Crisis within the Congress and Preparations for a Final Assault (1939-42)

The success in Provincial Assembly elections and formation of the Congress ministries were important milestones in the Indian National Movement. It helped the increasingly eroding hegemony of the colonial authorities in the country. The period from now onwards till the Quit-India movement, however, turned out to be a period of deep internal crisis for the Indian National Congress which reached its climax with the resignation of Subhas Chandra Bose not only from the Presidentship of the party but also from the party itself. The period also witnessed internal squabbles in the Congress. The period was also marked by the increasing overtones of communalism and various efforts, more often unsuccessful, in combating this increasing trend in Indian politics.

The Tripuri Crisis

The fifty-second session of the Congress was to be held at Tripuri near Jabalpur in March 1939. Through his long years of prison and exile Subhas Bose had earned a reputation and had been a unanimous choice as the President of the Congress in 1938. But during his years in office he took hardly any interest in problems of organization and gave no clear lead in many matters that came up before the Working Committee. In 1939, he decided to stand again – this time as the spokesperson of militant politics and radical

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1 Bipan Chandra, et al., op. cit., p. 443.
2 S. Gopal, Jawaharlal Nehru, op. cit., p. 241.
groups. Bose’s campaign “centered on the charge that the Right-wing were about to enter in to a compromise with the British Government and that negotiations had reached such a stage that a prospective list of ministers for the federal cabinet has been drawn up.” This and other charges that he and his supporters labeled against what they called “the right wingers” and “compromise wallas” sounded wild and totally false against leaders with long public service and commitment. Subhas, as the biographer of Nehru suggests, could not get along with Gandhiji, which was not just difference of viewpoint.

Jawaharlal Nehru too differed with Gandhiji just as much, but they had a mutual understanding. Gandhi writing to Nehru had indicated this: “we know that neither of us can do without the other, for there is a heart union between us which no intellectual differences can break.” With Subhas Bose there was no such affinity, and when he announced early in 1939 his intentions to seek reelection, we do not find Gandhi very comfortable. He in fact encouraged another candidature by someone else.

Thus, there were indications of an acrimonious situation developing within the Congress. This, however, was of a “diffused character, without any controlling political position underlying it”.

Subhas Bose’s campaign witnessed articulation of a series of disparate grievances, and was in no way a unified leftist challenge to the Right-Wing that he claimed it to be. He declared that he represented the “new ideas, ideologies, problems

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1 The problematic of “compromise” characterized the left wing attitudes to Gandhian strategy and this crystallized around Bose’ campaign for reelection to the Presidency of the Congress for second term.
3 S. Gopal, Jawaharlal Nehru, op. cit., p. 241.
4 Gandhi in May 1939, quoted in Tendulkar, Mahatma, Vol. 5, p. 95.
5 S. Gopal, op. cit., p. 241.
6 Ravi Vasudevan, op. cit., p. 372.
7 Ibid.
and programmes” that had emerged with “the progressive sharpening of the anti-imperialist struggle in India”. The presidential elections, he declared, should be fought among different candidates “on the basis of definite problems and programmes”.

Rajendra Prasad, a confirmed Gandhian, had an entirely different perception over the whole issues. He believed that these kinds of thoughts and ideas were contrary to professed ideals of the Congress. No wonder he, along with Sardar Patel, J.B. Kripalani and four other members of the Congress Working Committee, issued a counter statement, and declared that the talk of ideologies, programmes and policies was irrelevant in the elections of a Congress president. These were evolved by the various Congress bodies such as the AICC and the Working Committee, and that the position of the Congress President was just like that of a constitutional head that represented and symbolized the unity and solidarity of the nation. In his opinion, therefore, Subhas Bose’s entire conduct was contrary to the usual practice evolved within the Congress over the years. He also held Subhas Bose responsible for precipitating the crisis as he did not consult Gandhiji or the Working Committee in this matter.

It appeared that Subhas Bose himself was seeking re-election but he never spoke his mind to the Working Committee. He had been elected unanimously for the Haripura session at the instance of Gandhiji himself. Even now, if he had expressed his wish to Gandhiji and all of us, we might have somehow accommodated him.

However, the occasion for accommodation did not present itself and the rift between those who accepted Gandhiji or Subhas Bose widened further. The two groups had drifted quite apart from each other which were, indeed, quite an unfortunate development. That difference had crystallized and almost reached a stage beyond reconciliation was evident. To quote Rajendra Prasad:

When the Working Committee next met in Bardoli, where Gandhiji used to spend a month in winter, we informally discussed the issue again and it was generally agreed among us that Maulana Azad should be elected. Maulana Azad consented but no one spoke of this to Subhas Bose. He also never touched on the subject but we only heard that wherever he went he had been canvassing support for his own candidature.¹³

Gandhiji’s nominee was Maulana Azad, who, however, withdrew his candidature as soon as he learnt that there would be a contest. Subsequently the proposal came forth, just before the election, to nominate Pattabhi Sitaramayya, and a communication in this regard was sent telegraphically by Sardar Patel to Rajendra Prasad, who was at Patna at that time, for his endorsement.¹⁴ The contest, therefore, was to be between Subhas Bose

¹³ Ibid., p. 480.
¹⁴ According to Sitaramayya, there was nothing wrong in Subhas Bose becoming President for the second time. However Gandhiji wanted Maulana Azad to be become President as this might have eased the communal situation and help to solve the communal problem. In his own words: “The writer was informed by Gandhiji as he was departing from Bardoli that it was his (Gandhiji’s) intention to place the crown of thorns that year on his (writer’s) head if Maulana had not agreed. But fortunately, he had agreed the previous morning and left for Bombay. The next day Maulana revised his opinion in Bombay and decided to withdraw. By that time, it seems three nominations were announced in the press. Subhas Babu’s, the Maulana’s and the writer’s, the last without his knowledge and therefore forthwith withdrawn in Bombay.
and Sitaramayya now. It was the first time that there was a contest for the election of the President. However in the ensuing election Subhas Bose was elected on 29 January by 1580 votes against 1377. The highest number of votes he got from Bengal was 404.\textsuperscript{15} Gandhiji declared that Sitramayya’s defeat was “more mine than his”.\textsuperscript{16} He also indicated the role of bogus membership etc. in the election. Gandhiji was not in a happy mood, to say the least.

For Rajendra Prasad the issue involved was ideological in nature. It was, he thought, “contest between those who believed in Gandhiji’s ideology and those who did not.” He, along with his like minded group had an apprehension “that things might change and that a new Congress President might come in who would formulate his own programme and carry the organization with him”. He felt hurt and viewed the defeat of his group in terms of inability of Sitramayya to represent Gandhiji, at least, symbolically:

If Maulana Azad had agreed to stand, we had no doubt that he would have been returned by a large majority because the common Congressman liked him and did not want to break with the Gandhian programme. But the people were unable to see a symbol of Gandhiji in

Shortly after, however, it had to be restored at the Maulana’s instance as he had decided to withdraw himself and then hastening from Bombay to Bardoli announced his own withdrawal. This left the writer and Subhas Babu in the field. The contest was unintended and unexpected at least on the part of one of them.” Pattabhi Sitaramayya, The History of the Indian National Congress, Vol. II (1935-1947), Bombay, 1947, p.105.

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{IAR}, Vol. 1, 1939, p. 319.

\textsuperscript{16} On 31 January 1939 Gandhiji issued the following statement: “Mr. Subhas Bose has achieved a decisive victory over his opponent, Dr Pattabhi Sitaramayya. I must confess that from the very beginning I was decidedly against his re-election for reasons in to which I need not go. I do not subscribe to his facts or the arguments in his manifesto. I think that his references to his colleagues were unjustified and unworthy… And since I was instrumental in inducing Dr. Pattabhi not to withdraw his name as a candidate when Maulana Saheb withdrew, the defeat is more mine than his.” \textit{IAR}, Vol. 1, 1939, p.320.

