

## **India's Role in the Second World War and Its Struggle for Independence**

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### **Abstract**

India's participation in the Second World War (1939–1945) was both extensive and transformative, leaving a lasting impact on its political destiny and its struggle for freedom. Although India entered the war under British colonial rule without the consent of its leaders, the subcontinent became indispensable to the Allied war effort. India contributed the largest volunteer army in history, with over 2.5 million soldiers serving across diverse theaters, from North Africa and Europe to Southeast Asia. These soldiers played a critical role in halting Axis advances and safeguarding Allied supply lines, while India's geographical position made it a vital base for training, logistics, and communication.

Equally significant were India's economic and material contributions. The country supplied vast resources, including food grains, raw materials, and manufactured goods, while also financing the war through loans and sterling balances. However, these contributions came at a heavy human cost, exemplified by the Bengal Famine of 1943, which resulted in millions of deaths. At the same time, the contradiction of fighting for democracy abroad while living under colonial subjugation deepened nationalist sentiment at home. The Quit India Movement of 1942 and Subhas Chandra Bose's Indian National Army reflected two contrasting yet powerful responses to colonial domination. Ultimately, the war weakened Britain's hold and intensified India's demand for sovereignty, paving the way for independence in 1947.

**Keywords:** World War II, Indian independence, military contribution, economic support

### **Introduction**

India's involvement in the Second World War (1939–1945) represents a critical turning point in both global and national history, intertwining its colonial subjugation with its aspirations for freedom. As a colony of the British Empire, India did not enter the war by choice; the decision was unilaterally made by the British government, without consulting Indian political leaders or

the people. Yet, despite the absence of sovereignty, India emerged as an indispensable contributor to the Allied cause. On the military front, India provided the largest volunteer army in history, with more than 2.5 million soldiers serving across diverse theaters of war—from the deserts of North Africa and the mountains of Italy to the jungles of Burma and Malaya. These soldiers not only defended Allied positions but also played decisive roles in halting Axis advances in Asia, particularly against Japanese forces on India's eastern front. India's geographic position further enhanced its strategic importance, functioning as a hub for supply routes, training camps, and logistical operations that supported Allied campaigns in Asia and the Pacific. Alongside military service, India's economic and industrial capacities were redirected toward the war effort. The subcontinent supplied vast quantities of food grains, raw materials, and manufactured goods, while its ports, railways, and factories became central to Allied supply chains. However, this involvement was not without cost; inflation, food shortages, and the Bengal Famine of 1943 revealed the harsh impact of war and colonial extraction on the civilian population. Thus, India's role was both pivotal to Allied success and deeply intertwined with its own socio-political struggles.

At the same time, the Second World War intensified India's long-standing struggle for independence, creating both opportunities and contradictions that reshaped nationalist politics. Indian leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian National Congress opposed the unilateral declaration of war, demanding that participation must be tied to Britain's commitment to grant independence. Their demand was rejected, leading to heightened political tensions and the launch of the Quit India Movement in 1942, a nationwide campaign calling for an end to British rule. While the Congress pursued nonviolent resistance, leaders like Subhas Chandra Bose adopted a more radical approach, seeking international alliances and organizing the Indian National Army (INA) with Japanese support to fight against British forces. These parallel movements highlighted the growing determination of Indians to secure freedom, even as millions of soldiers fought under the British flag abroad. The paradox of Indians risking their lives for democratic ideals overseas while being denied those very rights at home sharpened nationalist consciousness and delegitimized colonial authority. By the end of the war, Britain was economically exhausted and politically weakened, while India had gained both the organizational strength of its independence movement and the moral legitimacy of its demand for sovereignty. The war thus accelerated the process of decolonization, making India's eventual independence in 1947 not merely a result of internal agitation but also a

consequence of global upheaval. In this sense, India's dual role in World War II—both as a key contributor to the Allied victory and as a nation advancing its own struggle for self-determination—marks the conflict as a decisive chapter in the making of modern India.

