WOMEN AND THE QUIT INDIA MOVEMENT 1942

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Abstract
The present work is an attempt to analyze the role of women in the Quit India Movement of 1942. Women from time immemorial had her political, social and cultural existence. They as a force played a crucial role in the struggle for Indian independence. The Quit India Movement of 1942, which was a spontaneous mass uprising witnesses women in the forefront. The 1942 women activists challenged the norms of respectability that obsessed an earlier generation of women leaders. Women during the movement led processions, picketed liquor shops, boldly faced government repressions, indulged in terrorist activities and even sacrificed lives.

Keywords: Women, Quit India Movement, Mass participation, Non-violence, Extremism

Introduction
Women always constitute to be an important section of the society. There is considerable ambiguity about the nature and status of women in Indian society. Some sacred ancient texts give women an exalted status in various manifestations of mother goddesses like Durga, Kali or Chandi. But there is another profile of women also sanctioned by religious writings and folklores. She is believed to be fickle and fragile, sensuous, temptress and given to falsehood, trickery and impurity. The tilt in the accepted stereotypes is towards the negative and derogatory picture. There are of course some exceptions which permits a greater measure of equality and freedom for women.

The concept of feminism is a product of western society. Feminism simply means advocacy of women’s rights on the grounds of political, social and economic equality to men. Feminism is the social theory or political movement supporting the equality of both the sexes in all aspects of public and private life.

In the context of the rise of modern western feminist movements of the early nineteenth and twentieth century and the status of women in the Indian societies, the participation of women in the Indian freedom struggle generally and more particularly the women’s participation in the Quit India Movement can be analyzed.

Women’s participation in the Indian freedom struggle added to the legitimacy of the Indian freedom struggle. Their active participation not only changed their goals but also organized the activities. The political participation of women were equally approved and appreciated by men who otherwise want them to be perfect wives at home.

The participation of women in the Quit India Movement of 1942 was significant from several aspects. The women of India, at large, were endowed with a new spirit on the call of Mahatma’s ‘do or die’. A ‘leaderless movement’ and the men folk being behind the bars the women were active throughout the movement. There was direct involvement of women in the extremist activities. Huge numbers of women martyrs were listed in this movement. The struggle for Indian independence introduces Indian women to a new kind of liberation movement. A sense of responsibility and dedication towards one’s own country led them to organize and fight for achieving the ends.

With the changing time, women from all regions stepped forward, the participation did not restrict to so call “respectable” women but it was extended to those who stood on the margins of the middle class society. Women made and sold salt, picketed shops of foreign cloth and liquor and preached the value of khaddar. Earlier women were merely supporting the revolution hiding the revolutionaries, collecting funds or spreading the propaganda. But, during the 1942s women were making and transporting the explosives and were directly involved in revolutionary acts.

The Indian women freed themselves from medieval Indian orthodoxy, got imbued with rational ideas, and developed an ideology of their own creating a sphere of influence. The Indian National Movement surely contributed to this phenomenon.

Methodology:
The present work follows descriptive and analytical method from a gender perspective. It also uses sociological approach for wider understanding of the subject matter. The present article involves a critical use of both primary and secondary sources based on external and internal criticism. The paper is basically compiled with various sources like books, journals and newspapers.

Discussions:
Indian women participated in the Indian freedom struggle irrespective of their background, liberal homes or conservative families, urban centers or rural districts,
single and married, young or old. The rise of political consciousness among Indian women can be vaguely traced to the year 1875 when the women of Bengal supported the Ilibert Bill, the act which permits the Indian judges to try the British subjects. One of the biggest examples of rising political consciousness among Indian women was Rani Laxmi Bai who fought bravely for her cause in the Revolt of 1857. The establishment of Indian National Congress in 1885 as a platform of political activities among the Indians intensified the political participation of the women. However, the ad hoc participation of women, as also students, in the different stages and programmes of the national movement as such are ‘little narratives’ that operate under the banner of different nationalist or revolutionary ideologies.1

