

Quit India Movement: Rethinking The Role of Women

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Abstract:

Any discussion on quit India movement is incomplete without mentioning the contributions made by Indian women. Their active participation not only changed their goals but also organized the activities. They were endowed with a new spirit on the call of Mahatma Gandhi's 'do or die'. Women as a force played a crucial role which changed the course of the movement. The role played by women is a story of devotion, sacrifice and patriotism and it is marked as the most remarkable contribution towards the attainment of freedom. A sense of responsibility and dedication towards one's own country led them to organize and fight for achieving the ends. The movement encouraged women to come out of the thresholds of their homes and raise their voice against the British rule. When most of the men freedom fighters were in prison, the women came forward and took the charge of the struggle. The list of great women whose names have gone down in the history of quit India movement for their dedication and undying devotion to the service of India is a long one. The role played by women in the Quit India Movement forced us to get realize that they are not just to share power, but to change the nature of power; not just to govern, but to change the nature of governance. The objective of the present study is to analyse the role played by women during the Quit India Movement and how far it has changed the socio-political status of women in the contemporary period.

Keywords: Quit India Movement, Women leadership, Non-violence, Extremism.

I Introduction:

Without the active participation of the women no revolution in this world is complete. Women have always taken the pivotal role in all the revolutionary movement in history when fighting for an issue. It is true that in older times, women were not allowed to take part in such events actively. But in those days also, women always contributed in some way or the other to uplift the human society by helping the wounded or providing mental support to their spouses, Hence no revolutionary struggle in the history of mankind can be described fully without completely understanding the role that women played in it. Such a story of a great uprising is the Indian Freedom Movement. While many of us remember the names of various leaders who helped us achieve freedom, like Mahatma Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar among others, what we forget is the contribution of women, the determination shown by women at that time which led to the British being forced to withdraw their rule from India. They contributed in all national movements like Non-Cooperation, Civil disobedience, and Quit India Movements. Although not many women were educated or liberated enough to participate in the movement, even those women helped in some way or the other which finally led to one of the greatest successful freedom struggle in the history of man. At first, only elite women came forward in national politics but later, women from every caste and category participated in national politics to save their country.

The Quit India resolution addressed women directly "as disciplined soldiers of Indian freedom" and attracted them to the movement (Bhuyan, 2016). Women actively participated in the various protests that were taking place at the time. The techniques used by women were

according to Gandhi's previous methods- salt-making, boycotts of courts and schools, picketing cloth and liquor shops, and non-payment of taxes. The movement began in the cities with strikes, demonstrations, and clashes with the police and moved to the countryside where peasants rebelled against landowners and the agents of British authority. Women participated in the initial strikes and demonstrations in cities, with the radical students who organized peasant movements, and, when protest was suppressed, joined the secret underground.

II Methodology

The present work is basically compiled with various sources like journals, books and newspaper reports. It follows descriptive and analytical method from a gender perspective. The present paper includes a critical use of both primary and secondary sources based on external and internal criticism.

III Role of women in Quit India Movement

Women's early contribution to the national movement started in the late 19th century with women's participation in the Indian National Congress. The nationalist movement led by Gandhi was based on non-violence. This ideology guided women to step over the thresholds of their home. They participated in the freedom struggle irrespective of their age, marital status, social background, rural urban differences. Their nature of struggle was not just non-violent, but also included armed movement. However, the ad hoc participation of women in different stages of Indian national movement is 'little narratives' that operate under the banner of different revolutionary ideologies (Deka, 2013).

An increase in the participation of the women in the freedom struggle was noticed particularly after 1930s. The need for organizing a women's wing in the Congress was felt by 1940s.

Vijaylakshmi Pandit, Aruna Asaf Ali, Mridula Sarabhai and Sucheta Kriplani took the leadership in organizing a women's wing of the Congress in order 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.

After the failure of Cripps Mission in 1942 Mahatma Gandhi had come up in his writings with the concept of Quit India Movement. Demanding immediate withdrawal of British rule over India, The Congress Working Committee passed the Quit India resolution on 14th May, 1942 at Wardha. In its Bombay session held on 7 and 8 August, 1942 The All India Congress Committee endorsed the Wardha decision on Quit India. The Viceroy empowered by Governor General-in-Council took drastic action to suppress the movement. Congress organizations at all levels were declared illegal. Top Congress leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi and many others were arrested on 9th August 1942. The arrest of all leading national leaders made the movement leaderless. Under this circumstance, the All India Congress committee resolved, "Every men 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.

Women's participation in the Quit India Movement of 1942 is a story of devotion, sacrifice and patriotism and it will submerge in history as the most remarkable contribution towards the attainment of freedom. They actively participated in the different constructive works in a planned

and effective way. They took part in thousands in active demonstration against the British oppressions by taking out processions, holding meetings and demonstrations. The women volunteers propagate Gandhi's motto of 'do or die' and spread the message of Quit India in the different meetings held in villages throughout the country.