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Sitaramayya, and so in the election which ensured,
Subhas Bose won by a large majority. 17

The election of Bose aggravated the crisis further ahead of the Tripuri session of the Congress. 18 Bose actively indulged in propaganda against Sardar Patel and the majority of the top Congress leadership, whom he branded as Rightists. He accused that the “old guard” were conspiring with the Government and working for a compromise on the question of federation, and had even drawn up a list of prospective central ministers and, therefore, not wanting a leftist as the president of the Congress ‘who may be a thorn in the way of a compromise and may put obstacles in the path of negotiations’. 19 He announced that the “Right” and the “Left” were in confrontation and demanded the immediate issuing of an ultimatum to the Government and launching of a struggle. He had, therefore, appealed to Congressmen to vote for a leftist and ‘a genuine anti-federationist’. 20 In his autobiography, Subhas Chandra Bose put forth his thinking of the period more bluntly. “As Congress president, the writer did his best to stiffen the opposition of the Congress Party to any compromise with Britain and this caused annoyance in Gandhian circles who were then looking forward to an understanding with the British Government.” 21 The Gandhiists, he wrote, “did not want to be disturbed in

17 Rajendra Prasad, Autobiography, p. 481.
18 According to S. Gopal, this was only the beginning of the crisis. To quote: “With his re-election Bose believed that his hour as charismatic leader had arrived. Impatient, willful and endlessly ambitious, he decided to press home his victory. He ignored the fact that many local and regional factors for which he could take no credit had played a part in the election. He stressed only that there was widespread dissatisfaction with the older leaders and believed that he had been chosen to replace them. Incapable of the wider view, he tended to see most events in relation to his own career.” S. Gopal, op. cit., p. 242.
their ministerial and parliamentary work’ and ‘were at that time opposed to any national
struggle”.22

This was, indeed, a acrimonious campaign which was bound to drive a fissure in
the Congress at a critical juncture when war clouds were hovering over the horizon.
Subhas Bose had underestimated Gandhiji and his followers who welcomed a break and
brought about it in their own way. This group pointed out in a statement: “Subhas Babu
has mentioned his opposition to the federation. This is shared by all the members of the
Working Committee. It is the Congress policy”.23 And subsequently on the eve of the
meeting of the Working Committee, which was to be held at Wardha, twelve members of
it, including Rajendra Prasad, resigned from it as they “did not see eye to eye with the
President”24 The three members who remained on the Working Committee were Bose
himself, his brother Sarat and Jawaharlal Nehru. To quote Rajendra Prasad:

We did not see eye to eye with the President and we thought it
better to let Bose himself draft the resolutions because the main
burden of the Congress organization would have to be borne by
him and his supporters in future. Further, we did not want to
embarrass him by our presence in the Working Committee. It
would have looked improper also if we, as the Working
Committee, were to oppose the official resolutions in the open
session. So we wanted to give Bose a free hand and wanted him
to constitute his own Working Committee and to draft
resolutions he and his supporters wanted to sponsor. We thought
our stand was in keeping with democratic principles.25

22 Ibid.
23 Tendulkar, Mahatma, Vol.5, p. 28.
24 The other member of the Working Committee were Sardar Patel, Jairamdas Daulatram, Acharya
That Jawaharlal Nehru did not resign, however, did not mean that he agreed with the thinking of Subhas Bose. He had already asserted before the elections, that in the election no principles or programmes were at stake. Rajendra Prasad held a very similar view. But he disapproved the manner in which Subhas Bose was being hounded out after winning the elections. But he did not support Subhas Bose either. Therefore he declined to sign the letter of resignation of twelve members of the Working Committee and resigned later on his own. Though some of his statements were critical of Subhas Bose at Tripuri he remained silent and urged Subhas Bose not to resign and also tried in private discussions to patch up a compromise.26 For Subhas Bose it was not easily comprehensible:

Nobody has done more harm to me personally, and to our cause in this crisis, than Pandit Nehru. If he had been with us, we would have had majority. Even his neutrality would have probably given us a majority. But he was with the Old guard at Tripuri. His open propaganda against me also has done me more harm than the activities of the twelve stalwarts. What a pity! 27

Not only Jawaharlal Nehru but even the socialists distanced themselves from Subhas Bose over this issue. Though they did not agree over the entire resolution of Govind Vallabh Pant yet they abstained over it. Jayaparakash Narayan who spoke on their behalf said:

Our Party voted for Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose, but from the very beginning we had made it clear that our vote did not mean a

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26 S Gopal, Jawaharlal Nehru, op. cit., p. 242.
27 Bose to his nephew, 17 April 1939, quoted in S. Gopal, ibid.
settling of the issues between the Rightists and the Leftists. We voted for Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose, because we preferred him to the other candidate, namely Dr. Pattabhi. We then never expected that it would lead to schism in the Congress. Our party does not and will not participate in this quarrel. I am convinced that this could have been averted. We tried our best to prevent it. We failed and we were disappointed.\textsuperscript{28}

The Socialist leaders also did not want a division in the Congress to take place. They made sincere efforts to persuade both Subhas Chandra Bose and the other side to have a rapprochement but finally they also could not succeed. Quoting Jayaprakash Narayan here will give a better picture:

We went to Subhas Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose and requested him to issue a statement clearing the position. Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose agreed, but the statement he made was not satisfactory. Coming to Tripuri, we approached the other side and discussed with them how a settlement could be effected. Here also our attempt proved abortive. We believed that unless the next Working Committee was appointed in accordance with the wishes of Mahatma Gandhi it will not be possible to maintain unity in the Congress.\textsuperscript{29}

Jawaharlal Nehru held a somewhat similar position. He had felt distressed with Bose's aspersions on his colleagues. To quote him:

\textsuperscript{28} \textit{IAR}, Vol. 1, 1939, p. 334.
\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Ibid.}
I do not know who you consider a leftist and who a rightist. The way these words were used by you in your statements during the presidential contest seemed to imply that Gandhiji and those who are considered as his group in the Working Committee are the rightist leaders. Their opponents, whoever they might be, are the leftists. That seems to me an entirely wrong description. It seems to me that many of the so-called leftists are more right than the so-called rightists. Strong language and a capacity to criticize and attack the old Congress leadership is not a test of leftism in politics. I think the use of the words left and right has been generally wholly wrong and confusing. If, instead of these words, we talked about policies it would be far better. What policies do you stand for? Anti-federation, well and good. I think that the great majority of the members of the Working Committee stand for that and it is not fair to hint at their weakness in this respect.\footnote{Nehru to Subhas Bose, 4 February 1939, Nehru, Selected Works, Vol.9, pp. 481-2.}

The real differences lay in the realm of policy and tactics between Subhas Bose and 'Gandhian members' or so called Rightists. As Bipan Chandra argues, "they were partially based on differing perceptions of the political reality, and differing assessments of the strength and weakness of the Congress and the preparedness of the masses for struggle. Differing styles regarding how to build up a mass movement were also involved."\footnote{Bipan Chandra, et al, op. cit. p.445.} Reba Som in her recent work has argued that Mahatma Gandhi and Subhas Chandra Bose represented two diametrically opposed positions in the anti-imperialist struggle. "Gandhi's approach of non-violent non-cooperation was hotly contested by Subhas, who advocated a more forceful and confrontational approach .... Subhas was the
only leader in the Congress who dared challenge Gandhi’s leadership by advocating an alternative programme”. 32

The resignations of the Working Committee members were not finally accepted as Subhash Chandra Bose could not come to Wardha due to his illness. The old Working Committee continued when the Congress met a Tripuri in an atmosphere of tension from 10 to 12 March 1939. Gandhiji did not attend this session involved as he was in what is known as “Rajkot affairs”. He had gone to Rajkot by undertaking a vow of fast unto death as a protest against breach of an agreement by its ruler. He understandably endorsed the view point of majority the Working Committee members.

Owing to the alarming state of his health, Subhash Chandra Bose, the President, could not attend the open session of the Congress. An atmosphere of tension and indecision had prevailed in Tripuri. Bose’s supporters were angered by the resignation of the Working Committee as they thought that these resignations were just to place obstacles in their way. But this was not true in the eyes of Rajendra Prasad who thought that the leaders, who had resigned and had difficulty in working with Subhas Bose, had basic differences. According to Rajendra Prasad their “resignation was meant to clarify our position and to avoid a situation in which the programme would be theirs and the

32 The differences between Gandhi and Subhas made them strike different postures and take up the contrary positions. While the rhetoric of Subhas made him appear as an uncompromising detractor of the Gandhian line, Gandhi, too, exhibited a ruthless firmness in edging Subhas out of the Congress leadership. They were as he explained to Subhas, ‘sailing in different boats’ in their quest for national freedom. However in a situation almost reminiscent of a familial relationship between a stern father and a rebel son, Subhas was to retain till the end an abiding, albeit grudging, admiration for Gandhi’s magnetic popular appeal, the strength of his moral convictions, and the ease with which he could identify with the essential soul of India. Gandhi, in turn, admired Subhas burning patriotism, his irrepressible zeal and enthusiasm, his reckless courage and defiance of convention. When they parted company in 1940, Gandhi told Subhas that if his path proved to be correct one, he (Gandhi) would be the first to admit it by sending him a congratulatory message.... Perhaps the differences between Gandhi and Subhas had more to do with their different formulations of an anti-imperialist strategy than with the substance or innate dislike of imperialism.” Reba Som, Gandhi, Bose, Nehru and the Making of the Modern Indian Mind, New Delhi, 2004, p. 8.
responsibility of implementing it would be ours.” Gandhi too seemed to agree with this and in fact he had mince no words saying this was the right path when he said: “I rejoice in this defeat” because “Subhas Babu, instead of being President on the sufferance of those whom he calls rightists, is now President elected in a contested election. This enables him to choose a homogeneous cabinet and enforce his programme without let or hindrance”.

