

REV. MADAM CAMA (1861-1936)  
MADAMA BHIKAJI CAMA  
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# THE INSPIRING STORY OF BHIKHAJI CAMA

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Madame Cama holding her flag of Indian Independence. Painting by Cumi Dallas (1972). Image credit: Dadi Pudumjee.

THE INSPIRING STORY OF  
BHIKHAIJI CAMA (1861-1936)  
MOTHER OF THE INDIAN INDEPENDENCE  
REVOLUTION

(Abridged Version)

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*Cover Image: Painting of Bhikhaiji Cama holding her flag of Indian independence. Oil painting by Cumi Dallas (1972). Credit: Dadi Pudumjee. The Indian Parliament's Rajya Sabha's web-site states that this portrait of Bhikhaiji Cama was donated by the Parsi Pragati Mandal, Surat. The site also states that the portrait is housed in the parliamentary museum and archives. Archives are often housed in remote areas not within the view of normal parliamentary traffic. If so, that is regrettable. The painting rightly deserves a place in the main halls of the parliament buildings.*

*Zoroastrian Heritage Articles*

# The Inspiring Story of Bhikhaiji Cama (1861-1936)

## Mother of the Indian Independence Revolution

### 1. Bhikhaiji Cama's Early Life

Bhikhaiji Cama was born to Sorabji and Jaijibai Patel, a wealthy Bombay family, on September 24, 1861. She was schooled at the Alexandra Native Girl's English Institution, a school built in 1863 by Manockjee Cursetjee Shroff (1808–1887), a reformer and outspoken champion of female education.



Alexandra Native Girls' English Institution, Waudby Road (now Hazarimal Somani Marg), Bombay/Mumbai, India. From *Leaves from the Life of Khan Bahadur Muncherji Cowasjee Murzban* (c.1880) p.56.

In 1885, Bhikhaiji married Rustam Cama, a lawyer and son of the famed Kharshedji Rustomji Cama, patron of the K. R. Cama Institute of Oriental Studies. 1885 was also the year the Indian National Congress held its first meeting – a meeting Bhikhaiji attended and a harbinger of the cause to which she would dedicate her life.



Photograph taken during Bhikhaiji Cama's wedding. Standing second from left is Bhikhaiji's husband Rustamji Cama. Perhaps the woman sitting in front of him is Bhikhaiji.

## 2. Social Work Nursing Plague Victims

In September 1896, a famine followed by a plague epidemic struck Bombay. In the first year of the plague, a research laboratory to examine the disease and cures was set up at the Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy (J. J.) Hospital in Bombay.

Bhikhaiji joined a team caring for the afflicted at the Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy Hospital and Grant Medical College complex.

Unfortunately, she contracted the plague herself and survived only to be so weakened that in 1902, she had to move to London for medical care.



Caring for victims of the plague in Bombay/Mumbai.

## 3. Bhikhaiji's Political Activities in London

In London, Bhikhaiji met well-known Indian nationalist Shyamji Varma and Dadabhai Naoroji, then President of the Indian National Congress' British Committee. [Earlier, Dadabhai Naoroji had moved to London to work in the Cama family's London office, the first Indian business firm in England. He went on to start his own business and then successfully sought election as a member of the British House of Commons.] Bhikhaiji became Naoroji's secretary and in February 1905, both of them lent their support to the founding of Shyamji Varma Indian Home Rule Society.

While in London, Bhikhaiji also delivered fiery speeches advocating Indian independence and freedom at London's Hyde Park. We get a sense of her strident views on Indian independence in the slogan she coined for herself, "Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God."

The Open University states her address in London was 44 St. Marks Road.

## 4. Bhikhaiji's Flag of Indian Independence. Call for Human Rights

On August 22, 1907, Bhikhaiji attended the International Socialist Conference in Stuttgart, Germany, where she described the devastation wrought by the famine and plague she had experienced in India.

[British Labour leader Ramsay MacDonald (who became Prime Minister of Britain in 1924, from 1929 to 1931, and from 1931 to 1935) opposed her being allowed to address the Stuttgart conference, but another British delegate Jorris demanded she "be allowed to continue".]