### **Overview of British Colonialism in India (1858–1939)**

The period between 1858 and 1939 marked the consolidation and expansion of British colonial rule in India, following the dissolution of the East India Company after the Revolt of 1857 and the formal transfer of power to the British Crown. The British Raj, established under Queen Victoria's Proclamation of 1858, ushered in a centralized and bureaucratic system of governance, with the Viceroy representing the British monarch and a complex administrative hierarchy overseeing the vast subcontinent. British colonial policies were driven by economic exploitation, political control, and cultural imperialism. The colonial administration restructured India's agrarian economy to suit British industrial interests, leading to the commercialization of agriculture, land revenue systems like the Zamindari and Ryotwari, and recurring famines due to food insecurity and cash crop dependency. The industrial development of India was systematically stifled to promote British manufacturing exports, turning India into a supplier of raw materials and a market for finished goods. Politically, while the British introduced modern legal and civil services, these institutions were designed to reinforce imperial authority rather than empower Indians.



The socio-cultural landscape saw deep interventions through English education, missionary activity, and efforts to "civilize" Indian society, often undermining indigenous traditions and fueling socio-religious reform movements. Simultaneously, the 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed the emergence of Indian nationalism, spurred by increasing awareness of economic exploitation and racial discrimination. The foundation of the Indian National Congress in 1885 marked the beginning of organized political resistance, which evolved from petitions and reformist appeals to mass-based movements under leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi, and Jawaharlal Nehru. Events such as the Partition of Bengal (1905), the Jallianwala Bagh massacre (1919), and repressive laws like the Rowlatt Act exposed the oppressive nature of colonial rule and galvanized public opinion. By the 1930s, despite the Government of India Act of 1935 promising limited provincial autonomy, Indians were disillusioned by continued imperial control. Thus, by 1939, on the eve of World War II, British colonialism in India had become an increasingly untenable enterprise, facing rising internal dissent, economic discontent, and a powerful nationwide demand for complete independence.

### **Global Political Climate Leading Up to World War II**

The global political climate leading up to World War II was marked by deep-seated tensions, ideological conflicts, and the unresolved grievances of World War I, which collectively created a volatile international environment. The Treaty of Versailles (1919), which ended World War I, imposed harsh reparations and territorial losses on Germany, fostering resentment and a desire for revenge among its population. This dissatisfaction laid the foundation for the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party, who capitalized on nationalist sentiment, economic despair, and anti-Semitic propaganda to establish a totalitarian regime. Simultaneously, fascist ideologies took hold in Italy under Benito Mussolini and in Spain under Francisco Franco, where authoritarian rule was consolidated through violence and suppression. In the East, Japan's imperial ambitions grew unchecked, as it invaded Manchuria in 1931 and later launched a full-scale war against China in 1937, aiming to dominate Asia and secure vital resources. The global economic depression of the 1930s intensified instability, unemployment, and social unrest, leading to a widespread erosion of faith in democratic institutions and the rise of extremist movements. Meanwhile, the League of Nations, established to ensure peace, proved ineffective in curbing aggression due to its lack of enforcement power and the absence of major powers like the United States. Britain and France, haunted by the horrors of World War I, adopted a policy of appeasement, allowing Germany to rearm, annex Austria in the

Anschluss (1938), and occupy Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland without consequence. This diplomatic leniency emboldened Hitler further, culminating in the Nazi-Soviet Pact (1939), a non-aggression agreement between Germany and the USSR, which cleared the path for the invasion of Poland. The invasion on September 1, 1939, prompted Britain and France to declare war on Germany, officially igniting World War II. During this pre-war period, ideological divides between democracy, fascism, and communism were stark, and the world stood increasingly polarized. Colonial powers like Britain and France also began reinforcing their imperial holdings, sensing global upheaval. As the crisis deepened, nations braced for another catastrophic war, unaware that it would soon become the deadliest conflict in human history and profoundly reshape global geopolitics and the colonial order.

