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The voice of freedom: Role of women in secret radio broadcasting of 1942

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Abstract
The Quit India Movement of 1942 represented a decisive moment in India's independence struggle, where communication and morale were critical under conditions of censorship and repression. Amid these challenges, women played a transformative role through the clandestine operation of Congress Radio, led by Usha Mehta. This secret broadcasting initiative disseminated nationalist messages, patriotic songs, and strategic instructions, bypassing colonial censorship and uniting citizens across urban and rural India. Women not only managed technical operations but also ensured secrecy, relocation of equipment, and dissemination of information under constant threat of arrest. Their participation challenged gender norms by positioning women as strategists, communicators, and leaders in a high-risk political and technological domain. The broadcasts sustained the Quit India Movement by reinforcing unity, resilience, and collective participation, while simultaneously reshaping perceptions of women's agency in nationalist resistance. By examining these contributions, this paper highlights the intersection of gender, communication, and political activism, underscoring how women's courage and innovation left an enduring legacy in India's fight for freedom.

Keywords: Voice of freedom, secret radio, radio broadcasting, British colonial, Usha Mehta

Introduction
The Quit India Movement of 1942 marked a crucial turning point in India's struggle for independence, mobilizing millions of Indians to rise against British colonial rule. While mass protests, strikes, and underground revolutionary activities defined the movement, the significant contributions of women have often been overlooked. Among these, the clandestine operation of the Congress Radio, also known as the Secret Radio, stands out as a remarkable example of women's courage and strategic innovation. Led by Usha Mehta, a young and determined activist, women coordinated the production, transmission, and dissemination of nationalist broadcasts that reached citizens and freedom fighters across the country. These broadcasts informed listeners about ongoing protests, inspired participation, and countered British propaganda. Operating under extreme risk of arrest, imprisonment, and persecution, the women involved demonstrated extraordinary bravery and organizational skill [1].

Their involvement challenged traditional gender roles, showing that women could assume leadership positions in political resistance, strategy, and communication. By using radio waves as a tool of freedom, these women strengthened the movement's reach, cohesion, and morale. Their work not only kept the spirit of the movement alive but also created a template for the strategic use of media in resistance movements. By examining their contributions, we gain a richer understanding of how women actively shaped the Quit India Movement, asserting agency in a male-dominated political landscape and leaving a lasting legacy in India's struggle for independence [2].

Women entering the airwaves
Communication posed one of the greatest challenges during the Quit India Movement. With top leaders imprisoned, newspapers heavily censored, and public gatherings strictly banned by the British, the movement faced the serious risk of losing momentum and coherence. At this critical juncture, women emerged as courageous agents of change, stepping into roles that were both highly strategic and extremely dangerous. Among them, Usha Mehta, a young Gandhian activist, recognized the untapped potential of radio technology [3]. Though

broadcasting was tightly controlled by colonial authorities, she understood that it could serve as a powerful medium to bypass censorship and reach ordinary citizens directly, transmitting messages of resistance, hope, and solidarity. On August 27, 1942, under Mehta's leadership, the Congress Radio, often referred to as the Secret Radio, was launched. The station broadcast regular messages from national leaders, patriotic songs, updates about strikes, protests, and acts of civil disobedience, and instructions for local activists to sustain momentum despite British crackdowns. The very act of establishing a secret broadcasting network was revolutionary, particularly for women, who were traditionally expected to occupy supportive or domestic roles rather than assume leadership in political and technological spheres [4].

Women not only operated the equipment but also coordinated logistics, ensured the secrecy of transmission locations, and maintained communication networks across cities. They meticulously planned the relocation of the transmitter to avoid detection, often moving heavy equipment under the cover of night, disguising their movements, and using covert signals to communicate across neighborhoods [5]. Some women also trained volunteers in the technical aspects of radio operation, including understanding signal strength, power management, and emergency protocols, demonstrating remarkable adaptability in a male-dominated technical field. Their work required ingenuity, vigilance, and immense courage, as discovery by the British authorities could result in imprisonment, torture, or even the dismantling of the entire operation. Many of these women also engaged in spreading messages from the broadcasts to remote villages, ensuring that information reached citizens who did not have direct access to radios. This role involved clandestine travel, discreet messaging, and the careful building of trust within communities all under the constant threat of surveillance [6].

By entering the airwaves, these women transformed communication from a passive form of support into a direct instrument of political action. They demonstrated that gender did not limit one's capacity to influence and lead a nationwide movement. Through their initiative, women like Usha Mehta proved that technological innovation could be harnessed for freedom struggles, and that their participation was not merely supplementary but central to sustaining resistance and morale during one of India's most decisive moments. Their pioneering efforts left a lasting legacy, highlighting the intersection of gender, media, and political activism in the history of India's independence movement. These brave women redefined the possibilities of female participation, inspiring subsequent generations to recognize that courage, skill, and strategic thinking know no gender [7].