When she appealed for the gathering to support her call for human rights, equality and Indian independence from



Bhikhaiji Cama holding her flag of Indian Independence. Location, date and other details not known. Cumi Dallas' 1972 portrait of Bhikhaiji appears to be based on this photograph.

Great Britain, she wrapped herself with a flag she had made proclaiming, “This flag is of Indian Independence! Behold, it is born! It has been made sacred by the blood of young Indians who sacrificed their lives. I call upon you to rise and salute the flag of Indian independence. I appeal to lovers of freedom all over the world to support this flag.”

## 5. Who Designed Bhikhaiji’s Flag of Indian Independence?

While several authors claim that the flag Bhikhaiji unfurled at Stuttgart was based on an earlier design made by others, they provide nothing tangible to substantiate their claims and we have yet to see anything that demonstrates that Bhikhaiji’s Stuttgart flag was made by anyone other than herself.

In Stuttgart, Bhikhaiji did state, “This flag is of Indian Independence! Behold, it is born!” She would hardly have made such a categorical and dramatic statement about its birth if the flag had been ‘born’ elsewhere at an earlier date.



Bhikhaiji Cama’s flag being feted at the Kesari-Maratha Library in Pune, India. Credit: Savarkar.org.

Further, if the flag already existed in India, Indulal Yagnik, the socialist leader of Gujarat, who hardly have found it necessary to smuggle Bhikhaiji Cama’s Flag of Indian Independence into India. Her flag now resides in the Kesari-Maratha Library in Pune, India. It eventually evolved into the national flag of India.

## 6. Bhikhaiji Moves to Paris

After the 1907 Stuttgart conference, Cama traveled extensively delivering lectures advocating Indian independence and women’s rights, seeking to gain public support for her cause while mobilizing public opinion against British rule in India. Bhikhaiji did not shy away from espousing Indian independence through revolutionary means.



Bhikhaiji Cama holding her flag while posing with Indian lawyer and political activist Sardarsingh Rana in Paris.

A sample of her writing reads as follows, “*Some of you say that as a woman, I should object to violence. Well, I had that feeling at one time, but that feeling is gone. If we use force, it is because we are forced to use force. Struggle for freedom calls for exceptional measures. Successful rebellion against foreign rule is patriotism... we want back our own country. No English oak is wanted in India. We have our own noble banyan tree and our beautiful lotus flowers... let our motto be ‘We are all for India, India for Indians.’*”

The British government became increasingly alarmed at her activities and we read of threats of arrest and deportation to India (and possible imprisonment). Consequently, she moved to Paris on May 1, 1909 where her home at 25, Rue de Ponthieu, became the headquarters for Indian independence advocates. She and Munchersshah Burjorji Godrej also co-founded the Paris Indian Society.

### (i) Bhikhaiji Publishes the Weekly Bande Mataram

In Paris, Bhikhaiji launched, wrote, published and distributed revolutionary literature in collaboration with her fellow revolutionaries and she had her publications printed in various cities across Europe. In September 1909, Bhikhaiji launched a weekly periodical named 'Bande Mataram'.

Bande Mataram's inaugural issue commemorated the martyrdom of Madan Lal Dhingra who was hung by the British for his assassination of Sir Curzon Wylie in London on July 1, 1909. Wylie was the Secretary of State for India, Lord George Hamilton's (1895–1903), political aide-de-camp.

The British had banned the nationalist poem titled 'Vande Mataram' (Glory to the Motherland) and they banned Bhikhaiji's publications from being imported into India as well. Regardless, her publications were smuggled into India via the French colony of Pondicherry. Bhikhaiji was nevertheless assisted by a revolutionary from Madras, M. P. T. Acharya, in Bande Mataram's distribution both in Pondicherry and amongst soldiers of the Indian Army.