The Swadeshi Movement with its seed in the partition of Bengal in the year 1905, the Indian National Movement took a major leap forward. Women folk both from the rural and urban population from Bengal and other parts of India became actively involved in politics. They joined men in protesting the division by boycotting foreign goods and only buying swadeshi goods. Instances are found women even joining the extremist ventures during the Swadeshi Movement. Nanibala Devi a woman from Bengal was an active worker of Jugantar group an extremist organization from Bengal led by Amarendra Nath Chattopadhaya. With the advent of Mahatma Gandhi in the political scenario the participation of Indian women achieved a new fillip. Gandhi had immense faith in the strength and capabilities of Indian women and urged women leaders to be like those of ancient mythical heroines like Sita, Draupadi and Damayanti, firm and self controlled. Initially, Gandhi’s mobilization of women was within the elite class. This was perhaps a strategy to form leadership for mass mobilization.2 The Non Co-operation Movement of 1921 under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi witnessed a large number of women in the forefront involving both in the protests program as well as constructing activities like spinning charkha and popularizing khadi. Women from all strata of society were touched by the appeal of Gandhi. Moongri, a woman laborer from a tea estate of Assam who was an alcoholic was so influenced by the ideologies of Gandhi that she not only gave up drinking but also became an active participant of anti-liquor drive. Moongri died in a clash during the picketing of liquor shops. The Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-34), in India was a period of women awakening. In the words of Jawaharlal Nehru, “most of us men folk in prison then a remarkable thing happened. Our women came to the forefront and took the charge of the struggle. Women had always been there of course, but now there was an avalanche of them, which took not only the British government but their own men folk by surprise.

‘Quit India’ or ‘Bharat Chodo’. This simple but powerful slogan launched the legendary struggle in response to Gandhi’s call for immediate independence, which also became famous by the name of August Revolution. It was a civil disobedience movement in which the people of the country demonstrated an unparallel heroism and militancy. Towards the third decade of the twentieth century world witnessed the ravages of another destructive war. Almost the whole world was divided into two belligerent camps the Axis power and the Allies. World War II was ensued with Germany’s invasion of Poland on 1st September, 1939. The Indian political sky during the period was covered with the clouds of political dissensions, political leadership being divided among them regarding the extension of support to the British war efforts. By now it had become clear that the alien government had no intention of making India free within moments, instead they wanted to utilize the Indian resources for the purpose of war. By the end of 1941, World War II took a serious turn; Japan’s rapid advance towards eastern frontiers of British India caused serious anxiety among the allied powers. The British Government wanted to come to negotiation with the Indian leaders; Indian leadership was also showing signs of changing attitude. However, Congress working committee did not deviate from its earlier stand of non-cooperation. The Cripps Mission of 1942 failed to satisfy the Indian people.

In the meantime Mahatma Gandhi had come up in his writings with the concept of Quit India Movement. The Congress Working Committee passed the Quit India resolution on 14th May, 1942 at Wardha demanding immediate withdrawal of British rule over India.

The All India Congress Committee in its Bombay session held on 7 and 8 August, 1942 endorsed the Wardha decision on Quit India. The Governor General-in-Council empowered the Viceroy to take drastic action to suppress the movement. Congress organizations at all places and all levels were declared illegal. Top congress leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Kasturaba Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu and many others were arrested on 9 August 1942.

The arrest of the national and provincial leaders made the people leaderless. In this situation the All India Congress Committee resolved, “Every man and women, who is participating in this movement, must function for him or her within the four corners of the world as general instruction issued. Every Indian who desires freedom and strive for it must be his own guide…” Gandhi’s mantra of do or die worked as the guiding spirit of the people throughout the movement.
There was an increase in the participation of the women in the Indian freedom struggle more particularly after 1930s. By 1940s the need was felt for organizing a women’s wing in the congress. Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Aruna Asaf Ali, Mridula Sarabhai and Sucheta Kripalani took the leadership in organizing a women’s wing of the Congress which would lead to better organized cooperation of the women folk. The women folk in general were led by Kasturba Gandhi (Gujarat), Basanti Devi (Bengal), Parbati Devi (Agra), Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya (Bengal), Sarojini Naidu (Mumbai), Uma Nehru (Uttar Pradesh), Bai Amman (Lahore) and so on.

The role played by the women folk in the Quit India Movement of 1942 is a story of devotion, sacrifice and patriotism and it will go down in history as the most remarkable contribution towards the attainment of swaraj. The women actively participated in the Satyagraha Movement and undertook different constructive works in a planned and effective way. The protests against the British oppression were demonstrated by women in thousands by taking out processions, holding meetings and demonstrations. The women volunteers spoke in the meetings held in different villages throughout the country to propagate Gandhi’s motto of ‘do or die’ and spread the message of Quit India.

By 9th August 1942 the leading women leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Meera Ben and Sushila Nayar were confined along with Gandhi at the Aga Khan’s palace Poo na. The arrests of the national and local leaders caused tremendous uproar among the people. The masses were invigorated with a new spirit employed their full strength and energy for the cause of the freedom. The Quit India Movement being leaderless deflected in one and many ways from the Gandhian policy of non-violence. The Movement was characterized by extremists’ activities like attacking the government buildings, damaged railway tracks and sabotaged military supply lines. The increasing government atrocities contributed to the increase of violent activities among the masses.