The role of Usha Mehta

Usha Mehta, barely in her early twenties, emerged as the central figure in the daring operation of the Congress Radio. Despite her youth, she demonstrated exceptional leadership, courage, and organizational skills that were crucial for the success of this clandestine mission. Operating under strict secrecy, she and her team of dedicated women activists shifted the radio transmitter across multiple locations in Bombay (now Mumbai) to evade detection by the British authorities. Each relocation involved meticulous planning, covert coordination, and the management of volunteers who risked their safety to ensure the broadcasts continued uninterrupted [8].

Mehta faced enormous personal risk. Arrest, interrogation, and torture were constant threats, yet she remained undeterred in her mission to maintain the flow of nationalist communication. Her broadcasts were not merely informational; they carried a powerful tone of reassurance, solidarity, and inspiration, signaling to the Indian populace that the struggle for independence persisted despite harsh repression and widespread crackdowns. Her famous opening line, "This is the Congress Radio calling on 42.34 meters from somewhere in India," became emblematic of resistance, courage, and defiance [9]. It symbolized the indomitable spirit of the freedom movement and became a rallying cry for both urban and rural populations across India. The Congress Radio was far more than a communication device; it was a lifeline connecting disparate groups of activists and ordinary citizens. Listeners depended on the broadcasts for updates on strikes, underground activities, and strategic instructions that enabled continued participation in the Quit India Movement. The secret radio forged a sense of unity, hope, and resilience, demonstrating that even in the face of imprisonment and violence, the nationalist spirit could be sustained [10].

Usha Mehta's leadership also highlighted the broader significance of women's roles in India's freedom struggle. By taking charge of the Congress Radio, she challenged societal expectations that women should remain confined to domestic or auxiliary roles. She became a strategist, communicator, and symbol of courage, proving that women were capable of leading high-risk, high-impact political initiatives. Her actions inspired countless other women to participate actively in the independence movement, whether through underground work, local organizing, or supporting civil disobedience campaigns [11]. Moreover, Mehta's operational genius ensured that the technical challenges of running a clandestine radio station such as signal transmission, avoiding detection, and maintaining secrecy-were successfully overcome. She combined ingenuity with discipline, organizing a network of volunteers who meticulously rotated locations, maintained the equipment, and safeguarded the information. The risk extended not only to those directly operating the station but also to families and supporters who could face reprisal from colonial authorities, yet the team persisted undaunted [12].

Through her courage, foresight, and unwavering dedication, Usha Mehta ensured that the voice of the Quit India Movement reached every corner it could, defying censorship and oppression. Her leadership left an indelible mark on the history of India's struggle for independence, demonstrating that women's contributions were central, strategic, and transformative. By spearheading the Congress Radio, she became a symbol of women's agency, resilience, and innovation, underscoring the indispensable role of women in shaping India's fight for freedom [13].

Contributions of other women

While Usha Mehta is rightly remembered as the central figure and public face of the Congress Radio, the success of this clandestine operation was equally reliant on the tireless and courageous efforts of numerous other women who worked behind the scenes. These women provided safe houses, identified secret locations, and facilitated the continuous relocation of the transmitter to ensure that

broadcasts could be set up, operated, and dismantled without detection by British authorities. Their logistical work involved carrying, concealing, and transporting critical equipment such as microphones, transmitters, batteries, and power supplies-often through crowded streets or covert routes-to avoid surveillance and interception [14].

Beyond logistical support, these women were instrumental in maintaining the flow of information and sustaining public engagement with the movement. They communicated broadcast schedules, encouraged listeners to tune in discreetly, and helped circulate vital messages to communities lacking direct access to the radio. These tasks required not only courage but also technical acumen, as operating and maintaining radio equipment in the 1940s demanded an understanding of electrical circuits, signal strength, and transmission techniques-a domain largely dominated by men at the time. Many of these women performed their roles under extreme risk, facing the possibility of imprisonment, torture, or the complete dismantling of the operation if discovered, yet they persisted with determination and precision [15].

Their efforts allowed the Congress Radio to frequently shift locations, maintaining secrecy and continuity, ensuring that messages of resistance, patriotism, and solidarity reached a wide audience across India. These women demonstrated that participation in the nationalist struggle extended far beyond leadership positions or public protest. Through careful planning, technical skill, and unwavering commitment, they became indispensable to the operation's success, exemplifying how courage could manifest in both visible and invisible forms [16].

Moreover, their work highlighted the collaborative nature of the Quit India Movement, showing that its achievements relied not only on prominent leaders but also on collective action and coordinated efforts by women at multiple levels. These unsung heroines complemented Usha Mehta's leadership, proving that women's contributions were central to sustaining the momentum of the independence struggle. By stepping into these critical roles, they expanded the scope of female participation in nationalist activities, challenging prevailing gender norms and demonstrating that women were capable of strategic, technical, and revolutionary action. Their resilience, ingenuity, and dedication ensured that the voice of freedom continued to resonate across the country, leaving a lasting legacy that underscores the transformative and indispensable role of women in India's fight for independence [17].