### (ii) Bhikhaiji's Pondicherry Connection

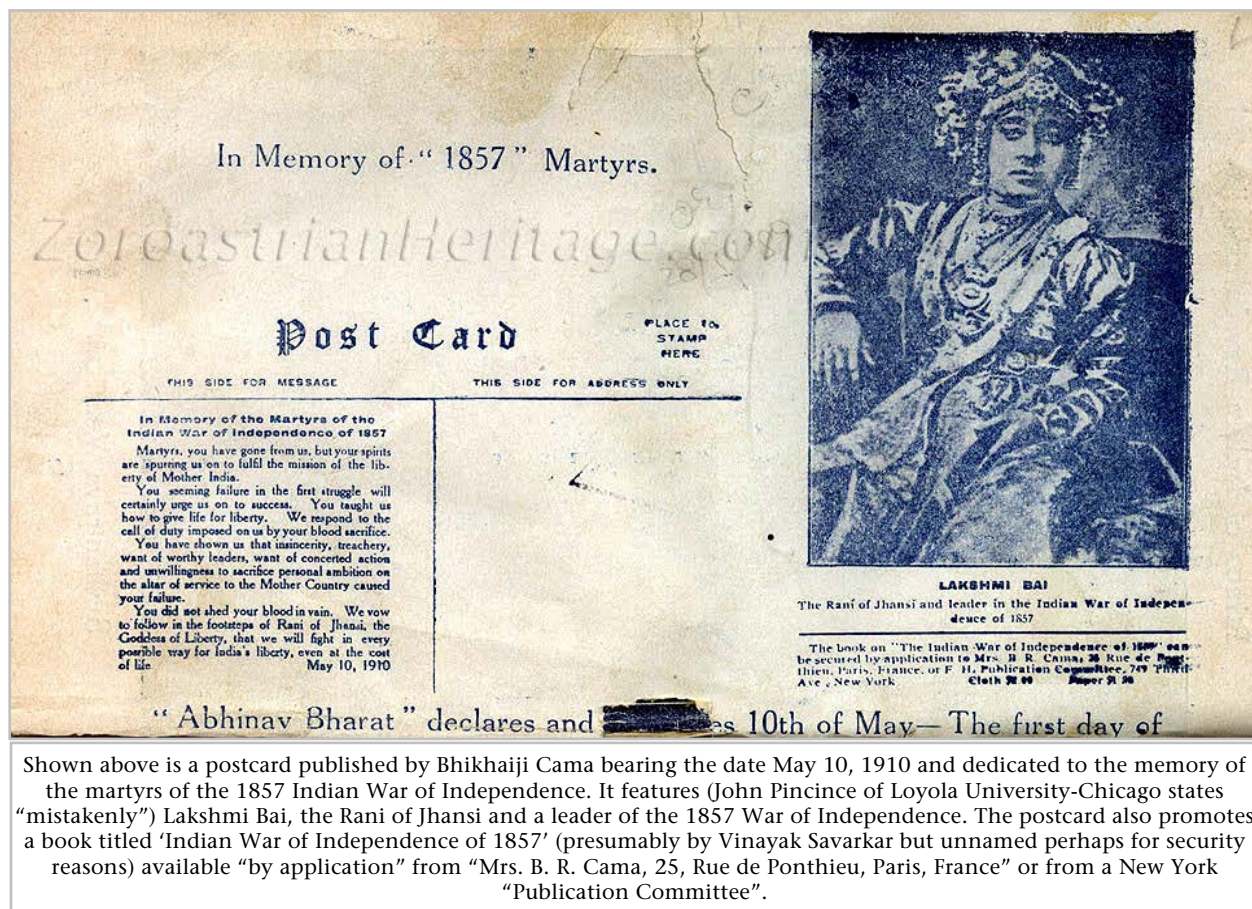
S. Lal writes that Bhikhaiji Cama developed the backdoor Pondicherry route for smuggling revolutionary material into India by joining the French Socialist party in 1910. When she heard the British were pressuring the French to arrest or curtail the activities of anti-British Indian revolutionaries in Pondicherry, "she sent Paul Richard", a French socialist barrister, to Pondicherry with a letter of introduction to other Indian revolutionaries that he may establish close links with them and plan ways to harass India's British administrators. Paul Richard arrived in Pondicherry in 1910 ostensibly to campaign on behalf of a candidate seeking Pondicherry's seat in the French Assembly. Richard also used his influence with the French Government to rebuff the British demands for arrest of Indian revolutionaries and the confiscation of Cama's publications.

