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Role Of Youths In Organizing Quit India Movement In Ballia

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Abstract

On August 8, 1942, the Congress Working Committee passed the Quit India Resolution, marking a decisive moment in India's struggle for independence. In response, the British government swiftly arrested prominent Congress leaders. This created a leadership vacuum that was soon filled by emerging youth leaders, sparking widespread disturbances across the country. In Ballia, the movement was spearheaded by college students. These students took the bold step of shutting down their colleges and initiating protests, resulting in many of them being arrested. On August 10, student led rallies and meetings led to a complete shutdown of the local market. The momentum quickly spread to the surrounding countryside. The inability of British authorities to effectively respond undermined their legitimacy, and their position was further weakened when they resorted to force. This uprising in Ballia was driven by a distinctive local environment, shaped by a long standing tradition of resistance that had prepared its people, particularly the youth, for radical action. This section will explore the foundational context, arguing that the youth-led rebellion was the result of this unique legacy of defiance, intensified by the powerful national and international forces at play in 1942. Between August 10 and 17, unrest spread across the entire district. Over the following two weeks, Ballia was effectively cut off from the rest of the region. Revolutionaries disrupted railway services, severed telegraph lines, and blocked major roads, isolating the district and crippling colonial communication and transportation networks. This paper examines the critical role played by youth in the organization and leadership of the Quit India Movement in Ballia during August 1942. It highlights how young activists, inspired by nationalist and socialist ideologies, transformed the district into a significant centre of anti-colonial resistance.

Key Words: National Movement, Quit India Movement, Qaumi Seva Dal, Satyagraha, Arya Kumar sabha, Swaraj, Ziladish.

Background

In August 1942, the British administration collapsed in the regions of Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. At the time, British forces were engaged in fighting Japanese aggression on the eastern front, and Ballia, strategically located on the main line of contact with the northeast, became a focal point of unrest. The situation bore a striking resemblance to the Revolt of 1857. When Hallet, the Governor of the United Provinces, referred to the events as a “rebellion,” Governor-General Linlithgow reacted sharply. However, following this exchange, the term “rebellion” came to be widely used to describe what became known as the August Revolution of 1942.¹

Economic conditions were among the key factors that set the stage for the Quit India Movement. Between 1939 and 1943, the wholesale price index (with 1940 as the base year = 100) surged dramatically from 108 to 307.² This sharp rise in prices primarily affected small tenants and agricultural laborers. Although Max Harcourt later examined the role of inflation in causing unrest, it is important to note that prices began to rise significantly only in early 1943, not in 1942.³ In fact, in absolute terms, the prices of wheat and rice in the primary markets of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar were still lower than in 1929.⁴ Against this economic backdrop, the Quit India Movement found strong support in Ballia, where the youth played a crucial role in its organization. Historically, Ballia had been a center of resistance since the Revolt of 1857. The British government maintained a close watch on the region, as local opposition had continued sporadically over the years. By the 1930s, Ballia had also become a key contact point for revolutionaries from Punjab and Bengal. Icons like Bhagat Singh and Chandrashekhar Azad enjoyed great popularity in the area.⁵

Ballia's tradition of resistance was deeply rooted in pride for figures like Mangal Pandey, a hero of the 1857 uprising, and Kunwar Singh, a zamindar from nearby Shahabad who often camped in the region. The spread of nationalist sentiment began with the Arya Samaj, promoted by a local zamindar, Ganga Singh. He played a vital role in founding Ballia's district branch of the Indian National Congress in 1919.⁶

During the 1920s and 1930s, Ballia did not play a prominent role in the nationalist movement. In 1931, the police arrested all key members of the District Congress Committee on fabricated charges of conspiracy and inciting violence. Although the court eventually dismissed these charges, the leaders remained imprisoned throughout the period of unrest.⁷ This incident highlighted both the ease with which the police controlled the agitation and the lack of strong local leadership and organization in Uttar Pradesh at the time. Meanwhile, during the 1930s, Banaras emerged as a significant hub of revolutionary activity. Students from wealthy families in Ballia who went to study at Banaras Hindu University came into contact with young revolutionaries and eventually formed their own radical revolutionary groups.⁸

