

The Role of Women in the Quit India Movement: Challenges and their Implications

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the historical background of the Quit India movement, its cause and impacts on colonial rule, and how this mass movement inspired women to participate in the freedom struggle. The Paper discusses the challenges that women faced during the Quit India Movement. further, it will discuss how the Second World War gave people the opportunity to people to raise their voice against colonial rule under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and how growing frustration among people regarding food shortage, inflation, and to lack of political failure of the Crips Mission intensified demands for immediate freedom from British colonial rule. The paper highlights how the prominent women played a vital role. Women such as Kasturba Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu, and Kamala Nehru formed groups and organizations to garner mass support in the National Freedom Movement. The percent study will be based on secondary data. The methodology used the purpose of this study is interdisciplinary, combining historical analysis, feminist theory, oral history, and archival research.

Keywords: World War II, Crips Mission, Quit India movement, Mahatma Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Nehru

INTRODUCTION

The Quit India movement is a significant event in the history of the Indian national freedom movement in the 21st century. This movement was started in 1942 under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Movement was spread across the region of the country. The people from different sections of society had participated in this movement with the Slogan of “Do or Die,” which was given by Mahatma Gandhi to mobilize mass support. There were several causes of this movement which was instigated people to raise their voice. The decision of British Government to involve India in the second World War without any consulting with Indian leaders had allowed people to raise their voice against British exploitation, on the other hand, growing frustration among people regarding food shortage, inflation, and due to lack of political failure of Crips Mission, the rise of nationalist sentiment among people and demand for self-governance,

intensified demands for immediate freedom from British colonial rule. the Cripps mission was sent in march 1942 by the British government to gain critical support from India during World War- II both in terms of military resources and economic contributions, this mission put up three features, such as Indian would be granted dominion status after the War the second was to established constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution with the representation of all communities. The third recommendation of this mission was to provide the right to India. Despite this proposal, the mission failed to gain the huge support of Indian leaders. Consequently, the British government adopted harsh policies to suppress the uprising movement. Thousands of leaders, including Mahatma Gandhi and other Congress members, were arrested, and the British imposed strict censorship on the press, limiting news coverage. Police and military forces were deployed to prevent mass movement, by violence and repression resulted in violence and numerous deaths.

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Ultimately, the failure to meet Indian aspirations for immediate Independence led to heightened tensions. Consequently, several women were inspired by this mass movement. Further, they decided to participate, and they came out to the front to lead the Quit India movement. Many women emerged as leaders, organising protests and rallies. Of them were Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay were prominent figures. These women participated in and joined demonstrations, boycotts, and civil disobedience campaigns. Several women have played an active role in providing essential support services, such as preparing food for protesters, tending to the injured, and spreading awareness about the movement. Many women were arrested by the British government, but they remained committed to the movement, and these women also inspired others to give their contribution to the struggle for independence.

Historical Context and the Entry of Women into the Movement:

The participation of women in political movements had been gradually increasing since the early 20th century. Organizations like the All-India Women's Conference and individual leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay had already laid the groundwork for women's political consciousness. The Quit India Movement, however, marked a dramatic shift. For the first time, women from diverse social and economic backgrounds joined en masse, driven by nationalist fervor and a growing sense of empowerment (Greenough, P. R. 1983, pp. 1-3).

The Quit India Movement of 1942 occupies a central place in the history of India's struggle for independence. Launched by Mahatma Gandhi on 8 August 1942 at the Bombay session of the All-India Congress Committee, the movement called for the immediate withdrawal of British power from India. The slogan "Do or Die" electrified the masses, and for the first time, Indians across regions, classes, and communities participated in such large numbers in a single campaign. While much has been written about the political strategies of leaders such as Gandhi, Nehru, and Patel, an equally important yet often underrepresented aspect of this movement is the role of women (Babu, 2020, pp. 15- 17).

