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Bhikaiji Cama: Mother of the Indian Revolution

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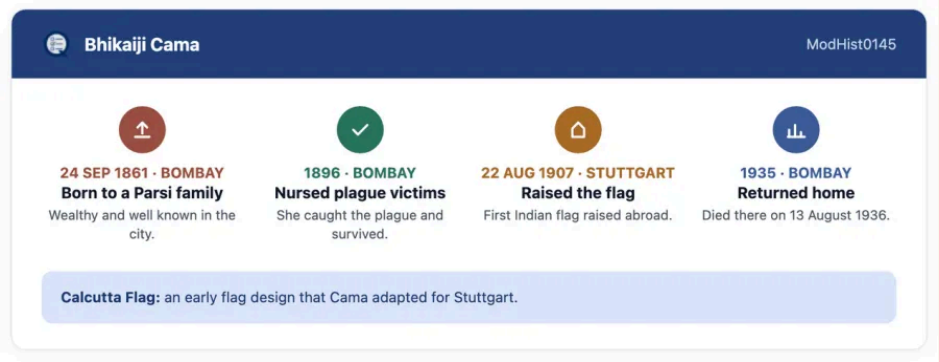
Bhikaiji Cama: Mother of the Indian Revolution

On 22 August 1907, a Parsi woman stood up at a socialist congress in Stuttgart. She raised a flag that no government had approved.

She was Bhikaiji Cama. She spent about thirty years in exile, and she ran a revolutionary press from Paris.



Bhikaiji Cama. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.



Four turning points in the life of Bhikaiji Cama.

> **Born.** 24 September 1861, Bombay.
> **Family.** A rich Parsi family.
> **Flag.** Stuttgart, 22 August 1907.
> **Base.** Paris and London.
> **Press.** Bande Mataram and Madan's Talwar.
> **Died.** 13 August 1936, Bombay.

Calcutta Flag: an early flag design that Cama adapted for Stuttgart.

Exile: living outside your country because you cannot return safely.

Parsi: a member of the Zoroastrian community of India.

1 Who was Bhikaiji Cama?

She grew up rich and chose a hard road.

- She was born on **24 September 1861** in Bombay.
- Her family was large, rich and Parsi.
- Her parents were Sorabji Framji Patel and Jaijibai Sorabji Patel.
- Her father was a lawyer by training and a merchant by trade.
- She studied at Alexandra Girls' English Institution.

- She was a diligent child with a gift for languages.
- She also played cricket well.
- On 3 August 1885 she married Rustomji Cama.
- He was a rich, pro-British lawyer who wanted a career in politics.
- The marriage was not happy.
- Her husband's family was loyal to the British.
- She spent most of her time on charity and social work.

> **Quick check 1.** Bhikaiji Cama was born in Bombay into a rich Parsi family. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

2 How did the plague change her life?

Nursing the sick led her away from India.

- In **October 1896** famine and then plague hit the Bombay Presidency.
- She joined a team of nurses working out of Grant Medical College.
- They cared for the sick and later inoculated the healthy.
- She caught the plague herself, but she survived.
- She was left very weak.
- Her illness pushed her towards a new life abroad.
- In 1902 she was sent to Britain for medical care.
- She meant to return to India in 1904.
- Instead she met Shyamji Krishna Varma in London.
- He was known for fiery nationalist speeches in Hyde Park.

3 How did she join the London circle?

She became part of the early nationalist network abroad.

- Varma introduced her to **Dadabhai Naoroji**.
- Naoroji led the British Committee of the Indian National Congress.
- He strongly criticised British economic policy in India.
- She worked as his private secretary.
- She also campaigned with Bipin Chandra Pal, Lala Hardayal and V. D. Savarkar.
- In February 1905 she helped back Varma's Indian Home Rule Society.
- She was warned that she could not return to India unless she stopped.
- She refused.
- She chose exile over silence.
- That same year she moved to Paris.

4 What happened at Stuttgart?

She raised a flag of Indian independence on foreign soil.

- On **22 August 1907** she attended the Socialist Congress at Stuttgart, Germany.
- Hemchandra Kanungo went with her.
- She described the terrible effects of famine in India.
- She appealed for human rights, equality and freedom from British rule.
- She unfurled what she called the Flag of Indian Independence.
- She was the first person to hoist an Indian flag in a foreign country.
- Her flag was a change to the **Calcutta Flag**.
- Its green, yellow and red bands stood for Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism.
- It carried Vande Mataram, a crescent, a sun and eight lotuses.
- The eight lotuses stood for the provinces of British India.

5 What did she do in exile?

She printed, smuggled and organised from Paris.

- In Paris she co-founded the **Paris Indian Society**.
- Her partners were S. R. Rana and Munchershah Burjorji Godrej.
- They published revolutionary papers in the Netherlands and Switzerland.
- The papers included Bande Mataram and, later, Madan's Talwar.
- Britain and India banned them.
- They were smuggled into India through the French colony of Pondicherry.

- In 1909 Madan Lal Dhingra shot William Hutt Curzon Wyllie.
- Britain asked France to hand her over, but France refused.
- Britain then seized her inheritance.
- Lenin is said to have invited her to live in the Soviet Union, but she declined.
- In 1910 she spoke in Cairo and asked where the women of Egypt were.
- She believed women would win every right once India was free.
- In 1914 she was briefly arrested at Marseilles.
- She had tried to stir up Indian troops arriving there.
- She was made to leave Marseilles and moved to Arcachon, near Bordeaux.
- From January 1915 to November 1917 she was interned at Vichy.
- After release she had to report weekly to the police in Bordeaux.