Several women leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Meera Ben and Sushila Nayar were arrested along with Gandhi on 9th August, 1942. The arrests of the national and local leaders caused tremendous turmoil among the masses. The masses were rejuvenated with a new spirit employed their full strength and energy for the cause of the freedom. The Quit India Movement deflated in many ways from the Gandhian policy of non-violence, as the movement becomes leaderless. The increasing oppression of the government contributed to the increase of violent activities among the masses. The Movement was characterized by extremists' activities like attacking the government buildings, damaged railway tracks and sabotaged military supply lines. The British government justified the suppression of Quit India Movement on the ground that it uses violence in an unprecedented scale and women were the worst sufferers (Bandyopadhyaya, 2009). The common practices used by the police and military personnel for the suppressions of women activists were insulting with obscene language, slapping, beating, forcefully entering the house during the night hours and misbehaving with the women. 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 brutality.

After the imprisonment of top Congress leaders on 9th August 1942, a number of junior leaders indulged themselves to terrorist activities. In order to organize 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. Mrs. Sucheta Kriplani, Dr. Rammanohar Lohiya, Achyut Patvardhan, Usha Mehta, Kamala Devi Chattopadhaya, Poornima Banarjee, Aruna Asaf Ali etc were the new activists of this extremist sentiment. The extremists aimed at mass action both in the rural and urban areas. They appealed the countrymen to run a parallel local government which will shatter the government machinery. That would be the beginning of free Indian states. They received good response from the Indian business community in the matters of fund collection and were able to collect a good sum of money. Guerrilla bands were also deployed to raise funds for local units by political dacoities.

IV Rethinking the role of Women

Women's participation in the Quit India Movement was significant from different ground. Through this movement India saw for the first time, the active engagement of women in the freedom struggle. Women set aside the shelter of their homes and with unprecedented courage and endurance stood with their men counterparts to share with them the sacrifices and triumphs of the struggle. Their participation added to the legitimacy of the Indian freedom movement which was equally appreciated by men. Gandhi realized that women's nature is best suited for nonviolent *satyagraha*, as it required not much physical strength but moral courage and spiritual determination. This movement introduced them to a new kind of liberation movement which helped them to organize and fight for achieving the goals. The Indian National Congress also recognized the inclusion of a large number of women as a part of its agitations.

According to Kouzes and Posner (1995) 'Leadership is the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations'. Women have the capacity of enhancing, transforming

and expanding the notion of power and politics and are capable of giving full meaning to the concept of representation and leadership. Based on historical experience they forced us to realize that they are not just to share power, but to change the nature of power; not just to govern, but to change the nature of governance (Jain, 2013). When most of the important Congress leaders were behind bars, the women leaders took the responsibility of directing and taking forward the national movement. Sucheta Kriplani carried the non-violent Satyagraha, while Aruna Asaf Ali guided the underground revolutionary activities. Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti of Bengal also mobilized the rural women.

(Menon, 2011) noted “It is difficult now, in this new century, to recapture or imagine the enormous optimism of those early years of what is called the second wave of the Women’s movement in India.” (Sen, 2000) also made similar observation in this regard. According to her “The women's movement in India took off in the 1920s, building on the 19th-century social reform movement. The women's movement progressed during the period of high nationalism and the freedom struggle, both of which shaped its contours ...” (Thapar, 1975) in her book *Indian Women*, noted that participation of women in Indian national movement lead to a greater participation of women in the post independence period as compared to their Western counterparts. She quoted “Participation in the politics of the national movement was an act of patriotism and political life became a respectable vocation for a woman”. These findings help us to understand the contribution of several women leaders who made a radical difference to women’s life in the ‘50s and ‘60s. The active participation of women in picketing shops, processions, throwing bombs etc. generated a sense of self-confidence and a realization of their own strength. They did not question the male leadership or patriarchal values. With their continued activities in the public arena they waved the economic and social ground of other women of the society. The sub-

committee named 'Woman's Role in Planned Economy (WRPE)' formed by the Congress party in 1939, comprising women leaders at that time reported that the traditional vision of the man in front carving out new paths, and the woman trailing behind with the child in his arms must be changed to 'man and woman, comrades on the road, going forward together, the child joyously shared by both' (Jain 2013). They also demanded that the women's unpaid labour within family should have the right to claim all the facilities, given to the other workers by the state. Gandhiji involved a number of women leaders into different political bodies, based on the belief that they would achieve liberation which in turn will encourage them to achieve women's rights through their active participation in national movement. It cannot be denied that women became aware of their potential in contemporary society following the Gandhi's ideology. He gave them courage and confidences, making them realize that the national movement would not succeed without their active participation (Norvell, 1997).

Conclusion:

Thus the involvement of women in the Quit India movement took different forms, from non-violent movements to active protests. Through their movements they made Indian men familiar of their determination, courage and capabilities. With their limited resources, the extremists had not been able to achieve much by way of results. But they had kept alive the Quit India Movement much longer than it would have lasted otherwise. With the Quit India Movement they got introduced with a new kind of liberalism and social status which was untouched by them before. Remarking upon the role played by women in the freedom struggle, Mahatma Gandhi had said, "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." The ripples

of these past movements have undoubtedly reached in the current century. The active role played by women in the Quit India Movement will bring immense strength in the effort to achieve common objectives of present day.

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