The participation of women in the Quit India Movement was unprecedented in scale. Unlike earlier phases of the nationalist movement, where women played limited supportive roles, in 1942, women became active

organizers, leaders, and even symbols of defiance. They led processions, ran underground networks, broadcast secret messages, distributed pamphlets, and faced brutal repression with courage. From well-known figures like Aruna Asaf Ali, Sucheta Kriplani, Usha Mehta, and Kasturba Gandhi to countless unnamed women in villages and towns, their contribution gave the movement its mass character (Jayalakshmi, 2025. p 16).

However, women's involvement did not come without challenges. They had to overcome deep-rooted patriarchal barriers, social conservatism, and familial restrictions. The colonial state treated them harshly—subjecting them to imprisonment, torture, and humiliation. Additionally, women bore the double burden of balancing domestic responsibilities with political activism, a difficulty rarely faced by their male counterparts. Yet, despite these struggles, their role left lasting implications not only for the success of the Quit India Movement but also for women's status in independent India (Allen, 2011).

The implications of women's participation were far-reaching. Politically, their involvement demonstrated that women could lead and sustain mass struggles, laying the foundation for their participation in post-independence governance and law-making. Socially, it disrupted rigid gender norms and legitimized women's presence in the public sphere. At a deeper level, their sacrifices shaped the ethos of the new nation, ensuring that ideals of equality and justice became integral to India's democratic framework (Kumar, 2002). This paper examines the role of women in the Quit India Movement, the challenges they faced, and the implications of their participation. It highlights both the celebrated leaders and the ordinary women whose stories remain less visible. It also explores how women's struggles during this period contributed to reshaping India's political and social structures. By bringing these narratives together, this study emphasizes that the story of India's independence is incomplete without acknowledging the central role played by women in the Quit India Movement (Gandhi, 2011).

Causes of the Quit India Movement:

The Quit India Movement of 1942 was one of the most decisive and powerful struggles in India's fight against British colonial rule. Launched by Mahatma Gandhi on 8 August 1942 at the Bombay session of the All-India Congress Committee, it called for the immediate withdrawal of the British from India. The slogan "Do or Die" became the guiding spirit of this mass movement.

However, the call for such a bold and final confrontation did not emerge suddenly. It was the result of several political, economic, and social developments that had gradually convinced the Indian leadership and the masses that British rule could no longer continue (Singh, 2021).

Failure of the Cripps Mission:

One of the most immediate causes of the Quit India Movement was the failure of the Cripps Mission. During World War II, the British government, eager to secure Indian cooperation, sent Sir Stafford Cripps to India in March 1942 with a set of proposals. These promised dominion status for India after the war but offered no immediate transfer of power. Furthermore, the plan allowed provinces to opt out, which raised fears of partition. Indian leaders saw this as a divide-and-rule strategy rather than a genuine attempt at granting freedom. The rejection of the Cripps proposals deepened frustration and convinced nationalists that independence could not be delayed (Jegen, 2005).

Impact of World War II:

World War II had a devastating impact on India. The British had unilaterally dragged India into the war in 1939 without consulting Indian leaders, a decision that created widespread resentment. The war strained India's economy, leading to shortages of essential goods, rising inflation, unemployment, and eventually famine-like conditions, particularly in Bengal. Ordinary Indians bore the brunt of these hardships, which made them more willing to join mass protests against colonial rule.

Growing Nationalist Sentiment:

The Quit India Movement was also the outcome of growing nationalist aspirations. Since the adoption of the demand for "Poorna Swaraj" (complete independence) in 1930, Indians were no longer willing to accept partial reforms. The earlier movements—the Non-Cooperation Movement and the Civil Disobedience Movement—had already mobilized the masses and prepared the ground for a more forceful demand. By the early 1940s, the idea of full independence had become non-negotiable for the Indian National Congress and the people at large.

Repression and Distrust of the British:

The British government's repeated use of repression had created deep mistrust among Indians. Incidents like the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919 and frequent lathi

charges during peaceful protests had convinced people that British rule was exploitative and violent. Indians no longer believed in the sincerity of British promises and were determined to end colonial control once and for all.