### (iii) Bhikhaiji Publishes the Weekly Madan's Talwar

In 1909, Bhikhaiji Cama had launched another weekly called 'Madan's Talwar' that memorialized Madan Lal Dhingra's name. This weekly's target audience were Indian sepoys serving in the British Indian Army.

### (iv) Bhikhaiji's Home Becomes a Centre for Publishing Indian Revolutionary Literature

Bhikhaiji employed various communication means for advocating Indian independence including the publication of postcards. In addition, she promoted revolutionary literature written by others – publications such as Vinayak Savarkar's 'Indian War of Independence of 1857'. We read that Savarkar's "original Marathi manuscript was kept in the safe custody of Madame Cama in Paris." Later, she gave the manuscript to Dr. Coutinho of the Abhinav



Shown above is a postcard published by Bhikhaiji Cama bearing the date May 10, 1910 and dedicated to the memory of the martyrs of the 1857 Indian War of Independence. It features (John Pincince of Loyola University-Chicago states "mistakenly") Lakshmi Bai, the Rani of Jhansi and a leader of the 1857 War of Independence. The postcard also promotes a book titled 'Indian War of Independence of 1857' (presumably by Vinayak Savarkar but unnamed perhaps for security reasons) available "by application" from "Mrs. B. R. Cama, 25, Rue de Ponthieu, Paris, France" or from a New York "Publication Committee".

Bharat society, a secret organization founded by Savarkar between 1903 and 1905. Bhikhaiji was apparently a member of the Abhinav Bharat and had taken an oath under its revolutionary banner to fight the "British tyrants until death or victory". Author S. Lal asserts that she established her New India Society (later known as the Paris India Society) on the lines of the Abhinav Bharat.

Bhikhaiji's prolific publishing of revolutionary material made her home in Paris a hub for the publication and promotion of Indian revolutionary literature. During her stay in Paris, Bhikhaiji Cama was for all practical purposes the Indian independence movement's publisher.

#### (v) British Demand for Extradition & Confiscation of Bhikhaiji's Assets

In 1910, the British Government asked France for her extradition, a petition the French rejected. The British also confiscated all of Bhikhaiji's assets in India.

#### (vi) Bhikhaiji's Internment

After the start of World War I in 1914, France now Britain's ally, briefly jailed Bhikhaiji in October 1914 when she tried to instigate troops of Punjab Regiment who had just arrived in Marseilles on their way to the battlefield. Later, the French Government sent Bhikhaiji to Vichy where she was again interned. She was eventually released in November 1917 on the condition that she report to the police weekly. After the war ended, Bhikhaiji returned to her Paris home and resumed her political and revolutionary activities.



## 7. Bhikhaiji's Mythical Reputation Grows

Bhikhaiji soon earned a mythical reputation. The Russians called her India's Joan of Arc while Indians called her the "Mother of the Revolution".

In a Parsi Khabar article we read that "according to the History Sheet of the Criminal Intelligence Office of the Home Department (Political) of the Government of India in 1913" Bhikhaiji was recognized as one of the leaders of the Indian revolutionary movement based in Paris. Hindus also regarded her "as a reincarnation of some deity, presumably Kali."



Bhikhaiji Cama.

## 8. Bhikhaiji's Call for Universal Suffrage

Bhikhaiji's call for Indian independence and human rights included a call for universal suffrage. In 1920, she exhorted two Parsi women champions of voting rights, Herabai and Mithan Tata, to "work for India's freedom and independence. When India is independent, women will not only [have] the right to vote, but all other rights."

## 9. A Lonely Bhikhaiji Misses Home

Banned from returning to her beloved India, Bhikhaiji was lonely and homesick as she turned sixty. She missed her family and longed to see their photographs. Forlorn, she neglected her appearance and looked haggard. Cut off by the British from her wealth, she depended on her brother Ardeshir Patel for funds. When he died, she sank into poverty. Then fate dealt her a final cruel blow. An accident cracked her skull and left her face paralysed.

