

**Second Place Winner**  
**Division II – 10-12th Grades**  
***Matangini Hazra: An Indian Braveheart***  
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For two centuries, India was subject to the ferocious rule of the British Raj. In 1608, the British East India Company began trade with India, but it slowly took imperial control by implementing colonies and snaking its way into Indian politics. The British Empire suppressed Indian culture, starved the citizens, and exploited Indian wealth and resources. Repeatedly oppressed, the people of India took action to claim freedom. During 1857-1947, Indians tirelessly resisted British rule and engaged in an effort to break the chains of colonial oppression. As the movement developed, Mahatma Gandhi soon became the face of the Indian Freedom Struggle. It was his resilience, tenacity, and his ability to unite the masses that earned India its freedom. His method of nonviolent protests proved to be effective against the British, and he was dubbed the father of the nation. However, there remain many unsung heroes from the Indian Freedom Struggle. One that stands out is Matangini Hazra. Hailing from West Bengal, India, she actively participated in the Indian Independence Movement until she was shot dead by the British Indian police. She sacrificed her life to oppose the British and advocate for the freedom of her fellow Indians, and to ensure India could breathe from the cruelty and injustice of the British Raj. Throughout her career as a fierce protester, she exhibited the utmost moral courage to fight for her country. Matangini Hazra embodied the very meaning of moral courage by willing to do the right thing morally in the face of adversity, which takes a great amount of thought and deliberation; she expressed her personal views and values in the face of dissension and rejection. Hazra directly stood up to individuals with power over her for the greater good.

Born in the poverty-stricken village of Midnapore, India, Matangini Hazra led a seemingly uneventful life. She received no formal education, married as a child, and was widowed at 18. The turning point in her life arrived when she decided to join the Indian Independence Movement. In 1905, when the Nationalist movement reached its peak in West Bengal, Hazra became profoundly inspired by the actions of Gandhi. She followed him so faithfully that she was nicknamed “ 'Gandhi Buri', Bengali for old lady Gandhi” (Bhowmik, para 2). She joined the Civil Disobedience Movement and was arrested for violating the Salt Act in 1932. She was quickly released but arrested again for petitioning for the salt tax to be abolished (Bhowmik, para 2 & 3). During her time in prison, she learned more about the freedom struggle from other prisoners. After being released, Hazra immediately joined the Indian National Congress, a pro-Independence political party (Bhowmik, para 3). When Gandhi commenced the Quit India Movement in 1942, she requested to lead a protest to the Tamluk court and police station; however, she was rejected due to her elderly age. Soon after, her time to shine came. At 72 years old, Hazra led 6,000 protesters to the Tamluk police station and court. As they approached, protesters were halted by the British Indian Police. Hazra stepped in front of the crowd to ask that the police not shoot at them. Consequently, she was instantly shot. Nonetheless, she carried on, marching with the flag of the Indian National Congress as bullets riddled her body. Hazra

continuously chanted 'Vande Mataram', which roughly translates to "hail the Motherland" in Hindi. She died with the national flag flying high in her hands. The Biplabi Newspaper of the Tamluk National Government describes Hazra's final moments: "Matangini led one procession from the north of the criminal court building; even after the firing commenced, she continued to advance with the tri-colour flag, leaving all the volunteers behind. The police shot her three times. She continued marching despite wounds to the forehead and both hands." (Bhowmik 8). Following her sacrifice, Hazra was viewed as a national symbol of the Indian Independence Movement and as a symbol of the significance of women in the soul of a nation.

Matangini Hazra survives as a manifestation of endless courage and authentic leadership. Her ability to proudly convey her patriotic beliefs and values without fear of repercussions is a compelling reason why she will forever live in the hearts of Indians. Even her old age did not impede her from venturing out into the streets of Midnapore and fearlessly fighting against colonial rule. As someone of Indian descent, it fills me with awe to have such an empowering woman be part of my heritage. India is usually perceived as a poor, developing country plagued with disasters; in fact, many don't know of its colorful history and culture. Before colonial rule, India was quite a prosperous country. I strive to explain to everyone how strong-willed not just Indians are, but how strong-willed Indian women are. India was and is still considered to be a patriarchal society, so to have a woman aggressively voice her opinions was unconventional at the time, and Matangini Hazra shattered that stereotype. I feel deeply empowered by her actions to fight for the voices of colored women to be heard everywhere. I want to showcase the valiant India that Matangini Hazra fought for in the 20th century. Learning more about my Indian heritage is a great way for me to feel more connected to my ancestral roots and to argue that India was fought for by many influential people besides Gandhi. I am grateful to Matangini Hazra and other unsung Indian heroes that struggled endlessly to restore the glory of the country I dearly love.

In the 20th century, as the Indian Independence Movement gained ground, Matangini Hazra took the initiative to express her desire for a free India. In the face of adversity, she persisted to make her ideas known. Moreover, she united thousands of people to protest British rule and the injustice present in their society. Matangini Hazra was a force to reckon with, no obstacle could stand in her path. Thus, her outstanding moral courage makes her a prominent figure in India's history.

### **Works Cited:**

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