During this period, many students who gained admission to Banaras Hindu University, though not directly affiliated with underground political organisations, became increasingly radical in their political beliefs. This shift was largely due to BHU's environment, which fostered strong Marxist and socialist sympathies.⁹ Similarly, Kashi Vidyapeeth in Banaras—established to promote national education in contrast to British-style English education—produced a significant number of politically radical students, heavily influenced by its principal, Narendra Dev. Some students from both BHU and Kashi Vidyapeeth played active roles in organizing the Kisan Sabha movement across the United Provinces. Meanwhile, other young nationalist radicals channeled their revolutionary zeal into acts like train robberies, which they termed “Swadeshi dacoities.” By the mid-1930s, Kisan Sabha's had gained considerable momentum in the region, driven by younger Congress members who identified as socialists.¹⁰ In Ballia, the Kisan Sabha specifically opposed only foreign landlords. A communist leader, Vishwanath Mardana, led aggressive campaigns against the zamindaris of Kasim Bazar, Jaunpur, and Dumraon. However, the Kisan Sabha in Ballia itself remained largely inactive and lacked militancy during this time. During the period of Congress Ministries, primary membership in Congress increased in eastern Uttar Pradesh and primarily in Ballia, as this table indicates:-

Primary membership of the congress in three districts of Eastern Uttar Pradesh, 1937-1939.

District	13 Nov 1937	30 Sep 1939
Banaras	13,648	14,182
Ballia	12,610	21,027
Ghazipur	6,304	7,748

(Source: AICC papers, File No. 20(1) of 1937 and c-1 of 1940)

This increase may not be surprising for Ghazipur and Banaras, but membership in Ballia was nearly double. Reports from AICC align with those submitted by government officials and later confirmed by the Intelligence Bureau.¹¹

During this period, another significant force emerged such as the Congress Qaumi Seva Dal. Formed under the broader leadership of the Indian National Congress, it quickly gained popularity, particularly among rural youth, whom it sought to recruit for the nationalist movement. Originally established in 1938 as the Congress Qaumi Sena with R.S. Pandit as its convener, the organization was influenced by Jawaharlal Nehru's ideas about a National Militia, inspired by his visit to Republican Spain that same year.¹² However, in 1939, the name was changed to Qaumi Seva Dal following objections from Gandhians, who felt that its militaristic uniform and discipline too closely resembled those of the police. Although the Seva Dal did not gain significant traction across most of Uttar Pradesh, it found a stronghold in Ballia, where it was notably active under the leadership of young socialist leaders such as Rajeshwar Tiwari and Viswanath Choubey. Both were students at Banaras Hindu University and young men in their twenties from wealthy, landowning families in Ballia. They were also affiliated with the Congress Socialist Party. In an interview with Chandan Mitra, Rajeshwar Tiwari shared detailed insights into the activities of the Qaumi Seva Dal:

"The Qaumi Seva Dal played a crucial role in the 1942 movement. One key reason was that it was made up entirely of very young individuals—most were just 18 or 20 years old. Many were new to politics and often not even formal members of the Congress. Another important factor was the kind of training provided at the Dal's camps. These were rigorous and instilled a strong sense of discipline. Some camps lasted up to two months, bringing together youth from nearby villages to live, learn, and work together. We survived on food collected from the villagers and spent much of our time discussing politics. Wearing uniforms gave us a sense of identity and pride. We often conducted 'route marches' through the villages, which left a strong impression on the local people."¹³

During the constructive phase of the Congress movement, the Qaumi Seva Dal emerged as a powerful force for mass mobilisation, particularly at the grassroots level in Ballia. It played a key role in recruiting and training the younger generation to participate in the nationalist struggle. In 1940, Acharya Narendra Dev took charge as the principal commander of the Congress Qaumi Seva Dal in Uttar Pradesh. Under his leadership, the Dal expanded significantly, preparing a pool of young alternative cadres ready for action. This preparation proved

crucial when the Quit India Movement began, as these youth leaders were able to immediately step into leadership roles. By 1939, Ballia had the highest number of Qaumi Seva Dal members in the state, with 5,452 enrolled, followed by Jaunpur with 3,000 members.¹⁴

Before the launch of the Quit India Movement by the Congress, Ballia had already become a center of unrest. The collapse of British authority in the region was not simply due to the absence of British officials, as Hallet suggests.¹⁵ To truly understand the dynamics of mass mobilization and the sequence of disturbances in Ballia, it is essential to examine the events and the organizations involved.