Gandhi's Leadership and the Masses' Discontent:

Finally, the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi played a crucial role. Gandhi's call to "Do or Die" gave a moral and emotional push to the movement. His insistence that freedom could not be postponed inspired millions of Indians. The ordinary people—peasants, students, workers, and women—were already suffering from poverty, heavy taxation, and food shortages during the war. Their growing discontent merged with the political call for independence, turning the Quit India Movement into a true mass uprising.

The role of women in the Quit India movement:

We have witnessed for the first time in Indian history, which showed the role of women in the freedom struggle at the National level. This movement had changed the perception of Indian society about the role of women in the public sphere. The active role and participation of women in the Quit India movement changed their goal; there was a significant role from several points of view or aspects. A leaderless movement with the majority of the men behind bars. The women took responsibility to engage and play a vital role in the movement. They have decided to occupy the streets, raising slogans, and holding public lectures. Therefore, we can say that the Quit India movement introduced a new kind of liberation movement and also a sense of responsibility and dedication to fight for achieving the ends (De, D. Women's 2022, pp. 97-98).

He also said that the role played by the women in the Indian movement is a story of devotion, Sacrifice, and patriotism, and was regarded as the most powerful. The history of the Indian national freedom movement would be incomplete without writing the contribution of women. Before independence, women were deprived of their rights because of male dominance in society, and the primary responsibilities of women were to dedicate the implementation of household responsibilities; they were not allowed to participate in the public sphere outside of their families (Subasri, 2022 p-98-98).

The inspiration behind the movement was the great leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, who had inspired the people from different sections of society with his ideas.

the Women took on leadership roles in various parts of the country, especially after the arrest of senior Congress leaders. Aruna Asaf Ali hoisted the national flag at the Gowalia Tank Maidan in Bombay, symbolizing defiance against British authority. Usha Mehta organized an underground radio station, 'Congress Radio', to spread the message of resistance. Thousands of ordinary women engaged in civil disobedience, distributed pamphlets, and led protests in villages and towns. Women from rural backgrounds, such as Matangini Hazra in Bengal and Kanaklata Barua in Assam, became martyrs in their quest for freedom. Many women participated in clandestine operations, acting as couriers, hiding fugitives, and transporting documents and weapons. Their involvement in intelligence networks was critical, given that women were less likely to be suspected by the British authorities. (Manku, 2023, P. 6)

Challenges and implications:

The Quit India movement is a turning point in the freedom struggle. But it also presented a lot of challenges for women. While women were in the forefront of the movement, they also faced unique obstacles, including physical violence and harassment from authorities. traditional gender role, the perception regarding women's role in the public sphere of life restricted their participation in the movement. Despite these obstacles, women's involvement in the Quit India movement challenged colonial rule, and it also began to reshape societal perceptions of women in India (Ramanjineyulu, 2023, pp.43-54).

Traditional patriarchal norms limited women's mobility and freedom. Participation in a political movement, particularly one involving confrontation with colonial authorities, was often discouraged by family and community members. Women faced brutal repression from the colonial regime. Many were jailed, beaten, or sexually harassed. Despite the non-violent philosophy of the movement, the British used violent methods to suppress female protesters. Even within nationalist circles, women were often relegated to supportive roles. Their contributions were not always acknowledged, and leadership was predominantly male-dominated, reflecting the broader gender inequalities of the time (Patra, 2024, p. 5). Despite their courage, women encountered formidable challenges. Patriarchal norms often discouraged them from stepping out of domestic roles, and they faced criticism from their families and

communities. The colonial government responded harshly, subjecting women to imprisonment, physical assault, and humiliation. Unlike their male counterparts, women also bore the double burden of managing households while participating in political activism. Furthermore, recognition of their sacrifices was often overshadowed by male-dominated narratives of the freedom struggle (Kaur, 1985 p. 8).