### **India's Socio-Economic Condition in the 1930s–40s**

India's socio-economic condition in the 1930s and 1940s was characterized by widespread poverty, economic stagnation, and deep social disparities, all exacerbated by the oppressive mechanisms of British colonial rule. The global Great Depression of the early 1930s severely impacted India's agrarian economy, causing sharp declines in agricultural prices, a fall in rural incomes, and increased indebtedness among farmers. Despite being predominantly an agrarian society, Indian peasants suffered due to exploitative land revenue systems like Zamindari and Ryotwari, which prioritized the interests of colonial administrators and landlords over cultivators. Industrial growth remained sluggish, with limited development in sectors like textiles, steel, and mining, primarily serving British interests. Small-scale industries and traditional crafts continued to decline under competition from machine-made British goods. Unemployment, especially among the urban poor and educated youth, was rampant, while inflation and rising costs of essential goods created further hardship. The 1930s also witnessed growing labor unrest, as workers in industries like jute, cotton, and railways protested for better wages and conditions, giving rise to stronger trade union movements. Socially, India remained stratified along caste, class, and gender lines, with marginalized communities facing systemic discrimination. Women had limited access to education, property rights, or employment, though reformist movements and the national struggle gradually brought their issues into the political foreground. The onset of World War II in 1939 intensified these challenges. British wartime policies drained Indian resources—both human and material—without adequate investment in domestic welfare. Massive procurement for the war effort led to food shortages and hoarding, culminating in the horrific Bengal Famine of 1943, which killed an estimated



three million people. Urban centers like Calcutta saw a surge in slums and homelessness, while health crises, malnutrition, and disease became widespread. Meanwhile, political unrest was growing, as the gap between British imperial promises and Indian realities widened. Nationalist leaders condemned the exploitation and demanded self-rule as a solution to chronic underdevelopment. In sum, the socio-economic landscape of India in the 1930s–40s was marked by deprivation, inequality, and unrest—conditions that not only fueled anti-colonial sentiment but also highlighted the urgent need for political and economic transformation through independence.

### **Literature Review**

**Chandra, B., Mukherjee, M., et al (2016).** India's struggle for independence was a long and arduous journey that spanned several decades, culminating in the country gaining freedom from British colonial rule on August 15, 1947. The movement began in the late 19th century, fueled by growing discontent against British policies, economic exploitation, and social injustices. Key figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel emerged, advocating for nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience. The Indian National Congress played a pivotal role, mobilizing mass support and uniting diverse groups against colonial oppression.

**Guha, R. (2017).** After Gandhi's assassination in 1948, India embarked on a transformative journey as the world's largest democracy, navigating the complexities of nation-building and socio-political challenges. The adoption of the Constitution in 1950 established India as a sovereign, secular, and democratic republic, enshrining fundamental rights and promoting social justice. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister, emphasized industrialization, scientific progress, and a non-aligned foreign policy, positioning India as a leader in the developing world. However, the nation faced numerous hurdles, including religious tensions, regional disparities, and economic inequalities.

**Corbridge, S., & Harriss, J. (2013).** "Reinventing India: Liberalization, Hindu nationalism, and popular democracy" reflects the complex socio-political landscape of India since the economic reforms of the 1990s. The liberalization policy, aimed at opening the economy to global markets, catalyzed significant economic growth, urbanization, and the emergence of a burgeoning middle class. This economic transformation altered the aspirations of millions, leading to demands for greater political representation and social mobility. Concurrently, the

rise of Hindu nationalism, particularly under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), reshaped the political narrative, emphasizing cultural identity and religion in governance.