Its proceedings were conducted without the President in a disturbed atmosphere. Bose had completely misjudged his support and the meaning of his majority in the presidential election. Congressmen had voted for him for diverse reasons, and above all because he stood for militant politics, and not because they wanted to have him as the supreme leader of the national movement. They were not willing to reject Gandhi’s leadership or that of other older leaders who decided to bring this home to Subhas. Govind Ballabh Pant moved a resolution at Tripuri expressing full confidence in the old Working Committee, reiterating full faith in Gandhi’s leadership of the movement and the Congress policies of the previous twenty years, and asking Subhas to nominate his Working Committee ‘in accordance with the wishes of Gandhi’:

In view of the critical situation that may develop during the coming year, and in view of the fact that Mahatma Gandhi alone can lead the Congress and the country during such a crisis, the Congress regards it as imperative that the executive authority of the Congress should command his implicit confidence and requests the President to nominate the Working Committee for the ensuing year in accordance with the wishes of Gandhi.

33 Rajendra Prasad, Autobiography, p. 482.
34 Gandhi, CW, Vol.68, p359.
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The resolution was passed by a big majority, but Gandhiji refused to impose a Working Committee on Subhas. Instead he asked him to nominate a Committee of his own choice. However Subhas Bose refused to do it as he was aware that he could not lead the organization on his own. At the same time he was also not ready to accept the leadership of the majority. He wanted, as Bipan Chandra argues, Gandhiji to be the leader of the coming struggle and at the same time Gandhiji to follow the strategy and tactics laid down by him and the left-wing parties and groups. Gandhiji, on the other hand, would either lead the Congress on the basis of his own strategy and style of politics or surrender the position of the leader. Acrimony and bitterness only increased after the session and “We had failed to decide any major issue, only an internal quarrel had been fought in the open.” 36

The position of Subhas Bose had become untenable. The President’s resolution had been thrown out and a resolution which did not have his support had been passed. What next? was the question now. If the President stood by the resolution adopted, he would have to form a Working Committee with the concurrence of Gandhiji. 37 However Subhas Bose was determined not to implement it.

The attempts at a compromise proved to be non-starter as Subhas Bose would not budge from his position insisting that the Working Committee should be representative of the new radical trends and groups which had elected him. Rajendra Prasad was deeply perturbed over the drift of affairs in the Congress. He wanted a conciliatory

36 Rajendra Prasad, Autobiography, p.484.
37 Ibid., p. 484.
rapprochement on the issue. Couple of days ahead of the AICC meeting where Subhas Bose tendered his resignation Rajendra Prasad wrote to Jawaharlal:

I am also not a little disturbed over the drift of affairs in the Congress. While on the one hand we have this complication in the Congress higher quarter, on the other hand there are visible signs of disruption and demoralization in the rank and file....

As regards tangle with the President I do not know how to solve it. My talk with Subhas Babu was short but he impressed on me that while he did not accept Bapu's viewpoint he was keen on having some sort of settlement particularly in the view of the developing situation in the country and outside. The correspondence between him and Bapu has shown a wide gulf between the two on almost all matters of public policy. But I feel that if the two could somehow and somewhere meet, it might be possible to find a via media.  

Rajendra Prasad, though he was one the most prominent Gandhian and one to take on Subhas Bose's challenge and resign from the Working Committee, was however hopeful of an amicable settlement on the entire issue. He appears to have discussed the matter with Jayaprakash Narayan, representing the socialists as well, as they also did not want a rupture within the Congress at this juncture. He was so keen on a settlement and continuance of Subhas Bose as the President of the Congress that he even suggested postponement of the proposed AICC meeting of Calcutta so that a rapprochement could have been worked out between him and Gandhiji. This is clearly borne out by the letter Rajendra Prasad wrote to Nehru on 19 April 1939:

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38 Rajendra Prasad to Nehru, 19 April 1939, RPCSD, Vol. 3, p. 48-49.
For that purpose the All India Congress Committee meeting has to be postponed till such time as they can meet. Jayaprakash Babu was telling me that he had suggested this to Subhas Babu but he was not prepared to postpone the meeting unless Gandhiji asked him to do so. Gandhiji is not likely to do so in view of the clear views he has expressed in his letters. So far as I am personally concerned you may take it that I shall do whatever is possible, if I can be shown a way out. The difficulty is in finding the way, and if Subhas Babu and Bapu could meet, it is possible a way might open out. Please let me know what transpires between you and Subhas Babu, if it is not awkward for you to do so.39

Though the proposed meeting between Subhas Bose and Gandhiji and consequent postponement of the AICC meeting did not materialize, Rajendra Prasad’s made it point to visit ailing Subhas Bose at the time of the AICC meeting in Calcutta. He visited him at Jhamadu Colliery where he was convalescing under the care of his brother. He could not touch upon any issues in question as Subhas Bose’s “state of health would not permit us to discuss these matters with him”. However Rajendra Prasad found Bose “in no mood to implement the Congress resolution”.40 Subhas Bose did not attend the AICC meeting on the first day and on the second day he sent in his resignation when it became clear that he did not enjoy the confidence of the AICC.41 Subhas Bose, in his resignation letter, put entire blame on Gandhiji for his inability to constitute the new Working Committee after his re-election:

39 Ibid.  
40 Rajendra Prasad, Autobiography, p. 484.  
41 The AICC met in Calcutta from 29 April to 1st May 1939. IAR, Vol. 1, 1939, p. 345.
I regret very much that since the Tripuri Congress I have not been able to announce the personnel of the new Working Committee. But this has been due to circumstances beyond my control. Owing to my illness, I could not proceed to meet Mahatma Gandhi, in lieu thereof, I stared correspondence with him. This enabled us to clarify our ideas and viewpoints, but did not bring us to settlement. When I realized that correspondence had proved ineffective, I wanted to make frantic effort to meet Mahatmaji at Delhi – but that effort also failed.

After Mahatmaji arrival in Calcutta we have had prolonged conversations but unfortunately they did not lead to any solution. Mahatmaji’s advice to me is that I should myself form a Working Committee leaving out the members who resigned from the previous Working Committee. This advice I cannot give effect to for several reasons. To mention two of the principal reasons, I may say that such a step would be contrary to the directions in Pantji’s resolution, which provides “inter alia” that the Working Committee should be formed in accordance with the wishes of Gandhiji and should command his implicit confidence....

Unfortunately for us Mahatmaji felt unable to nominate the Working Committee. 42

Putting the entire blame on Gandhiji, Subhas Bose did not spare those also who had resigned from the Working Committee. 43 The gulf had widened so much so that though Gandhiji visited Calcutta at the time but he did not attend the AICC meeting and

42 Ibid., p. 346.
43 As a last step, I tried my best to arrive at an informal solution of the above problem. Mahatmaji told me that the prominent members of the previous Working Committee and myself should put our heads together and see if we could arrive at an agreement. I concurred and we made that attempt. If we had succeeded in coming to a settlement, we would then have come up before the AICC for formal ratification of our informal agreement. Unfortunately though we spent several hours in discussing the matter we could not arrive at a settlement. Ibid.
preferred staying away at Sodepur while others were in the city. Gandhiji had by now made up his mind which he expressed in his letter to Subhas Bose:

> The views you express seem to me so diametrically opposed to those of the others and my own that I do not see any possibility of bridging them. I think that each school of thought should be able to put forth its views before the country without any mixture. And if this is honestly done, I do not see why there should be any bitterness ending in civil war.

> What is wrong is not the differences between us but loss of mutual respect and trust. This will be remedied by time which is the best healer. If there is real non-violence in us, there can be no civil war, much less bitterness.

> Taking all things into consideration, I am of the opinion that you should at once form your own cabinet fully representing your views, formulate your programme definitely, and put it before the forthcoming AICC. If the Committee accepts the programme, all will be plain sailing and you should be enabled to prosecute it unhampered by the minority. If on the other hand your programme is not accepted, you should resign and let the committee choose its president. And you will be free to educate the country along your own lines. I tender this advice irrespective of Pandit Pant's resolution.

> My prestige does not count. It has no independent value of its own. When my motive is suspect or my policy or programme rejected by the country, the prestige must go. India will rise or fall by the quality of the sum total of the acts of her many millions. Individual however high they may be are of no account except in so far as they represent the many millions. Therefore let us rule it out of consideration.  

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Jawaharlal Nehru nevertheless made a last minute effort during the AICC meeting to save the situation. He moved a resolution before the AICC requesting Subhas Bose to withdraw his resignation and nominate afresh the old Working Committee which functioned in 1938. Nehru explained that considering the external and internal situation of the country it was imperative that a way out must be found to end the controversy created by Pant’s resolution. As for the infusion of the fresh blood in the Working Committee he explained that two old members of the committee Jamnalal Bajaj and Jairamdas Daulatram would be resigning for the reasons of health. This would enable Subhas Bose to nominate in consultation with his colleagues two new members from other group’s thus adding fresh blood to the Committee. Jayaprakash Narayan, a socialist, besides Rafi Ahmad Kidwai supported this proposition of Nehru. Subhas Bose found the proposition of Nehru very identical to that made out by Mahatma Gandhi and others; and hence he did not budge from his position:

This resolution is in effect identical with the suggestions made informally by Mahatma Gandhi and other members during my conversations with some members of the Working Committee. Ordinarily Mahatmaji’s word is law to me but where principles are involved, I feel some times unable to accept his advice or suggestion.