In Uttar Pradesh 9th August itself some processions and hartal meetings took place. Big meetings were also held at Benaras, Allahabad, and Mathura, Meerut etc. the situation took a serious turn at Benaras and Allahabad on 12th August. In the morning Allahabad Kacheri was attacked by a mob headed by women. In South India also lack of leadership provoked the masses to join the movement. Students of Loyla, Christian, Presidency and Queen’s Mary College figured prominently in staging demonstrations, obstructing electric trains, braving lathi charges and whipping and courting imprisonment.

The Quit India Movement appears as a movement of crowning glory in the mythology of nationalism, narrated with little variation right from the school text books to orally circulated legends about it. However, some assertion regarding the inclusive nature of the struggle should have been substantiated more. Srimanjari’s essay on Bengal situates the movement in the context of the denial policy of the colonial rulers given the possible threat of a Japanese attack and the famine conditions that were building up. The high degree of repression that this combination of factors made possible provided the backdrop of the movement. Her study shows another interesting aspect of the movement. The invocation of mythical ‘Mahatma’ by the Rajyamshi, Modeshia and Pahari tribals, while attacking the local thanas or post offices, Mahatma ki jai was their cry as much as that of the jatiya Sarkar (national government) of Midnapore which sanctioned the use of arms in Mahatma’s name by women for their self defence. The national movement led by Gandhi was non-violent. Metaphorically the streets were viewed as moral battle fields and this ideology guided women to step over the thresholds of their homes. During the Quit India Movement of 1940s, twenty years after the non co-operation movement and ten years after past civil disobedience, more women came forward to participate because of the precedence in the past two decades. Educated and uneducated women sacrificed their time and materials, volunteering, campaigning, protesting, fasting and donating to the cause of freedom.

The province of Assam also produced a large number of energetic and patriotic women participating in the national movement. During the Satyagraha phase of the freedom movement, 1940-41 the women of Assam joined both the individual and collective satyagraha. Swarnalata Baruah and Haripriya Dutta were the first women in the Brahmaputra valley, to undergo rigorous imprisonment, for participating in the individual satyagraha. The wave of Quit India has strong effect in the then undivided Darrang district of the province. The 1942 upheaval in the areas like Kalabari, Gohpur, Barangabari, Behathi, Chariiali, Sootea and Jamuguri, Dhekijauli were spontaneous. The police opened fire at peaceful processions at several places. Kanaklata Barua, a young girl at Gohpur and Kahuli Devi and Kumali Devi at Dhekijauli died of bullet injuries on the spot while Tileswari Baruah and Juluki Kachariani of Dhekijauli succumbed to bullet injuries later on. Amidst the chaotic situations Tileswari Mahanta, a daring woman volunteer successfully hoisted the national flag at Behali thana. Similarly other places of Assam like Nowgaon and Lakhimpur were made proud by its valiant women fighting for the cause of the motherland even at the cost of their lives. The women of Assam fought on non-violent Gandhian lines, but a few of them disappoinnted with the methods of peace and non-violence involved in extremists’ activities.
In the Quit India Movement there was use of violence in an unprecedented scale and the government used it as a justification for repression. Women folk were the worst sufferers. Beating, slapping, insulting with the use of filthy language, forcefully entering the house during the night hours and misbehaving with the women folk were the common methods used by the police and military for the suppression of the women workers. Many girls at the age of puberty were deflowered; even pregnant women could not escape military brutality. The raping of woman was a part of police action against the people. The women folk were tortured both physically and mentally, many of them had to spend their nights in the jungles for fear of police atrocities.

The debate on the Quit India Movement has centered round particularly on two issues, was the movement a spontaneous outburst or an organized rebellion and how did the use of violence by the masses in the struggle square with the overall Congress policy of non-violent struggle. The element of spontaneity in the movement of 1942 was certainly larger than in the earlier movements. The whole pattern of the Gandhian mass movements was that the leadership chalked out a broad program of action and left its implementation at the local level to the initiative of the local and grass root level political activists and the masses. In 1942, the broad program had not yet been spelt out clearly since the leadership was yet to formally launch the movement. But in a way, the degree of spontaneity and popular initiative that was actually exercised by the leadership itself, the resolution passed by AICC clearly states this. The Congress was also ideologically, politically and organizationally prepared for the struggle for a long time. Moreover there were many who refused to use or sanction violent means and confined themselves to the traditional weaponry of the Congress. But many of these including staunch Gandhians who used violence in 1942 felt that circumstances warranted their use, Gandhi himself refused to condemn violence during this movement because he saw the mass movement to be a reaction to the much bigger violence of the state.

The Revolt of 1942, as it has been termed, was in fact short lived. Its importance lay in the fact that it demonstrated the depth that nationalist feeling had reached in the country and the great capacity for struggle and sacrifice that the people had developed. The great significance of this historic movement lies in the fact that the Quit India Movement placed the demand for independence on the immediate agenda of the national movement. Freedom was not lacking far behind after the ‘Quit India’.

