

# Aruna Asaf Ali

Aruna Asaf Ali was a freedom fighter who rose to prominence during the Quit India Movement. She is known as the 'Grand Old Lady of Indian Independence' for her role in the freedom struggle.

This article will give details about Aruna Asaf Ali within the context of the IAS Exam

## The early life of Asaf Ali

Aruna Asaf Ali was born Aruna Ganguly on 16 July 1909, in Kalka Punjab (now a part of the Haryana state). Her parents were Upendranath Ganguly and Ambalika Devi. Ambalika Devi was the daughter Trailokyanath Sanyal was a prominent leader of the Brahmo Samaj

Aruna completed her education at the Sacred Heart Convent in Lahore and All Saints College in Nanital. Upon her graduation, she worked as a teacher at the Gokhale Memorial School in Calcutta where she would meet Asaf Ali, a leader in the Indian National Congress (Founded on December 28, 1885). Despite familial opposition, they both got married and she would become an active participant during the independence struggle.

## Role of Aruna Asaf Ali in the Indian Freedom Struggle

Aruna Asaf Ali participated in a number of public processions during the Salt Satyagraha and arrested under many trumped-up charges.

Despite the Gandhi-Irwin Pact that promised release of all political parties, she was still not released in 1931. A public agitation by other women freedom fighters and direct intervention by Mahatma Gandhi himself would secure her release later.

While serving her jail sentence at Tihar Jail she protested against the severe treatment meted out to political prisoners by launching a hunger strike. While it did result in some improvement at Tihar Jail, she was shifted to Ambala and placed in solitary confinement. Upon release, she was not politically active but at the end of 1942 she became an active member of the underground movement

## Contribution to the Quit India Movement

The All India Congress Committee passed the Quit India resolution on August 8, 1942. In response, the colonial government arrested major leaders of the movement in order to pre-emptively collapse the movement. Despite major leaders and many workers of the party being in jail, Aruna Asaf Ali led the remainder of the party and unfurled the Congress flag at Gowalia Tank Maidan, marking the beginning of the Quit India Movement.

The police fired upon the assembly but Aruna stood her ground in the face of danger and for this she was called the Grand Old Lady of the Independence movement in her later years. The lack of senior leadership did little to stem the tide of nationalism as protests and demonstrations broke out throughout the country.

An arrest warrant was issued in her name but she went underground during which she edited the magazine Inquilab, a monthly magazine of the Congress party. She continued to exhort the youth to fight for independence not through passive activism but through active revolution. The British announced a reward of Rs.5000 for her capture. Despite Mahatma Gandhi urging to surrender, stating that she had done her duty to the cause, she only came out of hiding once the arrest warrant in her name was withdrawn in 1946.

## Life Post-Independence and Legacy

Aruna Asaf Ali was a member of the Congress Socialist Party, a caucus within the Congress Party for activists with socialist-leaning before leaving it and joining the Communist Party of India (CPI) in the 1950s. On the personal front, she was bereaved when Asaf Ali died in 1953.

In 1954, she helped form the National Federation of Indian Women, the women's wing of CPI but left the party in 1956 following Nikita Khrushchev's rise, upon the death of Joseph Stalin. In 1958, she was elected the first Mayor of Delhi. She was closely associated with social activists and secularists of her era like Krishna Menon, Vimla Kapoor, Guru Radha Kishan and Premnagar Gupta

Despite reservations about the emergency, she remained close to Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi.

She died in New Delhi on 29 July 1996, aged 87.

She was awarded India's second-highest civilian honour, the Padma Vibhushan in her lifetime in 1992, and finally the highest civilian award, the Bharat Ratna, posthumously in 1997. All India Minorities Front distributes the Dr Aruna Asaf Ali Sadbhawana Award annually.