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46 Ibid., p. 347.
Subhas Bose, not in a mood of reconciliation, did not relent and refused to bow to the wishes of the majority. Jawaharlal Nehru, getting disgusted with the approach of Subhas Bose, finally withdrew his resolution seeking his continuance as President, and the AICC subsequently accepted the resignation of Subhas Bose. The Congress had been suddenly rendered with no President and not even a Working Committee, plunging the entire organization into constitutional crisis. Rajendra Prasad observations in this regard are self-explanatory regarding the state of affairs in which the Congress had slipped into:

As Subhas Bose's position was now untenable, we began to think of his successor. The brutal frankness of Sardar Patel was not liked by Bose and other people. Jawaharlal who was disgusted with the state of affairs, did not want to take up the Presidency. Maulana Azad who would have been the best choice, had an accident ... and so could not be burdened with heavy responsibilities. Neither he was willing to accept the honour.

The Mantle of Presidentship Again

Though highly unwilling, Rajendra Prasad had to put on the mantle again, for the second time since 1934, of Presidentship of the Congress, and interestingly this time also, again at the behest of Gandhiji. The AICC elected Rajendra Prasad as the president. This was however not a normal situation considering the situation that confronted the country, the internal situation of the Congress and various other factors. Rajendra Prasad did not feel

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happy at all at what had happened so far. "I have realized more than anybody else the
difficulties, the trials and tribunals which await any one in these circumstances who is
called upon to hold the office of the President of the Congress." In his brief address of
the AICC after getting elected President of the Congress he expressed regret at what had
happened:

We have appealed to Sj. Subhas Chandra Bose to continue to
shoulder the burden of the office of the President. I requested and
implored him to form a Working Committee of his own liking,
composed of people who shared his views in entirety, and we
were prepared to go with him as far as possible. I assured him
further that if did that, I would not for myself- and if I may speak
for others, they would also not stand in his way and there would
be absolutely no obstruction. But unfortunately he could not see
eye to eye with me and he thought that in the circumstances the
best course for him was to resign. I am really sorry for that.

Rajendra Prasad was not at all prepared for this. He doubted seriously that this

kind of arrangement can really get the Congress rid of its problem. He thought that
Maulana Azad would have been the best choice in given circumstances. He was elected
President on 30 April and the very next day he announced the formation of the new
Working Committee, ending the stalemate characterizing the Congress ever since Subhas
Bose re-election. He included the names of Dr. B.C. Roy and Dr. P.C. Ghosh, besides the

50 Ibid., p. 349.
51 I did not want to take it up for two reasons. First, temperamentally I am one who steeps clear of
controversies and secondly, the next session of the Congress was to be held in Bihar and I would
not be able to devote myself to the arrangements if I were to entangle myself in all-India affairs. I
thought that I would not be able to improve matters by taking up the Presidentship and that the rot
would stop only when elections were held for a new President. But all my arguments had to be
waived when Gandhiji directed me to take up the responsibility."
Rajendra Prasad, Autobiography, p. 485

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twelve members who had resigned earlier. The Congress from the top had now become
functional which had remained paralyzed since Subhas Bose’s re-election. But the
situation inside the congress had become so much so vitiated that Rajendra Prasad’s
election was not taken easily by those who had supported Subhas Bose. This was because
Subhas Bose and his supporters had reduced the whole issue into a conspiracy against
Bengal. “For the moment Subhas has become a kind of symbol of Bengal and it is quite
impossible to argue with or about symbols.”\textsuperscript{52} No wonder Rajendra Prasad had to
undergo very awkward and unsavory situations in Calcutta after his election as
president.\textsuperscript{53} The atmosphere had got so vitiated that before his departure from Calcutta on
1\textsuperscript{st} May he tried to assuage the feelings of Bengal by reminding people there of his close
association with Bengal, where he had spent fifteen of the best and most impressionable
years of his life in Calcutta and said that some of his happiest memories belonged to
those days. He, however, added that his task was particularly difficult, but he had faith
that with God’s grace he would able to discharge his heavy responsibility to the best of
his ability. The reaction to Subhash Chandra Bose’s resignation and to election of the
new President was being watched anxiously by all who sought to bring about amity
between the two groups in the Congress and messages about this were sent to both
Mahatma Gandhi and Rajendra Prasad from different parts of country. Rabindranath

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Nehru to Krishna Menon, 4 April 1939, cited in S. Gopal, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 244.
\item The next day, Subhas Bose sent in his resignation. The A.I.C.C. accepted it and appointed me
President. As I stood up to speak, I heard shouts from a section of the pandal. I stood my ground
till the shouting died down. The proceedings were then conducted without any more ado and in the
evening the A.I.C.C. adjourned. When I left the place some volunteers offered to escort me to my
residence. On the way, one or two of them, who were apparently sympathizers of the Bose group,
seemed to be bent on mischief but they could do nothing more than pull my jacket. I only lost a
few buttons and reached home safely. I spoke to no one of this fearing an increase of tension.
When I left for Patna that night, I heard at the station that some miscreants had demonstrated
before Dr. B.C. Roy’s house, entered it and broken some furniture.” Rajendra Prasad, \textit{Autobiography}, pp.485-86.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
appealed, in the course of a message to President Rajendra Prasad, to him to bringing about unity in the Congress ranks: “Evil symptoms of the spirit of disruption in the heart of the Congress have become painfully evident and a leader possessing a sober mind, unbiased judgment and a sympathetic heart is urgently needed at this crisis. Subhash’s resignation has become unfortunately unavoidable.” Continuing further the Poet said: “I feel assured in my mind that your personality will help to soothe the injured souls and bring peace and unity into an atmosphere of mistrust and chaos....” Prafulla Chandra Ray also sent a similar message to the new President appealing for restoration of unity and solidarity within the Congress fold.

His tenure this time remained, indeed, mostly preoccupied with efforts at removing the ‘rot’ in the form of internal quarrels among Congress leaders in Orissa and the Central Provinces from within the Congress. These dissensions derived their strength and inspiration from “Congress dissidents who had been incensed by Pandit Pant’s resolution at the Tripuri session directing that Subhas Bose should form a Working Committee in consultation with Gandhiji if he did not want to shoulder the responsibility himself”.

As no regular business had been taken up in Calcutta, Rajendra Prasad called another meeting of the A.I.C.C. in Bombay a few days after the Calcutta session. An important matter awaited its consideration. Trouble had been brewing for some time on the Congress ministerial front, not engineered from outside the Congress but emanating from within. Some Congressmen had been dissatisfied with the Congress ministries for some reason or other and had been making complaint and hindering their work.

55 Ibid.
"Opposition from the enemies of the Congress", thought Rajendra Prasad, "would have been understandable and also genuine differences of opinion between Congressmen and the ministries, which could have been ironed out". "But what developed," he felt, "which genuine Congressmen could not understand and which pained them most, was an organized opposition within the Congress party against the ministries. Therefore at the Bombay session, a resolution was moved directing Congressmen not to indulge in sniping at the ministries, which was against the opposition of Subhas Bose and his followers. Rajendra Prasad had hoped that this would curb the activities of the dissidents. However, in open defiance of the majority view of the Congress, Subhas Bose announced a few days later that he would organize a countrywide demonstration against the A.I.C.C. decision. No choice was left other than an 'unpleasant task' of expelling Subhas Bose from the Congress. Demonstrations were held at several places in which Congress workers participated. The Congress could not put up with this kind of open defiance of its directives. After all, thought Rajendra Prasad, the only democratic method to settle any difference of opinion was the method of the ballot, and when a majority has once taken a decision, it ought to have been respected and no action taken to flout it. In his own words:

The Working Committee convened a meeting and called upon Subhas Bose to explain his action. He did not attend the meeting but sent in an explanation justifying his action. The Committee, therefore, reluctantly decided that disciplinary action against Subhas Bose was warranted. It was not easy to take action against a Congress leader of Subhas Bose's eminence. He had been twice elected Congress President; his patriotism, sincerity and sacrifices were absolutely beyond question. How could one take action against such a man? Most of us dreaded the idea. As

57 Ibid.
for myself, I always had affection for him, while Sarat Bose, who
was my contemporary in the Presidency College, Calcutta, and
lived in my hostel, and I were good friends. Now the question
was not one of personal likes or dislikes but one of duty, of
deciding whether the Congress could keep quiet in the face of a
setback to its prestige. We were therefore constrained to expel
Subhas Bose from the Congress.58