6 What are the exam traps?

Exams often confuse her flag with later ones.

- Her flag is **not** the final national flag.
- Pingali Venkayya's design came decades later.
- The Stuttgart event was in Germany, not Bombay or London.
- She was a Parsi, and she worked with leaders of every faith.
- She came home in 1935, after petitioning to renounce seditionist activities.
- She reached Bombay in November 1935 and died on 13 August 1936.
- She was 74 and very ill after a stroke.
- She left most of her assets to the Avabai Petit Orphanage for girls.

- The Indian Coast Guard ship ICGS Bikhaiji Cama carries her name.
- India issued a stamp in her honour on 26 January 1962.
- Read about Pingali Venkayya and the national flag.
- Read about Sohan Singh Bhakna, another exile organiser.
- Read about the Swadeshi Movement of 1905.

Quick check 2. Bhikaiji Cama raised her flag at a rally in Bombay. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Remember: Born 1861, Bombay. Plague nurse, 1896. London, 1902. Paris Indian Society. Flag at Stuttgart, 22 August 1907. Interned at Vichy, 1915 to 1917. Died 13 August 1936.

Think it through: Why raise the flag in Germany and not in India?

In India, the British would have stopped her at once. At Stuttgart, delegates from many countries were watching. So her message reached the world, and Britain could not silence it.

Quick check 3. The flag Cama raised in 1907 was a change to the Calcutta Flag. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Practice MCQs

1. Madam Bhikaiji Cama, often referred to as the 'Mother of the Indian Revolution', is particularly remembered for having hoisted an early version of the Indian national flag in 1907 at which international location?

A. The British Parliament in London

B. The League of Nations in Geneva

C. The International Socialist Congress in Stuttgart, Germany

D. The Paris Peace Conference

See answer ↓

2. Bhikaiji Cama nursed plague victims in Bombay in 1896, contracting the disease herself. What earlier work had this followed?

A. Practising law

B. Teaching at a girls' school

C. Journalism

D. Philanthropic work, after an incompatible marriage

See answer ↓

3. On 22 August 1907, Bhikaiji Cama unfurled an early version of the Indian flag at which event?

A. The Paris Peace Conference

B. The International Socialist Congress in Stuttgart

C. The Berlin Congress

D. The Round Table Conference

See answer ↓

4. The flag Bhikaiji Cama raised at Stuttgart was based on the "Calcutta Flag." Who designed it?

A. Hemchandra Kanungo and Sachindra Prasad Bose

B. Lala Lajpat Rai and Ajit Singh

C. Bhagat Singh and Ram Prasad Bismil

D. Aurobindo Ghosh and Bipin Chandra Pal

See answer ↓

5. During the First World War, French authorities interned Bhikaiji Cama at which location, from January 1915 to November 1917?

A. Marseilles

B. Bordeaux

C. Vichy

D. Arcachon

See answer ↓

6. Bhikaiji Cama worked as private secretary to which leader while living in London?

A. Dadabhai Naoroji

B. Bal Gangadhara Tilak

C. Gopal Krishna Gokhale

D. Lala Lajpat Rai

See answer ↓

7. Cama's banned weeklies, such as Bande Mataram and Madan's Talwar, were smuggled into India through which French colony?

A. Chandernagore

B. Mahe

C. Goa

D. Pondicherry

See answer ↓

8. Bhikaiji Cama returned to India in 1935 after agreeing to which condition?

A. She gave up her French residence

B. She paid a fine of one lakh rupees

C. She joined the Indian National Congress

D. She renounced seditionist activities

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **C.** Cama, a Parsi revolutionary who had earlier served as private secretary to Dadabhai Naoroji, unfurled an early version of the Indian tricolour at the International Socialist Congress in Stuttgart, making a bold declaration of Indian nationhood on an international stage well before India achieved independence. She spent much of her revolutionary career operating from Paris and other European bases, working alongside fellow overseas revolutionaries and publishing nationalist literature that colonial authorities worked hard to suppress. Her pioneering, internationally visible activism made her one of the most significant women figures of the entire revolutionary nationalist movement, predating by decades the more widely recognised women's political participation of the later Gandhian era. ↑ Q1
2. **D.** After an incompatible marriage to Rustomji Cama, she devoted herself to philanthropic work, which led into her 1896 plague relief nursing. ↑ Q2
3. **B.** She unfurled the flag at the International Socialist Congress in Stuttgart, Germany, appealing for equality and autonomy from Britain. ↑ Q3
4. **A.** The flag was based on the Calcutta Flag, designed by Hemchandra Kanungo and Sachindra Prasad Bose, carrying "Vande Mataram" in Devanagari script. ↑ Q4
5. **C.** French authorities interned her at Vichy from January 1915 to November 1917, and kept her under police surveillance even after her release. ↑ Q5
6. **A.** She met Dadabhai Naoroji through Shyamji Krishna Varma and became his private secretary in London. ↑ Q6
7. **D.** The weeklies were banned in Britain and India. They were smuggled in through the French colony of Pondicherry. ↑ Q7
8. **D.** Gravely ill, she petitioned in 1935 to renounce seditionist activities. She reached Bombay in November 1935 and died on 13 August 1936. ↑ Q8

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** ↑ 1
2. **False.** ↑ 2
3. **True.** ↑ 3

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