Impact of secret broadcasting

The Congress Radio broadcasts created a profound and unsettling impact on the British colonial administration, who had assumed that strict censorship and arrests would quickly suppress nationalist communication. Despite their intensive efforts, including raiding homes and monitoring signals, the authorities were unable to immediately locate or silence the secret station. This demonstrated both the ingenuity of the operators and the limitations of colonial surveillance. Ordinary citizens across urban and rural India tuned in secretly, often gathering in small groups to listen to updates, speeches, and patriotic songs. These broadcasts served as a vital lifeline, connecting people with the larger freedom movement at a time when public gatherings were banned and newspapers heavily censored [18].

The messages relayed through Congress Radio maintained morale, inspired courage, and instilled a sense of unity among Indians. Citizens learned about local and regional protests, strikes, and acts of civil disobedience, which enabled coordinated resistance against colonial policies. The broadcasts also highlighted the sacrifices of imprisoned leaders, reinforcing the idea that the struggle for independence continued despite setbacks. The secret transmission of information ensured that news of the movement's progress was not entirely dependent on word-of-mouth, reducing the risk of misinformation and maintaining the momentum of collective action [19].

Although the British eventually traced the radio signals and shut down the operation in November 1942, the impact of the Congress Radio had already been profound. It demonstrated the power of innovative communication in sustaining mass movements, proving that resistance could thrive even under strict repression. Moreover, the broadcasts reinforced the centrality of women in strategic roles within the nationalist struggle, as it was their courage, technical skill, and organizational acumen that kept the station operational [20]. The legacy of Congress Radio extended beyond the immediate events of 1942. It became a symbol of defiance, ingenuity, and the unyielding spirit of the freedom movement. Its success inspired future generations of activists to recognize the importance of communication, coordination, and creative methods of resistance. By bypassing colonial censorship, the radio empowered ordinary citizens to participate in the independence struggle, fostering a sense of agency and collective responsibility. In this way, the secret broadcasting not only strengthened the Quit India Movement at the time but also left an enduring mark on India's historical memory, highlighting the transformative impact of women-led initiatives in shaping the course of the nation's fight for freedom [21].

Legacy

The story of women in secret radio broadcasting serves as a profound testament to the multifaceted and inclusive nature of India's independence struggle. It illustrates that the fight for freedom extended far beyond the streets, protest marches, and prison cells, reaching innovative arenas such as the airwaves, where communication itself became a powerful instrument of resistance. Usha Mehta's courage, vision, and leadership transformed the Congress Radio into a symbol of defiance, demonstrating that even under the shadow of strict colonial surveillance and repression, women could exercise agency, take calculated risks, and significantly influence the course of the nationalist movement. Her pioneering example inspired countless other women to step forward, challenging entrenched societal norms that often confined them to domestic or supporting roles. Through her leadership, women recognized their capacity to function as strategists, organizers, communicators, and decision-makers, actively shaping the political landscape rather than remaining passive observers [22].

Equally important was the collective dimension of this endeavor. Many other women contributed tirelessly through logistical support, technical management of equipment, and the dissemination of critical information, forming an interconnected network that sustained the secret radio's operations despite constant threats of detection and arrest. Their coordinated efforts exemplified teamwork, courage,

and ingenuity, highlighting how women collectively expanded the boundaries of participation in the nationalist struggle [23]. Moreover, the legacy of the Congress Radio underscores the crucial role of innovative communication in sustaining mass movements. By reaching ordinary citizens in towns, villages, and remote areas, the broadcasts fostered a sense of participation, unity, and resilience among the populace, reinforcing that the struggle for independence was a shared endeavor requiring the engagement of all societal segments. The creativity, technical skill, and strategic thinking demonstrated by Usha Mehta and her collaborators continue to resonate in contemporary discussions on women's leadership, civic engagement, and activism [24].

By commemorating these contributions, historians and educators ensure that the narrative of India's independence fully reflects the voices, actions, and sacrifices of women, acknowledging their indispensable role in achieving a free and democratic nation. The legacy of the secret radio, therefore, is not merely a historical episode but also an enduring symbol of women's empowerment, courage, intellectual initiative, and unwavering commitment to justice, national liberation, and social transformation. Their story affirms that women were not merely participants but central architects of India's freedom struggle, capable of shaping history through intellect, perseverance, and bravery [25].

Conclusion

The secret radio of 1942 was more than a technological innovation; it became a powerful symbol of defiance, courage, and hope during the Quit India Movement. Women, especially Usha Mehta, used radio waves to bypass colonial censorship, spreading messages of resistance and inspiration to millions. Operating in secrecy and under constant threat of arrest, they demonstrated remarkable bravery, skill, and leadership, challenging traditional gender roles in political activism. The broadcasts maintained morale, unity, and participation among ordinary citizens, proving that resistance could extend beyond physical protests to strategic communication. The initiative highlights the indispensable role of women in shaping India's freedom struggle, showing that innovation, determination, and courage can turn even invisible tools into instruments of liberation. The legacy of Congress Radio ensures that women's voices and actions remain central to the narrative of India's independence. Their efforts continue to inspire future generations, emphasizing the importance of women's leadership in social and political movements. The story of Congress Radio reminds us that courage and creativity can challenge oppression in innovative ways. Ultimately, it cements women's place not just as participants but as pioneers in India's journey to freedom.

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