Rajendra Prasad was having a sense of bitterness and he found his second term as
President of the Congress highly unpleasant. Two more disputes awaited his intervention.
“It was a most unpleasant time that”, he complained, “I had during the period of my
second term as President.”59 These complaints were regarding functioning of Congress
ministries in Orissa and Central Provinces but in essence they were manifestations of a
rot arising because of a lust for power among some old Congressmen. In Orissa the
complaints had been made by a prominent Congressman. The rot was old and Rajendra
Prasad had earlier also tried to sort out the matter Then along with Sardar Patel had given
warning also and had asked for a written complaint, stating that if complaints were found
out to be incorrect after enquiry action would be taken against the complainants. Subhas
Bose had also entrusted Rajendra Prasad, before his resignation, to look into the matter.
Rajendra Prasad had very laboriously enquired into the matter and prepared a report.
Therefore now as a president he did not take much time in dispensing with the issue. The
parliamentary Board and the Working Committee considered the report prepared earlier
by him and declared the charges to be baseless. He called upon the complainant to

58 Ibid.
59 Ibid., p. 490. Subhas Bose was removed from the office of President of Bengal Provincial Committee and
disqualified from holding any office for three years. This subsequently led to the formation of the Forward
Bloc by him.
apologize for making false allegation. The apology was tendered and the matter was dropped.\textsuperscript{60}

A somewhat similar situation he found in the Central Provinces where he entrusted Bhulabhai Desai to look into the matter.\textsuperscript{61} But when the complainants declared that they had no confidence in him he took the matter into own hands and after a thorough enquiry announced his decision, which was subsequently ratified by the Working Committee and the matter was finally closed. He felt that so much of his time was taken by these distractions that he hardly got time to do anything constructive.

The World War II and Congress' Response

The war clouds had been gathering over Europe and Rajendra Prasad was conscious of its implications for India. In his Presidential address at the meeting of the All-India Congress Committee held at Bombay from 24 to 27 June 1939, he had cautioned the people against the impending danger. “The danger of world war”, he said, “is ever present and it might materialize in the course of a few months”. So he asked the people to “be ready to meet this crisis and to resist all the attempts to drag us into war, and thus give effect to the oft-declared policy of the Congress”. He further observed that “the first and most urgent problem for the Congress, is, therefore, to purify the organization and make it a

\textsuperscript{60} Pandit Nilkanth Das and Godavari Misra were contenders for the post of Chief Minister of Orissa and right from the beginning were opposed to Biswanath Das, the then Chief Minister. Both of them were Congressmen since 1920 and were widely respected in Orissa. Nilkantha Das was a member of the Central Assembly but was a contender for the leadership of the province. When he failed in his bid for the leadership he started casting aspersion on the integrity and moral character of Biswanath Das. Similar was the case with Godavari Mishra. Later Nilkantha Das joined hands with Subhas Bose after latter’s expulsion. At the outbreak of the war in Europe when the Congress ministries resigned, he and Godavari Mishra made strenuous efforts to form a ministry. They threw in their lot with the landlords and reactionary elements and formed a ministry with the Maharaja of Parlakimedi as Chief Minister. Godavari Misra became one of the ministers. They threw some Congress MLAs in prison and managed to prove majority in the Assembly.

\textsuperscript{61} There had been serious dissensions within the Congress ministry for quite some time which had resulted in expulsion of Dr. Khare from the Congress and the formation of a new ministry under the leadership of Shukla.
disciplined, and effective instrument of the people’s will” and for the “service of the
nation”, so that “in the trials to come the Congress may be fully prepared to carry India’s
cause to a successful conclusion”. 62

The crisis came soon when the World War II broke out on 1 September 1939 when Hitler had invaded Poland. Two days later on 3 September England declared war against Germany. Immediately without consulting the Congress or the elected members of the central legislature, the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, declared India to be a belligerent power and called upon her “to play a part worthy of her place among the great nations of the world”. 63 Gandhiji’s reaction was highly emotional. He met the Viceroy and after an interview issued a statement “expressing sympathy with Britain and advising India to offer unconditional help to her.” 64

To discuss the situation the Congress Working Committee met at Wardha from 10 to 14 September to which, in keeping with the nationalist tradition of accommodating diversity of opinion, Subhas Bose, Acharya Narendra Dev, and Jayaprakash Narayan were also invited. As Rajendra Prasad was then not quite well, Gandhiji specially sent Mahadev Desai to Ramgarh to take him to Wardha. Jawaharlal Nehru also returned to India on the eve of this meeting. Sharp differences emerged in this meeting. Gandhiji was for taking a sympathetic view of the Allies. He believed that there was a clear difference between he democratic states of Western Europe and the totalitarian Nazi state headed by Hitler. 65 The Socialists and Subhas Bose argued that the War was an imperialist one since both sides were fighting for gaining or defending colonial territories. Therefore, the

62 Quoted in K. K. Datta, op. cit., p. 165.
63 Ibid., p. 166.
64 Rajendra Prasad, op. cit., p. 493.

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question of supporting either of the two sides did not arise. Instead the Congress should take advantage of the situation to wrest freedom by immediately starting a civil disobedience movement. Jawaharlal Nehru had a stand of his own. He made a sharp distinction between democracy and Fascism. In his opinion the War was the result of the inner contradictions of capitalism maturing since the end of World War I. He, therefore, argued that India should neither join the War till she herself gained freedom nor take advantage of Britain’s difficulties by starting an immediate struggle. Rajendra Prasad had also reservations:

The question before us was what attitude to take on the issue of the war. Should the Congress help the war effort and, if so, should the help be unconditional or modified by some conditions? In this violent conflict, how could the Congress, with her declared policy of non-violence, render any help?

Gandhi ti toned down his stand when he found that his position was not supported by even his close followers such as Sardar Patel and Rajendra Prasad. Consequently, he decided to support Nehru’s position which was adopted by the Working Committee. The Working Committee strongly condemned the ideology and practice of Nazism and Fascism and expressed its protest against India being drawn into war without the consent of the Indian people and issued a statement on 14 September urging the British Government “to declare in unequivocal terms what their aims are in regard to democracy and imperialism and the new order that is envisaged, in particular, how these

are going to apply to India and to be given effect to in the present\textsuperscript{68} with a view to enabling India help Britain in her war effort. To quote Rajendra Prasad:

The Working Committee resolution, however, made it perfectly clear that if the British Government could declare its aims in a satisfactory manner, the Congress would be forced to help the war effort. Many people in India, and there were many Congressmen too, were sympathetic towards Britain at that time and if she had adduced some proof, as her leading statesmen and newspapers were shouting from housetops, that she was really fighting for democracy, the whole of India would have been behind her unreservedly. But actually, Britain was fighting a war for the defense of the British Empire, although to win over the sympathies of wavering nations, it was claimed to be a war to save democracy.\textsuperscript{69}

The course of the freedom movement and its strategy at this stage appears to have got entangled with question of support or no support for the war efforts. After the Working Committee's resolution Rajendra Prasad met Lord Linlithgow twice as Congress President, once along with Jawaharlal Nehru and the second time with Gandhiji and Mohammed Ali Jinnah. The Viceroy was then meeting representative Indians of all schools of thought with a view to enlisting India's help in the war. But Rajendra Prasad was very sure that he had made one serious mistake. As soon as the war began, without consulting anyone, he had declared that India too was on the side of Britain in her war with Germany. The Central Assembly was then in session and popular ministries where in office in eleven provinces, but he did not deem it important or necessary that their

\textsuperscript{68} Quoted in K. K. Datta, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 166.

\textsuperscript{69} Rajendra Prasad, \textit{Autobiography}, p. 494.
views should be invited, as if the war were not a matter of concern for any individual or institution in India. The demands of the Congress were two: First, besides clarification of British war aims, it wanted Indian independence to form part of the post-war plans of the British Government; and secondly, the Congress demanded that Indian representatives should be given certain administrative powers at the Centre with immediate effect so that they might be able to carry on the Government according to the wishers of the people and thus be able to render genuine help in the war effort. To appease Indian political parties, Lord Linlithgow proposed to appoint two more Indians on his Executive Council so as to give Indians a majority voice in the Council. He was, however, not willing to countenance any constitutional changes for the duration of the war. Whatever proposals he made were to be fitted within the framework of the Government of India Act, 1935. Even if the declaration of future independence were not pressed, thought, Rajendra Prasad, immediate transfer of certain rights was absolutely necessary to enthuse the Indian people and to enable them to extend willing help to Britain. In the words of Rajendra Prasad:

Always a supporter of democracy as against imperialism, it wanted British imperialism to evolve into genuine democracy in order that all her possessions and colonies might become free. Of course, Britain never deprecated that ideal of ours and, in fact, she agreed that independence was the ultimate aim of her policy. She only pleaded that India and the other colonies were not at that time fit to govern themselves and that, therefore, she considered it her duty to retain in her hands the responsibility of governing them and preparing them for ultimate self-
government. Indians, did not accept this position and that was the cause of our conflict with Britain.\textsuperscript{70}

The Muslim League’s view was that it could extend cooperation to the Allies on recognition of the League as “the only organization that can speak on behalf of Muslim India and an assurance that no declaration regarding the question of constitutional advance for India would be made without the consent and approval of the All-India Muslim League nor any constitution be framed and finally adopted by His Majesty’s Government without such consent”.\textsuperscript{71} The League further, with a view to distancing itself from the Congress, had started criticizing the functioning of the Congress ministries. Rajendra Prasad, as president of the Congress, in order to remove the apprehensions of the League, wrote a conciliatory letter to Jinnah on 5 October 1939:

> In the resolution of the Working Committee of the All-India Muslim League, passed recently in Delhi, reference has been made to Provincial Governments. It is stated that Provincial Autonomy in several Provinces has resulted in the domination of the Hindus over the Muslim minorities whose life and liberty, property and honour are in danger, and even their religious rights and culture are being assailed and annihilated every day under the Congress Governments in various Provinces. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru also informed me that you mentioned this matter to him in the course of a recent conversation.