**Extremism in the Quit India Movement: An Observation:**

The Quit India Movement of 1942 was featured by a well organized resistance movement, on a country wide scale. The confinement of the top Congress leaders on 9th August 1942, a number of junior leaders present in the session of AICC resorted themselves to terrorist activities. With a view to channelizing the sporadic and uncoordinated energies of the people into an organized movement the leaders of the Indian national movement decided to establish underground cells all over the country in order to start a mass insurrection. The leaders of this new nationalist sentiment were Mrs. Sucheta Kripilani, Dr. Rammanohar Lohiya, Achyut Patvardhan, Usha Mehta, Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya, Poornima Banarjee, Aruna Asaf Ali etc. The extremists aimed at mass action both in the rural and urban areas. The country men were appealed to declare independence immediately, the thana, tehsils, district headquarters the symbols of British administration were to be attacked which will shatter the government machinery. At that moment when the operation was on, a parallel authority of the people would be formed. That would be the beginning of free Indian states. In the urban areas a call for a general strike was made. Regarding funds, the underground revolutionaries received good response from the Indian business community and were able to collect a good sum of money. Guerrilla bands were also employed to undertake political dacoities, in order to raise funds for local units.

The leadership saw the role of the underground movement as being that of keeping up popular morale by continuing to provide a line of command and a source of guidance and leadership to activists all over the country. Among the places in which local underground organizations were active were Bombay, Poona, Satara, Baroda and other parts of Gujarat, Karnataka, Kerela, Andhra, UP, Bihar and Delhi. Congress socialists were generally in the lead, but also active were Gandhian ashramites.

A number of courageous women leaders involved themselves in revolutionary terrorism. Prominent among them was Aruna Asaf Ali; in the face of political brutality she raised the tricolor at the historic Gwalior tank in Bombay which perhaps provided the spark that ignited the Quit India movement. The District Magistrate of Delhi declared her to be a proclaimed offender and seized her property in September in 1942, which was sold off. The colonial administration seems to have connected some illegal Bombay Bulletins to her. The Government announced a reward of Rs. 5000 on her ‘capture’. School and college girls played an important role in the revolutionary activities. Women leaders like Aruna Asaf Ali, Usha Mehta and Sucheta Kripilani were memebres of the small group that ran the Congress Radio.
Working against heavy odds with limited resources, the extremists had not been able to achieve much by way of results. They had even failed to establish a strong or lasting organization. But by their acts of courage and defiance they had kept alive the Quit India Movement much longer that it would have lasted otherwise.

Conclusion

“When the history of India’s fight for independence comes to be written, the sacrifice made by the women of India will occupy the foremost place”, Mahatma Gandhi.

The systematic study of women’s past began when students of history recognized that they are witnessing a revolution. Gerda Learner an American was pioneer in the field of women history and the first person to hold a chair in women’s studies, said, “Women have, women are in history.” Her words became a manifesto. What emerged was a new way of thinking about gender. Instead of accepting feminine identity as natural and essential, historians and social scientists treated it as constructed. The liberating hypothesis stimulated questions about women’s unequal position. On the light of this rising consciousness, the participation of women folk in the freedom struggle can be interpreted. In the perilous hours of 1942 the womanhood of India forsook the shelter of their homes with unfailing courage and endurance and stood shoulder to shoulder with their men folk.

Many prominent women played leading role in the freedom movement. This trend continued unabatedly in the Quit India days. Women once enjoyed considerable freedom and privileges in the spheres of family, religion and public life; but as centuries rolled on, the situation went on changing adversely. Whatever that may be the Indian women during the nationalist movement continued this tradition, burdens of tears and toils of the long years of struggle were borne by women sometimes as wives, sometimes as mothers and sometimes as daughters as cheerfully. The program of self imposed poverty and periodical jail going was possible only because of the willing cooperation of the family women. In the resistance movements in the villages the illiterate women played passive but contributory part as comrade to their men folk.

The Quit India Movement opened a new vista for Indian women. They got introduced with a new kind of liberalism and social status which was unknown to them before. Quit India Movement drew the largest number of women to the forefront. It was a struggle substantially waged by the womanhood. The arrest of the important leaders and the other male workers going underground the woman took charge of the situation and carried on the movement by bearing the wrath of the Raj. The sacrifices made by the teen aged girls, mother with babies in their wombs and old woman and their defiance of bullets and lathis speak of their valor and spirit of nationalism and patriotism. India has produced great women throughout her long political, social and cultural history, thus ran their historic and heroic saga of winning freedom for their mother land as well as for themselves.

References

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