



Political Conditions of India on the Eve of the Quit India Movement

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ABSTRACT

The Quit India Movement of 1942 was a defining moment in India's fight for independence, driven by rising nationalist sentiment, economic distress, and British repression. Sparked by India's forced involvement in World War II and the failure of the Cripps Mission, the movement called for the immediate end of British rule. Mahatma Gandhi's slogan "Do or Die" galvanized mass participation, with students, women, workers, and peasants taking an active role. The British responded with severe crackdowns, imprisoning leaders and using military force. Despite its suppression, the movement highlighted the resilience of Indian nationalism and exposed the contradictions of British colonialism. It also marked a crucial step toward India's eventual independence in 1947. The active participation of women and rural communities underscored the widespread discontent with British policies. The Quit India Movement, though crushed militarily, succeeded in politically undermining British rule, proving that Indian self-rule was inevitable. The paper explores the movement's origins, leadership, grassroots involvement, and its impact on India's independence struggle.

INTRODUCTION

A turning point in India's fight for independence, the Quit India Movement of 1942 was Driven by the mounting unhappiness with the British government's imperialist tactics, the failure of constitutional discussions, and the terrible effects of World War II, it represented the pinnacle of nationalist opposition to British colonial control. On the eve of this movement, India's political environment was moulded by a complicated interaction of internal and outside elements including the repressive colonial government, the growing radicalism of the liberation fight, and the impact of world political events. Along with proving the tenacity of Indian nationalism, the campaign highlighted the inherent inconsistencies of British rule—which professed to support democracy outside while enslaving millions of people in India.¹

The background of the Quit India Movement was created in 1939 when Britain unilaterally announced India's involvement in World War II without consulting its government. Having been promoting self-rule, the Indian National Congress considered this as a flagrant disrespect of Indian sovereignty. The Congress was further alienated by the British government's lack of clarity on its post-war goals for India, which resulted in the resigning of its ministries in protest. Economic hardships, inflation, food shortages, and the failure of the Cripps Mission in 1942, which promised only a hazy promise of dominion status after the war, a proposition that was generally rejected by Indian leaders, marked the war years' growing disenchantment with British rule.²

The great leader of the Indian nationalist movement, Mahatma Gandhi regarded this as chance to intensify the fight for total independence. Approved by the All India Congress Committee on August 8, 1942, the Quit India resolution demanded an immediate end of British rule and the start of a mass nonviolent campaign. Gandhi's "Do or Die" rallying cry became into a distinguishing phrase that encouraged broad involvement all throughout India. With students, workers, women, and peasants especially important, the movement witnessed large public rallies, strikes, and acts of civil disobedience. The British reacted with merciless persecution, arresting eminent leaders, passing harsh laws, and sending police and military troops to quell the rebellion.³

The Quit India Movement was notable for among other things the extraordinary involvement of women. Women formed clandestine resistance, assumed leadership positions, participated in demonstrations, and confronted severe reprisals from colonial officials. Rural India was also greatly affected by the movement as local leaders and peasants tried to create parallel administrations in opposition to British rule. Areas such Midnapore, Ballia, and Satara became nuclei of resistance showing the intense hostility to British policy. Therefore, the political environment in India on the eve of the Quit India Movement revealed a combustible combination of nationalist ambitions, colonial repression, economic hardship, and world political changes. Although the uprising was finally put down, it was a pivotal turning point in India's independence campaign. The harsh reaction of the British administration just strengthened the validity of the demand for independence and prepared the ground for the last step of India's liberation in 1947.⁴

The outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 marked a significant turning point in global politics, and its ramifications were deeply felt in colonial India. Britain's declaration of war against Germany on September 3, 1939, was proclaimed in the name of defending democracy and protecting weaker nations. However, this stance was riddled with contradictions, as Britain remained unwilling to grant independence to India, its largest colony. India, devoid of an independent foreign policy, was forced into the conflict without any consultation. Lord Linlithgow, the Governor-General of India, unilaterally declared India's involvement in the war, disregarding the opinions of Indian political leaders. This unilateral decision exposed the fundamental hypocrisy of British rule, igniting a new wave of resistance in India.

The Indian National Congress and Its Opposition to the War

Having established its position clearly in its 1936 election program, the Indian National Congress denounced India's involvement in an imperialist war. In September 1939, the Congress Working Committee reaffirmed this stance, denouncing Nazi aggression and underlining that Indians themselves should decide on issues of war and peace for India. Their demand for a clear statement of British war aims and a guarantee of Indian independence, however, was categorically turned down This denial strengthened the conviction of



Indian officials about the exploitative and unreliable nature of British authority. The Congress ministers resigned in reaction in protest, therefore bringing about a significant political change.⁵