The active participation of women led to a significant shift in the perception of their societal roles. It planted the seeds of feminist consciousness in India and laid the foundation for the women's rights movement in post-independence India. Many women who were active in the movement went on to hold important positions in independent India. Their experiences contributed to the framing of gender-sensitive policies and the inclusion of women's rights in the Indian Constitution. Recent scholarship has begun to uncover and recognize the vital role played by women in the freedom movement. This has encouraged a re-evaluation of mainstream historical narratives that have often sidelined women's contributions (Jayalakshmi, 2025).

Findings:

1. The Quit India movement had given consciousness, empowered women and challenged traditional gender roles, and laid the foundation for future women's rights.
2. This movement has changed the narrative of society about the role of women in the public sphere
3. After the detention of Mahatma Gandhi ji along with Congress top leaders, the movement was leaderless. Then women came out of their houses and showed their courage, dedication and responsibility to the nation by devoting their lives. By doing this, they have inspired other women to serve the nation.

Conclusion:

The role of women in the Quit movement was crucial and transformative. They have inspired others, they actively participated in protests, mobilized communities, and demonstrated resilience against the colonial role. Women such as Kamla Nehru, Sarojini Naidu, and Kasturba emerged as prominent leaders, challenged societal norms, and contributed significantly to the Independence struggle. Their involvement not only

strengthened the movement but also marked a shift in women's roles in Indian society, laying the groundwork for future activism and the fight for gender equality. The Quit India Movement of 1942 represented not only a decisive moment in India's struggle for independence but also a remarkable chapter in the history of women's political participation in the country. The involvement of women in this movement was neither symbolic nor incidental—it was deeply significant, both in terms of the scale of participation and the nature of their contributions. From urban intellectuals to rural peasants, women transcended boundaries of class, caste, religion, and region to actively participate in the movement. Their courage, resilience, and commitment became the backbone of a mass uprising that challenged the very core of colonial authority in India. Women played diverse roles in the movement—organizers, protesters, informants, underground broadcasters, and even martyrs. Leaders such as Aruna Asaf Ali, Sucheta Kripalani, Usha Mehta, and Matangini Hazra, among many others, emerged as symbols of resistance and inspiration. Their actions demonstrated that patriotism was not confined to male political elites but was deeply rooted in every layer of Indian society, including its women. Their fearless participation also illustrated a growing sense of political consciousness and personal agency among women, reflecting the broader awakening that was beginning to take shape in Indian society. However, their journey was not without challenges. Women faced a dual struggle—against the colonial regime on one hand, and entrenched patriarchal norms on the other. Many had to defy family expectations, societal taboos, and gender stereotypes to take part in the movement. In addition, British repression was severe. Women were arrested, harassed, and imprisoned under harsh conditions. Despite the risks, their continued involvement highlighted an unwavering commitment to national liberation and social justice. Even within the nationalist movement, women were not always given equal space. Leadership remained largely male-dominated, and women's contributions were often under-acknowledged or forgotten in mainstream narratives. Yet, in retrospect, their participation laid the groundwork for more inclusive political processes in post-independence India. The legacy of their involvement in the Quit India Movement extended far beyond 1947. Many of these women later became lawmakers, educators, and activists in free India, continuing their fight for gender equality and social reform. Moreover, the Quit India Movement

became a catalyst for the redefinition of women's roles in Indian society. It challenged the traditional notion that women belonged only in domestic spaces and proved that they were equally capable of leadership, resistance, and sacrifice. It also served to inspire future generations of women to participate in public life, politics, and movements for rights and justice. The contributions of women to the Quit India Movement represent a pivotal shift in India's socio-political landscape. Their involvement was not just a footnote in the struggle for independence, but a powerful assertion of their rightful place in the nation's history. Recognizing and honoring their efforts is not only essential for historical accuracy but also for understanding the roots of gender equality in modern India. Their courage continues to inspire the ongoing journey toward a more just, inclusive, and equitable society.

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