> We feel that these charges are wholly unfounded and are based on misapprehensions and one sided reports that might have reached you and the League. ... We feel strongly, and I am sure, you will agree with us, that such charges, when seriously made, should be enquired into and either substantiated or disproved. We would like this course to be adopted in

\textsuperscript{70} Rajendra Prasad, \textit{Autobiography}, pp. 495-6.

\textsuperscript{71} K. K. Datta, \textit{op.cit}, p. 168.
regard to any specific instance that that are put forward. If you agree, we could request the highest judicial authority in India, Sir M. Gwyer, Chief Justice of the Federal Court, to enquire in to this matter. In the event of his not being available, some other person of a similar status and judicial position might be approached. 72

The Congress at no stage had denied the support but what it wanted was a clear cut assurance that imperialism would be over in the colonies and thereafter full democracy would be established in India. The talk about democracy, it thought, was a hollow promise and it would be never applied for India and other suppressed nations of Asia and Africa. What Rajendra Prasad, therefore, wanted was an announcement in plain language regarding that and an assurance to that effect to the people of these areas and some powers transferred to them as a practical proof of future good intentions. 73

But Jinnah was in no conciliatory mood as he wrote back: "... I have already placed the whole case before the Viceroy and the Governor-General and have requested him to take up the matter without delay as he and the Governors of the Provinces have been expressly authorised under the Constitution and are entrusted with the responsibility to protect the rights and the interests of the minorities." 74

His meetings with the Viceroy bore not fruit and he convened a meeting of the Working Committee in October 1939 to decide the next step. Rajendra Prasad thought that the position of the Congress ministries in the provinces had now become untenable and the question was whether it should be allowed to continue. A section of Congressmen

73 Rajendra Prasad, Autobiography, p. 496.
wanted the Congress ministries to continue as they believed that by remaining in power in the provinces, the Congress would be able to render some help to the people, undo any harm caused to them by the war and derive the maximum advantage from any good that the war might bring. But the majority, however, thought that if the war situation grew more serious, the Central Government would take more and more responsibility on itself and the provincial Governments would be rendered powerless. There was no chance of having any Indians of influence on the Executive Council to safeguard the interest of the provinces. The Executive Council itself would be powerless and would be able to do nothing beyond toeing the line for the Viceroy and the Member for War. The public would be expected to contribute to the War Fund and, as voluntary help could not be thought of, the provincial Governments would be in the invidious position of having to resort to pressure in the collection of funds, which was contrary to the principles of popular administration. Withdrawing from provincial Governments would be far preferable to facing such an untenable position of responsibility without power. The Working Committee, therefore, decided that in the event of the British Government’s reply to its demands being unsatisfactory, it would have to advise the Congress ministries to resign.

The All-India Congress Committee met at Wardha in between 9 to 10 October and ratified the position of the Working Committee as stated above. Rajendra Prasad forcefully elaborated the position of the Congress and a long quotation from what he said is worth mentioning here to make his position more clear. He said:

The present war, we are aware, is being waged by England and France against Germany. The declared objective is to free Europe from the constant fear of Nazi aggression and generally
to secure freedom for all nationalities. We have expressed our detestation of Nazi method of aggression. We have also expressed our sympathy in unmistakable terms with all those countries which have, from time to time, been made the victims of unprovoked attacks. We protested when Abyssinia was attacked. We expressed our sympathy with the democratic forces in Spain. We protested against the conquest and annexation of Czechoslovakia. We have expressed our sympathy with all the suffering nations. We have thus made our position perfectly clear. What we want is clarification of the position of the allied and particularly of England. We are aware that in the past there have been occasions when the avowed objects for which a war was fought were not the real objects. The last Great War, fought with slogans of self-determination and 'making the world safe for democracy' did not fulfill any of these objects. We are, therefore, naturally doubtful if the professed aims of the present war are its real aims.

India at the present moment is not an independent country. If it were independent, it would have considered whether it should join the present war. Many other countries which sympathise with Poland have not joined the war and with the best wish in the world to save the cause of democracy, we might have decided in favour of neutrality. If India is asked to help in a war for restoring and guaranteeing the freedom of Poland, is it any wonder that India should ask to be made free before she can render any help. It is no question of bargaining or taking advantage of difficulties of England. It is a simple and straightforward question that India asks. What part or lot can she have in a war waged for the freedom of other countries when her own freedom is denied to her by people who are fighting for freedom and democracy in Europe? We want a straight answer
to that question. We have also said that a mere declaration will not satisfy us. We want that declaration to be given effect to the extent it is possible under present conditions. We see that there are individual groups, parties and communities in India who have put forward their own claims to be considered. If the British Government and statesmen once make up their mind to deal fairly with India and to give effect to the ideas which they profess in regard to the war, it should not be difficult for them to evolve a formula that can satisfy all parties and groups.75

The British Government's response was utterly unsatisfactory. Linlithgow, the Viceroy, had held discussions with no fewer than 52 Indian leaders of different points of view, including Gandhiji, Rajendra Prasad, Jawaharlal Nehru, M.A. Jinnah and the Chancellor of Chamber of Princes. He issued a statement on 17 October in which he harped on the old rhetoric of the existence on the differences among Indians, the Muslim League and the Princes. As regards the objectives of the British Government in entering the war, he repeated the statement of the Prime Minister made on February 6, 1939, that their Government were seeking no material advantage for themselves and were not aiming only at victory, but looking beyond it to laying the foundation of a better system which will mean that war is not to be the inevitable lot of each succeeding generation. About India's future constitutional position, he reiterated the old pledge for the grant of Dominion Status and stated that the intention of the British Government was "to further the partnership between India and the United Kingdom within the Empire to the end that India may attain her due place among the great nations of the world." He was not for any constitutional changes during the war. But to meet the exigencies of the war situation, he

75 Ibid., pp. 166-7.
suggested the addition of two more members to his Executive Council who, however, were to have no independent powers but were to be mere heads of departments. He also referred to the formation of a War Advisory Body “representative of all major political parties in British India and of the Indian States.”

For the future, the promise was that at the end of the War the British Government would enter into consultations with ‘representatives of several communities, parties, and interests in India, and with the Indian princes’ as to how the Act of 1935 might be modified. As an immediate measure, he offered to set up a consultative committee whose advice might be sought by the Government whenever it felt it necessary to do so.

The reaction of the Indian people and the national leadership over the Viceroy's statement was sharp. "The Congress asked for bread and it has got a stone", remarked Gandhiji. Rajendra Prasad described it as “disappointing but not all surprising”. He said, “There is no room left for anyone to doubt that British policy remains what it has always been and that all talk about democracy and resistance to aggression is not meant to apply to India.”

The working Committee, meeting on 23 October, rejecting the Viceroy’s offer decided not to support the War, and called upon the Congress ministries to resign as a protest. Rajendra Prasad thought that “if the Congress ministries had stuck to the office … they would have been compelled to do things repugnant to the principles and ideologies of the Congress, and unless they wanted to stay as yes-men they would

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77 Ibid. In a private communication to Zetland, the secretary of State, Linlithgow was to remark a few months later; ‘I am not too keen to start talking about a period after which British rule will have ceased in India. I suspect that day is very remote and I feel the least we say about it in all probability the better’. Subsequently on 18 October, Zetland speaking in the House of Lords stressed differences among Indian, especially among Hindus and Muslims. He branded the Congress as a purely Hindu organization. It, thus, became clear that the British Government had no intention of loosening their hold on India during or after the War and that it was willing, if necessary, to treat the Congress as an enemy.
78 CWMG, Vol.70, pp.267-80.
79 Quoted in K. K. Datta, Rajendra Prasad, p. 169.
have been forced to resign anyway". However the Congress leadership still stayed its hand and did not give a call for an immediate and a massive anti-imperialist struggle. In fact, the Working Committee resolution of 23 October warned Congressmen against any hasty action. After all any idea of a German victory was unthinkable:

Nevertheless, I cannot say that I would have liked Britain to be defeated in the war. I could not certainly reconcile myself to a German victory. Germany had invaded Czechoslovakia because the latter was weaker. At that time Hungary and Poland could not resist the temptation of throwing themselves on the fallen victim to share in the spoils with Germany. When, therefore, Poland's turn to face Hitler's hordes came, I could not help feeling at first that the Poles were merely reaping what they had sown. But when, later, the German army, in a sweep, took Denmark, Norway, Holland and Belgium, I was deeply distressed, because Hitler made it clear that he would not let any weaker nation survive. My feeling of anger against the British for denying India her rights was somewhat assuaged and I somehow felt that it was our duty to help the British in defeating Germany and stop the rot.