While other parts of Uttar Pradesh were more aware of the events unfolding on August 9, 1942, rural Ballia remained largely uninformed. Only a few local radio stations briefly mentioned the arrest of national leaders. As the news gradually spread, many people who had been waiting for clear directions began to prepare for action. Late that night, a 14-year-old Congress volunteer named Suraj Prasad arrived from Banaras. He brought with him a copy of the newspaper Aaj, met with Uma Shankar Mishra, who had been appointed the district's dictator, and delivered some secret messages.¹⁶ In a discreet meeting with a small group of activists, it was decided that the public should be informed about the leaders' call for a hartal (strike) on August 10, which was to continue indefinitely until further instructions were received. The next day, without much resistance, a large crowd quickly gathered. They formed a procession that wound its way through various streets of the city, eventually converging at the city center¹⁷

Schools and colleges were closed on August 10. On the same day, gatherings and processions began in the city, and nearby shops shut down in observance of the hartal. On August 11, around 15,000 students marched towards the Kutchehry in an attempt to shut it down. The arrest of several students escalated tensions, leading to a violation of Section 144, and the functioning of the Kutchehry was forcibly halted.¹⁸ On the same day Ballia witnessed hundreds of students returning from the University of Lucknow Allahabad and Banaras.¹⁹

The students from those three highly politicized universities had their ears attuned to the burgeoning National Movement, carrying with them the electrifying news that the revolution was no longer a distant dream, it had already begun. They brought word that the people of Ballia were being lauded for their foresight and alignment with the evolving political consciousness. Young, articulate, and brimming with nationalist idealism, these students injected fresh optimism into the uncertain and speculative local political landscape.²⁰

On August 14, 1942, a massive crowd over 5,000 strong assembled at Belthara Road Railway Station, setting the building ablaze after ransacking it. That very day, an Army supply train, carrying sugar destined for troops at the Assam front, arrived at the station. The same mob seized the opportunity and looted the train. The gathering was further provoked by a young student, Parasnath Mishra, who was studying at Banaras Hindu University and was the son of a local school teacher.²¹ Parasnath Mishra arrived in his village on the afternoon of August 13. Inspired by the events unfolding in Banaras, his friends were eager to take action locally. Together, they traveled to a neighboring village where a regional fair was underway. There, they addressed the gathering, urging the crowd to convene the next day at Belthara Road to launch an attack on the railway station.²²

On the morning of August 14, at Belthara Road Railway Station, students from Allahabad University halted a train whose driver was displaying the Congress flag. They were traveling to Gorakhpur, stopping at stations along the way to address the people—encouraging them to resist British rule. At Belthara Road, the students proclaimed that the Congress had called upon citizens to dismantle British governance at all levels. They asserted it was a patriotic duty to burn down government institutions such as railway stations and post offices. As word spread, villagers arrived, some bringing bullock carts, and looted supplies, particularly sugar from an army supply train.²³

After the railway station's destruction, rumors spread that the army had arrived, prompting villagers to flee into the countryside.²⁴ Between August 10 and August 20, nearly all urban settlements and government facilities were razed by the masses. On August 18, revolutionaries seized control of local Tehsil and Thana buildings, while Bairia, Sikandarpur, and Reoti also fell under their sway. Events along Belthara Road and elsewhere reveal how leadership emerged and mass mobilization took shape during the 1942 rural uprisings.

One notable figure was Parasnath Mishra, a B.H.U. student barely 21 years old and not a local leader, but one who reached his village from Banaras bearing news of urban unrest. The involvement of students in the August 1942 revolt is further exemplified by the Azad train episode: students who commandeered and displayed this train not only carried word of disturbances but also sparked action among villagers. There is no evidence that locals had plotted any coordinated action prior to the students' arrival; these uprisings were largely spontaneous, driven by rumors. When trials began after the disturbances subsided, it became evident that officials had been aware of the developments. After Congress formed ministries in 1937, its legitimacy gained broad acceptance—even among junior administrative staff. While the specific reactions of such officials during the August 1942 unrest may have varied, most outwardly acknowledged that the British lacked moral authority in that context.

Conclusion

The role of the youth in the August Revolution of 1942 in Ballia was nothing short of decisive. They were not merely participants in a national movement; they were its local vanguard and its driving force. In a moment of profound leadership vacuum, the students and young people of Ballia seized the historical initiative. Drawing on a deep-seated local tradition of rebellion and galvanized by the national call to "Do or Die," they transformed a series of spontaneous protests into a full-scale, organized insurrection. They systematically dismantled the infrastructure of the colonial state, confronted its armed police, and through a successful popular uprising, overthrew the British administration. In the brief interregnum that followed, they were integral to the functioning of India's first independent government of the Quit India Movement, serving as the defenders of the new 'Swaraj.' Their triumph was met with a campaign of state terror of unparalleled savagery, and they bore the brunt of the brutal British reconquest. The legacy of their courage, their sacrifice, and their fleeting victory is etched into the very identity of 'Baaghi Ballia.' Their story stands as a powerful testament to the agency of local actors in the grand sweep of history and serves as a crucial chapter in the annals of India's freedom struggle, demonstrating the immense power of a determined and revolutionary youth.

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