## 10. Bhikhaiji's Last Days

Bhikhaiji petitioned the British government through Sir Cowasji Jehangir to permit her to return home to die. They acceded to the request on the condition that she renounced her nationalist activities – a demand that was entirely moot given her worsening ill health.

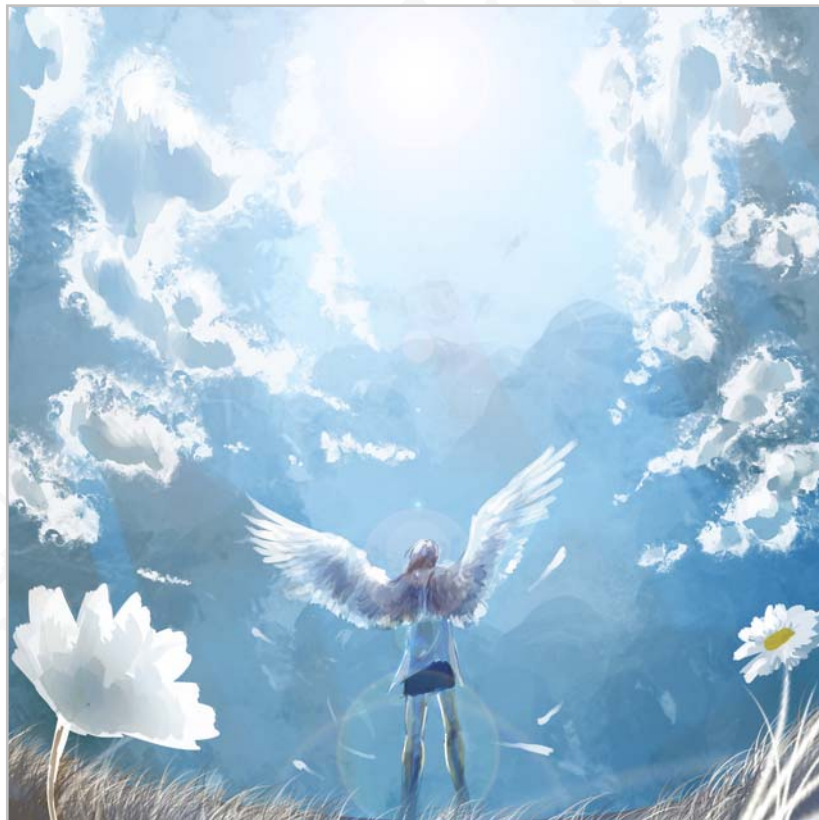
Accompanied by Cowasji Jehangir, Bhikhaiji arrived in Bombay in November 1935. Largely ignored, nine months later, on August 13, 1936, Bhikhaiji, aged 75, passed away at the Parsi General Hospital.

In an article titled "The Passing Away of Madame Cama" published in the Kaiser-e-Hind Harindranath Chattopadhyaya (1898–1990) wrote, "For I read yesterday in the paper that Madame Cama at the age of seventy-five, signed an agreement with the [British] Government that she would not take part in politics, nor speak anywhere. And it was on such an understanding that she was allowed to come back to the country of her love longing and birth, not to live there indeed, but to pass away, breathing her last breath on Indian air, almost with a mystical hope that it might mingle with the winds of freedom about to blow over India!"

## 11. Bhikhaiji Cama's Legacy

The cause to which she had devoted her life, however, survived and thrived. That cause was not just the independence of the Indian sub-continent but the emancipation of women as well.

According to the Fall 1994 FEZANA Journal, "Bhikhaiji Cama lived her life as a deeply religious person who believed in the teachings of Prophet Zarathushtra to fight against injustice." At "the Framji Nusserwanjee Patel Agiary at Mazgaon, a ceremony is performed every year to remember her life as a courageous and true Zarathushtrian and patriot."



A Fravashi is alight. Image: Breath of Life by Amidarosa at deviantart.com.