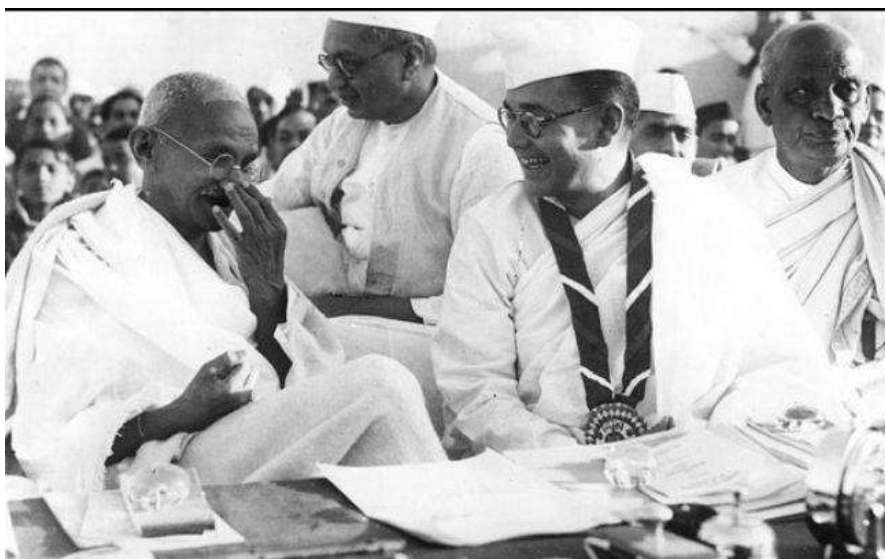
**Deloria, V. (2010).** "Behind the Trail of Broken Treaties: An Indian Declaration of Independence" highlights the historical injustices faced by Indigenous peoples in their quest for sovereignty and recognition. Throughout history, numerous treaties made between Indigenous nations and colonial governments were systematically broken, leading to the erosion of land, resources, and cultural heritage. This declaration serves as a poignant reminder of the promises made and subsequently betrayed, emphasizing the need for accountability and reparative justice. It articulates the collective desire for self-determination, cultural preservation, and the restoration of rights that have been denied. By reaffirming their identity and sovereignty, Indigenous communities challenge the dominant narratives that have marginalized their voices. This declaration calls for a renewed commitment to honoring treaties and fostering genuine partnerships based on mutual respect. It seeks to inspire solidarity and support for Indigenous struggles, advocating for a future where rights, dignity, and justice are upheld for all.

**Wolpert, S. (2009).** "Shameful Flight: The Last Years of the British Empire in India" encapsulates the turbulent and chaotic period leading to India's independence in 1947. As World War II drained Britain's resources and weakened its imperial hold, the Indian independence movement gained unprecedented momentum, driven by leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. The British response was marked by a mixture of repression and half-hearted reforms, exemplified by the brutal crackdown on the Quit India Movement in 1942. The ensuing years witnessed widespread unrest, communal tensions, and the horrors of partition, which led to the displacement and violence that claimed millions of lives. The British withdrawal was characterized by a desperate scramble to exit, leaving behind a fractured society and unresolved issues.

### **Role of the Indian National Congress and Major Political Players**

During the 1930s and 1940s, the Indian National Congress (INC) played a pivotal role in shaping the country's political landscape and galvanizing the masses in the struggle for independence from British colonial rule. As the principal nationalist organization, the Congress transitioned from moderate demands for constitutional reform to full-fledged campaigns for complete independence. Under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, the INC embraced the philosophy of nonviolent resistance, which became the cornerstone of mass movements such

as the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–34) and the Quit India Movement (1942). Gandhi's moral authority, commitment to Satyagraha (truth-force), and emphasis on rural upliftment and social reform mobilized millions across caste, class, and gender lines, making nationalism a truly popular movement. Jawaharlal Nehru, emerging as a prominent leader during this period, advocated for socialism, industrial modernization, and secular democracy. As Congress President and later as Gandhi's political heir, Nehru played a key role in articulating a vision of post-independence India that emphasized planned development and social justice.