With Mahatma Gandhi's demand for Individual Satyagraha, meant to carry out nonviolent anti-war propaganda and encourage non-cooperation with the British war effort, the Congress's opposition assumed a more ordered shape. Initiated on October 17, 1940, this campaign by Vinoba Bhave resulted in the detention of about 30,000 men and women. As Japan advanced into India, the situation became increasingly unstable and the British government was obliged to change its stance. Under Sir Stafford Cripps in 1942, the Cripps Mission was a last-ditch effort at Indian collaboration. All major political parties rejected the ideas presented, however, as they were generally seen as hypocritical and insufficient. This diplomatic collapse strengthened Indians' resolve for total freedom and heightened their feeling of betrayal.⁶

Resolution for British Withdrawal

Frustrated by the British government's intransigence, the Congress Working Committee passed a resolution in July 1942 demanding immediate British withdrawal from India. This was formally endorsed by the All India Congress Committee on August 7-8, 1942, in Bombay, leading to the launch of the Quit India Movement. The resolution marked a decisive break from previous negotiations and was aimed at mobilizing mass resistance on an unprecedented scale. The movement was driven by the belief that non-violent mass struggle, strengthened through decades of political agitation, could force the British to relinquish control.⁷

The demand for mass struggle has great resonance among Indians. Inspired by British losses at the hands of Japan, suffering of war refugees, and repressive wartime measures, people from all walks of life rose in opposition. The British government answered with pure force. On August 9, 1942 Gandhi and other Congress leaders were taken into custody. Gandhi's concise yet forceful exhortation, "Do or Die," became a rallying cry for millions before to his incarceration. News of his detention set to immediate hartals in Bombay, Ahmedabad, and Poona that rapidly extended throughout the nation. Student boycotts caused universities to close; industrial workers from places like Ahmedabad, Bombay, Kanpur, Indore, Bangalore, and Mysore went on strike; rural communities also started to resist. People proclaimed themselves free, seized government buildings, occupied police stations, and raised Indian flags over secretariats and courts in numerous districts. In Bihar, the Central Provinces, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka, Assam, and Bengal the movement acquired notable momentum.⁸

The British reaction was austere. To quell the revolt, tough legislation like the Special Court Ordinance, the Collective Fine Ordinance, and the Penalties Enhancement Ordinance were passed. Public floggings, mass arrests, property theft, and even extrajudicial killings—among other types of state-sponsored repression—were made lawful by these statutes. Thousands of political activists were imprisoned and Congress offices and monies were seized. The whole country became a huge jail as British officials tried to re-establish control by pure might.⁹

Despite the repressive circumstances, Indian women were instrumental in keeping the campaign going. Women took the stage for marches, demonstrations, and underground activity while many male leaders were incarcerated. They set up political training camps, provided first aid, taught democracy and constitutional rights, and even went through lathi drills—self-defense training. Led by women, the Political Prisoners' Relief Fund gathered large sums of money to assist detained activists. Many women worked from underground, planning ways to avoid British crackdowns and maintain the resistance.¹⁰ Bengal, especially the Tamluk subdivision in Midnapore, boasts among the most amazing illustrations of women's involvement. Tamluk residents created a volunteer army of men and women as part of their defence against British persecution and Japanese invasion.¹¹ Relief committees were formed, training camps were put up, and a Khadi Centre with 4,000 women spinners was founded. Formed simultaneously with National Government, it operated until August 1944 and was disbanded at Gandhi's request.¹²

In Tamluk, women activists boldly challenged British rule. Aiming to seize a police station, a seventy-three-year-old lady named Matangini Hazra organised one demonstration.¹³ She urged authorities to join the liberation struggle until she was shot dead, refusing to let the national flag fall as police fired at her. Other crimes followed: at least one woman in the area perished from the attack while seventy-four more were raped



by British officials. Women responded by forming the Bhagini Seva Sangha to defend their honour and by planning violent opposition.¹⁴ For wielding daggers in self-defence, several women even came under Arms Act punishment.

Another prominent woman in the resistance was Kalpana Dutta, who had earlier participated in the Chittagong Armoury Raid of 1930. After her release in 1939 due to efforts from Rabindranath Tagore, C.F. Andrews, and Gandhi, she actively engaged in communist labor movements.¹⁵ However, with the outbreak of the Second World War, she was ordered to leave Calcutta and was interned in Chittagong. From there, she carried out underground political work, including organizing secret meetings, distributing propaganda materials, and maintaining communication between different revolutionary groups. Her unwavering commitment highlighted the growing radicalization of the Indian freedom struggle.

CONCLUSION

The political conditions in India on the eve of the Quit India Movement were marked by growing disillusionment with British rule, intensified by wartime exploitation and repression. The failure of the Cripps Mission only reinforced the belief that independence was non-negotiable. The Quit India Movement represented the culmination of decades of political struggle, with mass participation from all sections of society. Women, in particular, played an unprecedented role, demonstrating resilience and courage in the face of brutal repression. Despite the immediate failure of the movement due to British military suppression, it fundamentally altered the political landscape. By exposing the limits of British control and mobilizing the masses on an unparalleled scale, the movement paved the way for India's eventual independence in 1947. The sheer scale of sacrifice and resistance in 1942 underscored the Indian people's unyielding demand for self-rule, making the Quit India Movement a decisive moment in the nation's history.

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