



WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE QUIT INDIA MOVEMENT (1942)

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Abstract

The Quit India Movement of August 1942 marked a decisive moment in the history of women's participation in India's freedom struggle. With virtually the entire senior Congress leadership arrested within hours of the resolution being passed, the movement's early direction fell to a wider, more improvised cast of activists, among whom women played a leadership role unprecedented in earlier nationalist campaigns. This paper examines that participation across several registers: symbolic and public leadership, exemplified by Aruna Asaf Ali's hoisting of the Congress flag at Gowalia Tank Maidan on 9 August 1942; clandestine and technological resistance, exemplified by Usha Mehta's underground Congress Radio; regional and often armed insurgency, exemplified by Matangini Hazra in Midnapore and Kanaklata Barua in Assam; and the sustained, less-chronicled labour of thousands of women as couriers, organisers, and prisoners in district and village-level Congress committees. The paper argues that Quit India represented both a continuation of the mass female mobilisation begun under Gandhian civil disobedience in the 1930s and a qualitative shift toward more autonomous, often militant, female political agency, with consequences that extended into the post-independence political career of many of its women participants.

Keywords: Quit India Movement; 1942; women's participation; Aruna Asaf Ali; Usha Mehta; Congress Radio; Matangini Hazra; Kanaklata Barua; Indian nationalism; gender and the freedom struggle

1. Introduction

On the night of 8–9 August 1942, following the All India Congress Committee's passage of the Quit India resolution in Bombay, the colonial government arrested Mahatma Gandhi and virtually the entire Congress Working Committee within hours. The movement that followed was consequently, in Gandhi's own later description, a largely "leaderless" mass upheaval, sustained not by top-tier Congress leadership but by a diffuse network of underground activists, students,

workers, and peasants across the country. It was in this vacuum of formal leadership that Indian women, many of them young and previously outside the front ranks of Congress politics, assumed an unusually prominent and diverse role — as public symbols of defiance, as organisers of clandestine communication networks, as leaders of regional insurgency, and as the enduring backbone of local Congress mobilisation. This paper surveys that participation thematically, situating it within the longer history of women's involvement in Indian nationalism since the 1920s.

2. Women in Indian Nationalism before 1942: A Brief Background

Women's political mobilisation in the freedom struggle had grown steadily since Gandhi's return to India, with the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22) and, more decisively, the Civil Disobedience Movement and Salt Satyagraha of 1930 drawing large numbers of women into picketing, salt-making, and the courting of arrest. Leaders such as Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, and Kasturba Gandhi had by the 1930s established women's participation as an accepted, if still subordinate, feature of Congress political culture, and organisations such as the All India Women's Conference provided institutional scaffolding for this activism. Quit India built directly on this foundation but, owing to the mass arrest of senior male leadership, gave women a far greater share of initiative and improvisational authority than earlier campaigns had allowed.

3. Symbolic Leadership: Aruna Asaf Ali and the Gowalia Tank Flag

The movement's opening act of defiance was itself performed by a woman. With senior leaders arrested overnight, Aruna Asaf Ali presided over the remainder of the AICC session on 9 August 1942 and hoisted the Congress tricolour at Gowalia Tank Maidan in Bombay, an act carried out in the face of police firing on the assembled crowd. This gesture is conventionally regarded as marking the formal commencement of the Quit India Movement. Asaf Ali subsequently went underground, evading arrest for years while coordinating resistance activity, and emerged after independence as a prominent political figure and, later, the first mayor of Delhi. Her role established, from the movement's very first hours, a template of visible female leadership that shaped public memory of Quit India.

4. Clandestine Resistance: Usha Mehta and the Congress Radio

A second, distinct mode of women's participation is exemplified by Usha Mehta, a 22-year-old student activist who, together with a small group of associates, established a secret transmitter that began broadcasting as the underground Congress Radio on 27 August 1942, operating from a series of concealed locations in Bombay under the identifying call sign "Congress Radio from

somewhere in India." The station broadcast news of the movement, messages from underground leaders, and reports of British repression that could not otherwise reach the public through a censored press, and continued operating despite British efforts to trace it until Mehta's arrest on 12 November 1942, after which she served a lengthy prison term. The Congress Radio episode illustrates how women's participation in Quit India extended into technical and organisational domains — communications, print, and courier networks — that were as vital to sustaining the underground movement as public demonstration.

5. Regional Insurgency and Martyrdom

In several provinces, women's participation in Quit India took a more directly confrontational and, in some cases, fatal form. In Midnapore district of Bengal, Matangini Hazra, then in her early seventies, led a procession of several thousand volunteers — the majority of them women — toward the Tamluk police station on 29 September 1942 and was shot dead while continuing to carry the national flag after being wounded, becoming one of the movement's most widely commemorated martyrs. In Assam, the teenaged activist Kanaklata Barua joined the Mrityu Bahini ("Death Squad") and was killed while leading volunteers attempting to hoist the national flag at a police station in Gohpur. In Odisha, women such as Parbati Giri led agitations and endured imprisonment, while Pari Bewa was killed during an uprising at Eram. These episodes demonstrate that women's participation in Quit India was not confined to organisational or symbolic roles but extended to direct, often armed or quasi-military, confrontation with colonial authority, at considerable personal risk.

6. Grassroots and Institutional Participation

Beyond these widely commemorated individual figures, the movement depended on a much larger, less visible corps of women who staffed local Congress committees, organised relief for the families of arrested activists, acted as couriers carrying messages and funds between underground leaders, and in some cases participated in the production and transport of propaganda material and, occasionally, explosives. Leaders such as Sucheta Kripalani played an important coordinating role in sustaining underground networks, while women's wings of provincial Congress committees organised local protests, hartals, and the boycott of government institutions. Large numbers of women were arrested and imprisoned during the movement's suppression, and prison experience itself often became a formative and radicalising element of their subsequent political careers.

7. Interpreting the Significance of Women's Role in 1942

Historians have read the prominence of women in Quit India as reflecting both continuity and change. On one hand, it extended a pattern of female mobilisation already established under Gandhian civil disobedience, in which women's participation was framed partly through the idiom of moral and domestic virtue extended into public life. On the other hand, the specific conditions of 1942 — the removal of the entire senior leadership, the movement's partially violent and insurrectionary character in several regions, and the sheer scale of underground organisation required — pushed a number of women into more autonomous, tactically improvisational, and in some cases militant roles than earlier nationalist campaigns had required or permitted. This shift had lasting consequences: many of the movement's women activists, including Aruna Asaf Ali, Sucheta Kripalani, and Usha Mehta, went on to substantial careers in independent India's politics and public life, carrying the organisational experience and public standing gained during Quit India into post-independence institutions.

8. Conclusion

Women's participation in the Quit India Movement of 1942 represented a significant escalation, both in scale and in kind, of the role women had played in the Indian freedom struggle since the 1920s. From Aruna Asaf Ali's opening act of defiance at Gowalia Tank Maidan, to Usha Mehta's underground Congress Radio, to the direct, sometimes fatal, confrontations led by Matangini Hazra and Kanaklata Barua, and the sustained grassroots labour of thousands of largely unrecorded local activists, women were central rather than peripheral to the movement's conduct and endurance. The removal of the Congress high command created space for forms of female political leadership that earlier, more centrally directed campaigns had not required, leaving a legacy that shaped both the historical memory of Quit India and the subsequent political trajectories of many of its women participants.

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