Meanwhile, Subhas Chandra Bose represented a more radical and militant strand within the Congress. Though he initially worked within the party, Bose's insistence on immediate and aggressive action against British rule led to ideological clashes with Gandhi and Nehru. After resigning from Congress leadership in 1939, Bose pursued international alliances to secure India's freedom, ultimately forming the Indian National Army (INA) with support from Axis powers. His charismatic leadership and wartime mobilization of expatriate Indians in Southeast Asia left a lasting legacy of patriotic fervor, even though his methods differed sharply from those of Gandhi. Apart from these towering figures, other leaders like Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, and Dr. Rajendra Prasad also played crucial roles in organizing Congress campaigns, negotiating with the British, and maintaining unity within a politically diverse movement. The INC's refusal to support the British war effort without a clear promise of independence led to confrontations like the Quit India Movement, where most of its leadership was imprisoned. Despite internal ideological differences, the collective efforts of



Congress leaders significantly eroded British control and prepared the foundation for a sovereign, democratic India.

### **India as a Base for Allied Operations in Asia**

During World War II, India emerged as a crucial strategic base for Allied military operations in Asia, serving as a vital logistical hub, troop staging ground, and supply depot in the fight against Axis powers, particularly Japan. Its geographic location made it indispensable for launching campaigns in Southeast Asia, Burma (now Myanmar), and China. The British colonial government, without consulting Indian leaders, committed India's resources and manpower to the war effort, turning the country into a military powerhouse under Allied command. Massive infrastructure developments took place to support wartime needs—airfields were built, roads and railways expanded, and ports upgraded to facilitate the movement of troops, arms, and equipment. Cities like Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, and Assam became focal points for Allied logistics and intelligence operations. India housed major military bases, supply depots, and hospitals, playing a critical role in the China-Burma-India (CBI) theater. From airbases in eastern India, the Allied forces—especially the U.S. Army Air Forces—conducted the perilous "Hump" airlift operations over the Himalayas to supply Chinese forces resisting Japanese occupation. Indian territory also hosted training camps for British, American, Chinese, and Indian troops, with thousands of Indian soldiers participating in the grueling Burma campaign to halt the Japanese advance. These operations were not without consequence for Indian civilians. Wartime requisitioning, inflation, forced labor, and displacement were widespread, contributing to economic distress and the Bengal Famine of 1943. The presence of large numbers of foreign troops introduced new cultural influences and disrupted traditional social structures. The militarization of Indian society deepened nationalist sentiment, as many Indians grew resentful of being treated as tools in a foreign war while being denied political autonomy. The strategic use of India in the Allied campaign demonstrated its immense value on the global stage and heightened Indian aspirations for self-determination. Ironically, while India was indispensable to the Allied victory in Asia, it remained under colonial rule throughout the war. This contradiction further delegitimized British authority and strengthened the call for independence, particularly after Indian soldiers returned home with heightened political awareness and a renewed sense of national pride born from their wartime contributions.

### **Conclusion**

India's role in the Second World War was not merely that of a passive colony obeying imperial orders, but of an active participant whose military and economic contributions shaped the course of the conflict and influenced its own national destiny. With more than 2.5 million soldiers serving across multiple war fronts, India provided the largest volunteer force in history, strengthening Allied operations in North Africa, Europe, and Asia. Simultaneously, the subcontinent's vast economic resources—food, raw materials, industrial goods, and financial reserves—sustained Britain's war effort at critical moments. Yet, these contributions came at an immense human cost, as heavy taxation, inflation, and the Bengal Famine of 1943 exposed the exploitative nature of colonial wartime policies.

Equally significant was the war's impact on India's political struggle. The paradox of Indians sacrificing their lives for democratic freedoms abroad while being denied the same at home sharpened the demand for independence. The Quit India Movement of 1942 and the rise of Subhas Chandra Bose's Indian National Army demonstrated the intensity of nationalist aspirations, each challenging British authority in distinct ways. By 1945, Britain was weakened, while India's political resolve had only strengthened. Thus, the war not only accelerated the decline of British imperial power but also gave decisive momentum to India's independence movement, culminating in freedom in 1947.

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