The Congress Ministries resigned early in November 1939 the Governors assumed control of legislative and administrative powers within the provinces. No settlement took place and the constitutional deadlock continued. Rajendra Prasad and other leaders of the Congress had genuine sympathy for Great Britain in that crisis and hour of adversity and they were prepared to render all possible assistance to her. All that they wished was a clear assurance from the British Government that India would be given

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81 Ibid., p. 499.
freedom after the war. "I can say", noted Rajendra Prasad, "that there was no bitterness in the heart of any Indian against the British and a large majority of Indians really thought it their duty to help Britain. They only wanted certain powers to enable them to carry out that duty. Without these powers the people could not be enthused".  

In December 1939, the Congress Working Committee decided to celebrate Independence Day on 26 January 1940 with a special significance. The thought was to emphasize India’s national will to freedom, and start a preparation for the struggle. Rajendra Prasad, as President of the Congress, used this occasion to issue an appeal for Independence Day celebrations in which he outlined two important points. First he exhorted everybody to engage in self introspection so that future struggle could be carried on more effectively.

Let this day, therefore, be a day of stock-taking. Let us search our hearts if we have not by our individual and national conduct prolonged our agony. Let us ask ourselves if we have been true to our high ideals, our noble purpose and the pure means which we have kept before ourselves to achieve our aim. Let each one ask himself, have I taken away every tinge of communalism from my life? Have I considered persons of other faiths and other views as my blood brothers? Have I as a Hindu done my little bit to wipe off the blot of untouchability? Have I allowed my individual ambition to stand in the way of the advancement of members of weaker communities? Have I been true to the masses? Have I lightened their burdens? Have I in my daily requirements and purchases remembered the starving millions distributed through the seven lacs of villages? Have I by my

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82 Ibid., p. 500.
personal example given them an idea of what they could do to help themselves?\textsuperscript{83}

And secondly he highlighted the dangers of the War and asserted the superiority of the non-violence:

The world is in the throes of a destructive war that threatens the very foundation of civilization. If the war is carried on by all parties with tainted motives, we may despair of any humane and equitable world order. What we do in the crisis is, therefore, not only of importance to ourselves but to the world. If by our non-violent means we can put an end to our internal strife and attain freedom, we will have proved to a doubting world that it can yet be saved without the aid of death-dealing instruments of war. We can do this only if we are true to our ideals and true to the leader who has placed this great weapon of non-violence in our hands. It is the weapon which even in weakness and defeat saves an individual and a nation their self-respect. Let us stick fast, therefore, to the anchor of non-violence. Let our non-violence be not of the weak but of the strong, fortified with the moral justice of our cause.\textsuperscript{84}

The next session of the Congress was to be held at Ramgarh in March 1940 in Bihar and Rajendra Prasad, and being the President of the Congress, had got little time to devote for its arrangements. He had also been elected Chairman of the Reception Committee of the Ramgarh session so as to avoid a contest among different contenders. He had, indeed, a tough time ahead making arrangements for the session and looking

\textsuperscript{83} RPCSD, Vol. 5, pp. V-VI.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.
after the affairs of the Congress. Nevertheless he never shrugged off from the responsibilities and went ahead with the best of his abilities.

The Government's refusal to accept the Congress suggestion precipitated talk of immediately launching a mass civil disobedience movement. By the time of Ramgarh session of the Congress sharp differences had grown on this issue. Gandhiji and the dominant leadership, including Rajendra Prasad were not in favour of it immediately. They advanced three broad reasons for not initiating an immediate movement. Firstly, they thought that since the cause of the Allies – Britain and France – was just, they should not be embarrassed in the prosecution of the War. Secondly, the lack of Hindu-Muslim unity was a big barrier to a struggle and in the existing atmosphere any civil disobedience movement could easily degenerate into communal rioting or even civil war. And lastly, they felt that there did not exist in the country an atmosphere for an immediate struggle. The Congress organization was weak and had been corrupted during 1938-39 and there was indiscipline and lack of cohesion within the Congress ranks. Under these circumstances, they argued, a mass movement would not be able to withstand severe repressive measures of the Government. They were, therefore, of the opinion that an intensive political work among the people was required for the time being to prepare them for struggle. This view was summed up in the form of resolution of the Working Committee, which Rajendra Prasad convened at Patna from 28 February to 1st March 1940. The resolution, after reiterating the Congress position on the War and asserting that 'nothing short of complete independence can be accepted by the people', declared that the Congress would resort to civil disobedience 'as soon as the Congress
organization is considered fit enough for the purpose, or in case circumstances so shape themselves as to precipitate a crisis.  

At Ramgarh session at the first sitting of the Subjects Committee of the Congress on March 17, Rajendra Prasad moved the main resolution on India and the War Crisis, as prepared by the Working Committee. His resolution was seconded by Jawaharlal Nehru and accepted by an overwhelming majority. Also as the Chairman of the Reception Committee he delivered the welcome speech and presented a brief survey of the history and glories of ancient Bihar with the hope that past might shed some inspiring lessons for the present. The main resolution on war crisis, passed by Congress, gave a clarion call to the people to be prepared for the inevitable struggle under the leadership of Gandhiji.

He had no doubt in the efficacy of the position adopted by the Congress and accordingly, after getting relieved of the Presidency plunged himself into implementing it. About a month after the Ramgarh session of the Congress, he joined a volunteers' training camp at Sonepur in North Bihar for a week from 20 April. The total strength of the campers was 291, of whom 147 were members of the Provincial Congress Committee. Besides spinning and organizing spinning classes Rajendra Prasad used to give discourses to the people every day on Charkha, technique of Satyagraha and allied matters. He laid great stress on constructive work as a means for training men "in the art of self-control and discipline, the essential qualities of a Satyagrahi". Such camps were organized also in the other districts of Bihar.

However left-wing groups – Subhas Bose and his Forward Bloc, the Congress Socialist Party, the Communist Party, the Royists, etc. suggested another perspective. In
their opinion the War as an imperialist war and it had offered an opportunity to achieve freedom by waging an all-out struggle against British imperialism. They held the view that masses were ready and were waiting for a call from the leadership. The communal problem and weaknesses in the Congress organization, they thought, would be easily and automatically swept away once a mass struggle was launched. In the words of Bipan Chandra, “Making a sharp critique of the Congress leadership’s policy of ‘wait and see’, the Left accused the leadership of being afraid of the masses, of having lost the zest for struggle, and consequently of trying to bargain and compromise with imperialism for securing petty concessions.”87 Their prescription was immediate launching of a mass struggle.

However there was no unanimity of plan of action among left groups if the dominant leadership of the Congress did not accept the line of immediate struggle. Subhas Bose wanted the Left to split the Congress if it did not launch a struggle, to organize a parallel Congress and to start a struggle on its own. He was convinced that the masses and the overwhelming majority of Congress would support the Left-led parallel Congress. While agreeing on the need for an immediate struggle, the Left was internally divided both in its understanding of political forces and on the course of political action in case the dominant leadership refused to accept their line. Subhas Bose wanted the Left to split the Congress if it did not lunch a struggle, to organize a parallel Congress and to start a struggle on its own. He was convinced that the masses and the overwhelming majority of Congress would support the Left-led parallel Congress and join the movement it would lunch. The CSP and the CPI held a different view. They thought that Bose was overestimating the influence of the Left and that no struggle could be launched

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without the leadership of Gandhiji and the Congress. Therefore, they thought, that no attempt should be made to split the Congress and disrupt the 'national united front'.

Jawaharlal Nehru wanted an early commencement of civil disobedience, but he would do nothing that would imperil the anti-Nazi struggle in Europe and the Chinese people’s struggle against Japanese aggression. However, he resolved his dilemma by deciding to go along with Gandhiji and the majority of the Congress leadership.

By the summer of 1940 the international situation became quite uncertain and dangerous as the war took a more ominous turn for the Allies. Germany’s quick successes, her alliance with Italy and fall of France – all happening with rapidity in fast succession, made the situation highly critical for Britain. “It was”, thought Rajendra Prasad, “a moment of grave crisis for Britain” and it consequently generated a great deal of anxiety in India. “In spite of the weakness of the British Government and its unjust treatment of India,” he reminisced, “German aggression had so much staggered us that for the moment we all forgot the acts of the British imperialists.”

