukur, they proceeded to Gobindnagar, Konchauki, Maguri, and Arjunda, eventually arriving at Telipukur in Kaloi village. A large public meeting was organized there. Despite police obstructions, the meeting was successfully held with a significant audience. Afterward, she returned home via Kalidan. This month-long public outreach campaign was truly remarkable.²⁸ As a woman, she tirelessly walked day and night to implement Congress programs, adhering to Gandhiji's principles and ideals, and dedicated herself to the cause of the nation's freedom.

In the aftermath, Indumati Devi organized a procession to launch a campaign targeting various government offices. She first led a march to the Panskura police station. The objectives were clear: to halt police oppression of Congress activists and demand the release of those detained during the tax-resistance movement. Around fifty marchers carried the national flag, and Indumati Devi led from the front with a large flag. Upon reaching the station, no senior officer was present – only three constables and one *daroga* (sub-inspector).

One of them sneeringly asked, "Why have women come here? Have women ever fought wars"?²⁹ Indumati Devi was offended by these pro-British, sycophantic policemen. She responded sharply, "If the men of the country don't enter the freedom struggle, then women must go to war".³⁰ This statement reveals the fierceness of her anti-British sentiment and proves that, as a woman, she was in no way inferior to men. Undeterred, she then marched to the nearby government Registry Office, where the group hoisted the national flag before peacefully dispersing and returning home.³¹

Prison Life:

During the second phase of the civil disobedience movement, Indumati Devi joined the tax-resistance movement and was imprisoned twice. The first time was in 1932, when she spent one month in lock-up and six months in jail.³² After her sentence at Tamluk Fort, she was transferred to Medinipur Central Jail. There, she came into close contact with many famous fellow inmates of the Swadeshi movement, including Bina Das.³³ A short while later, she was moved to Baharampur Jail. There, she met renowned women freedom fighters such as Jyotirmoyi Ganguly, Urmila Devi, Labanyaprabha Dutta, and Biba Mitra. Through conversations and discussions with them, Indu Devi's sense of patriotism was further awakened.³⁴

On August 18, 1932, British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald announced the Communal Award, granting separate electorates to Muslims, Sikhs, and other minority communities. Immediately, Mahatma Gandhi, then imprisoned, protested from jail and began a fast unto death.³⁵ At that time, in Baharampur Jail, Jyotirmoyi Devi urged all inmates to join Gandhi's campaign to abolish untouchability. After internal discussions, they adopted an innovative approach: they assigned two 'Bagdi' women from the prisoners to serve meals to everyone in the jail. A Muslim detainee named Khaleda also took part in serving food.³⁶ Through this act, Indumati Devi—though born into a Brahmin family—joined Gandhi's anti-untouchability movement even from prison.

In 1933, she was imprisoned for the second time. This time, she was initially incarcerated at Medinipur Central Jail, where she remained for about three to four days before being transferred to Baharampur Jail. Her sentence lasted six months, but she was released seven days before her term was fully completed.³⁷

Although Indumati Devi's presence wasn't prominently noted during later phases of the Civil Disobedience Movement and the Quit India Movement, mass agitation in Panskura continued—but she remained notably silent during this period, not participating in the shadow national government. The reasons for this change could be a topic for further discussion. However, from 1945 onwards, she served as the long-time President of the Panskura Thana Congress. After India gained independence in 1947, she became actively involved in various public welfare initiatives. She played a significant role in the anti-untouchability and Harijan upliftment movements. To promote rural economy, she founded the Cottage Industry Preservation Society, which established branches at various locations within the Tamluk subdivision and facilitated the development of cottage industries. She also led and managed the Masland³⁸ Industrial Training Center in Panskura and served as the lifelong President of the Mahishadal Matrisadan Society. Indumati Devi passed away on May 17, 1982.

Assessment:

Many years have passed since Independence, yet we, immersed in WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, and the swirl of various internet technologies, have forgotten these freedom fighters. The current generation not only remains distant from their deeds but doesn't even know their names. While her influence may not have extended to national or state-level leadership, Indumati Devi firmly rooted the movement at the grassroots. She worked with dedication and discipline in forming rural Congress committees, recruiting members, joining processions, leading police station assaults, and delivering speeches at public gatherings. Her unwavering commitment and effectiveness impressed the Sub-Divisional Congress Committee, who elected her as the fourth Director of the committee during the Civil Disobedience Movement.³⁹ This appointment stands as a significant testament to her leadership success.

A mother's love and affection for her children are universal. Mothers always wish for their children to have enough to eat and live well. Indumati Devi, however, believed that her children would truly be "well-fed" only when Mother India was freed from the chains of colonial rule. She not only encouraged her children to join the national movement herself but taught and guided them in it. Whenever she saw processions marching with Congress flags, teeming with young boys, she would think to herself, "When I send my children to the freedom struggle as bravely as those Rajput women, I will become a warrior-mother too".⁴⁰ This sentiment reflects her extraordinary maternal love, deeply intertwined with her dedication to the nation.

Once, Indumati Devi's capable son, Shyamadas, joined Congress workers in Tamluk to intensify the Salt Law civil disobedience, and was arrested by the police. He was just 23 at the time. Reflecting on the event, Indumati Devi said, "I was pleased that, like the other boys, my son too had joined the freedom struggle".⁴¹ When satyagrahis were arrested by the British police during marches, they were forced to sign bonds before being released. Indumati Devi declared her intention to her son, "Even if they scratch your hand, you will not sign the bond".⁴² And that is exactly what happened. After meeting him in jail, she said firmly, "You must absolutely not give your bond".⁴³ Her son, unable to disobey his mother's command, endured a one-day imprisonment. This event both highlights her magnanimity as a mother and her intense yearning for the liberation of Mother India.

In the 1930s, a rural housewife whose movements never extended beyond her subdivision and who had no higher education nonetheless rose, on the strength of her own merit, to become a Director of the Sub-Divisional Samar Parishad. Not only that—defying social norms of female seclusion, she managed her household while going out day after day to villages, dedicating herself night and day to the cause of freeing the country—an achievement no less significant than those of national leaders. Why did she not lead any major nationwide movement? Or why did she not participate in post-Civil Disobedience national campaigns? These questions can be set aside when one recognizes that her leadership at the grassroots strengthened district, state, and even national movements. Her selfless sacrifice still fills the people of Panskura with pride. She remains an ideal and source of inspiration for every Bengali woman. She continues to live on in the depths of our hearts.

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