Nevertheless, I cannot say that I would have liked Britain to be defeated in the war. I could not certainly reconcile myself to a German victory. Germany had invaded Czechoslovakia because the latter was weaker. At that time Hungary and Poland could not resist the temptation of throwing themselves on the fallen victim to share in the spoils with Germany. When, therefore, Poland’s turn to face Hitler came, I could not help feeling at first that the Poles were merely reaping what they had sown. But when, later, the German army, in a sweep, took Denmark, Holland, and Belgium, I was deeply distressed, because made it clear that he would not let

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88 Ibid.
90 Ibid., P. 499.
any weaker nation survive. My feeling of anger against the British for denying India her rights was somewhat assuaged and somehow felt that it was our duty to help the British in defeating Germany and help stop the rot. 91

In this extremely critical situation the Congress Working Committee held an emergency meeting at New Delhi from 3 to 7 July 1940 and made efforts to break the stalemate. Rajendra Prasad, or for that matter no one in the Congress, as he thought, wanted Britain's embarrassment. On the other hand what they wanted was an acknowledgement by her of India's right to complete independence in lieu of India's support. This was necessary to render and organize the material and moral resources of the country for defence and help of Britain. The Congress Working Committee, meeting in Delhi on July 1940, accordingly adopted a resolution asking the British Government to end the deadlock in the country by acknowledging the right of India to complete independence and to constitute a provisional National Government at the Centre in such a way "as to command the confidence of all the elected elements in the Central Legislature and secure the closest cooperation of the Responsible Government in the Provinces". 92

This time around an interesting debate regarding application of creed of non-violence took place among some Congressmen. Gandhiji wanted that India should completely stick to the policy of non-violence and did not favour the idea of extending active help to Britain in war effort. He went to the extent of suggesting the British that "time had arrived for a revision of Britain's war policy". In a letter to Lord Linlithgow he said:

91 Ibid.
92 Resolution passed at the CWC meeting held at Delhi on 7 July 1940. RPCSD, Vol. 5, pp. 262-3.
Sufficient has happened to prove the utter futility of armament for the protection of small nations, no matter how brave they are. Britain’s victory after the slaughter and ruthlessness which it must involve could never make the world safe for democracy nor bring it peace. Such a victory must another preparation for a war more inhuman than the present, as this one has proved more inhuman than the last. For this and similar reasons I urged with all earnestness and force at my command that if Britain could accept the no-violent method, it would redound her eternal glory and would count for much greater bravery than her proverbial bravery in the war.... If Britain could accept the method presented by me, it would point to all these countries the way of deliverance and ensure the peace of the world as no other method ever would or could. It would confound Nazi wisdom and put all the Nazi armaments out of use.... Unless you have any objection, I would like also to make a public appeal to accept the non-violent method at this supreme juncture in their life as also the life of mankind.93

Rajendra Prasad knew that Gandhiji had a firm faith about India offering moral support to Britain by maintaining non-violence. He was, therefore ready to go to any length with him. He was also not prepared to compromise on the issue of Non-violence. But the other members of the Working Committee thought that they “were not able to take up the grave responsibility of declaring” that they “would completely eschew violence” when they “had to deal with wide-spread internal disorders in this country or

93 Copy of a letter dated 30 July 1940 from Mahatma Gandhi to Lord Linlithgow, RPCSD, Vol. 5, pp. 263-65. Ther is no certainty that this letter was posted. However it was dictated by Mahatma Gandhi and written in Rajendra Prasad’s hand writing.

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external aggression”. They were, however, quite clear in their minds that “so far as the struggle for winning independence was concerned non-violence would continue to occupy the same place in the Congress programme that it had occupied all these twenty years”. Rajendra Prasad, therefore, along with Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, J.B. Kripalani, Shankarrao Deo and Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan supported Mahatma Gandhi and along with them tendered his resignation from the Working Committee. However he and others withdrew their resignations later at the request of Maulana Azad, President of the Congress. Nonetheless Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan could not be persuaded to withdraw his resignation. Gandhiji did not agree with the Working Committee and subsequently severed his connection with the Congress.

The Working Committee resolution of Delhi did not get a satisfactory response from the Government. The Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, issued a statement on 8 August 1940, reiterating the promise about Dominion Status and making it clear that in any revision of the Constitution “full weight should be given to the views of the minorities”. He further affirmed that the British Government could not consider the question of changing India’s constitution “at a time when the Commonwealth was engaged in a struggle for existence” and that a representative body for reframing India’s constitution could be set up after the war was over. He also observed that in the meanwhile, the British Government “will welcome and promote in any way possible every sincere and practical step that may be taken by the representative Indians themselves to reach a basis of friendly agreement”. For present he agreed to accommodate some prominent Indians connected with the political parties in the Viceroy’s Executive Council and establish a War Advisory Council to promote united efforts to meet the war situation. He held the

94 Quoted in K. K. Datta, op. cit., p. 176.
carrot by stating that "in this process new bonds of union and understanding will emerge and thus pave the way towards the attainment by India of that free and equal partnership in the British Commonwealth which remains the proclaimed and accepted goal of the Imperial Crown and of the British Parliament." 95

In fact the British Government as yet did not appear serious about securing India's cooperation, as Rajendra Prasad thought: "I am sure that never in her long history has Britain shown such a lack of farsightedness as when she rejected the hand of friendship held out by the Congress in 1940." 96 The August offer of the British Government was highly disappointing for Indians. Amery, Secretary of State for India, further aggravated the matter by his observations in the House of Commons on 14 August that the constitutional deadlock in India was due to lack of unanimity among the constituent elements in India's national life, viz., the Congress, the Muslim League, the Scheduled Castes and the Princes. 97 It was clear that the British Government was not willing to transfer power into Indian hands. "The house of cards which the Congress Working Committee and the A.I.C.C. had built thus collapsed in the twinkling of an eye", noted Rajendra Prasad. 98

Rajendra Prasad felt highly dismayed over the British response. In his view, the Congress had genuinely offered a hand of friendship to British. The attitude of the British Government was opposed to India's national interests. It kept issuing ordinance after ordinance taking away the freedom of speech and the Press and the right to organize

95 Statement made by the Viceroy on 8 August 1940, RPCSD, Vol. 5, pp. 263-5.
97 K. K. Datta, op. cit., p. 177.
associations. Nationalist workers, especially those belonging to the left-wing, were harassed, arrested and imprisoned all over the country. 99

The AICC, subsequently, in order to take stock of the developments and also to bring back Gandhiji at the helm of affairs, held its emergency meeting at Bombay on 15-16 September 1940. It was a very crucial meeting because the Congress had so far been following a policy of refraining from any action that might have embarrassed the British Government. But Gandhiji felt that if this attitude persisted the Congress would become supine and die a slow death. The AICC subsequently decided that it would not “submit to a policy which is a denial of India’s natural right to freedom, which suppresses the free expression of opinion and which would lead to the degradation of her people and their continued enslavement” 100. It also held the British Government responsible for creating “an intolerable situation” in India and “imposing upon the Congress a struggle for the preservation of the honour and the elementary rights of the people”. 101 Bringing truce with Gandhiji was necessary and hence it reiterated its firm belief in “in the policy and practice of non-violence not only in the struggle for Swaraj, but also in so far as this may be possible of application in a free India.” 102 Accordingly, it requested Gandhiji “to guide the Congress in the action that should be taken.” Despite the fact that Rajendra Prasad was convalescing at Sikar and had not been able to attend this crucial meeting he was in total conformity with its decisions.

100 Resolution passed by AICC at its meeting held in Bombay on 16 September 1940, RPCSD, pp. 269-70.
101 Ibid., p. 270.
102 Ibid.
Individual Satyagraha

Gandhiji had begun thinking of plans which would lead to a mass struggle within his broad strategic perspective. He accordingly suggested a Satyagraha of a new kind which was to be on an individual basis and offered by a few selected individuals in every locality. Only such persons would be chosen for participation that had proven their worth by their contribution in any sphere of the constructive programme. Further, participation would be restricted to persons with representative qualifications, such as members of institutions or organizations like the legislative assemblies, local bodies or Congress committees. The demand of a satyagrahi would be for the freedom of speech to preach against participation in the War. The satyagrahi would publicly declare: ‘It is wrong to help the British war-effort with men or money. The only worthy effort is to resist all war with non-violence resistance’. The satyagrahi would beforehand inform the district magistrate of the time and place where he or she was going to make the anti-war speech. The A.I.C.C. approved of the programme and entrusted Gandhiji with the task of conducting it. He agreed and said that none would be allowed to offer Satyagraha without his permission.

Gandhiji subsequently chose Vinoba Bhave, a Congress worker of exceptional merit, to inaugurate the movement. Vinobha Bhave started the movement on 17 October at the village of Paunar, about eight kilometers from Wardha, by delivering an anti-war speech. He was arrested on October 21 and sentenced to three months’ imprisonment. Then legislators and office-bearers of Congress committees were allowed to offer Satyagraha one by one. They were followed by constructive workers who were habitual

103 Bipan Chandra, et al., op. cit., p. 453.
104 Ibid.
spinners or had worked for the removal of untouchability. The provincial Congress committees prepared lists of qualified persons and sent them to Gandhiji and only those approved by him offered Satyagraha.¹⁰⁵

“The Satyagraha”, as Rajendra Prasad thought, “was meant to claim the freedom to preach and practice what we believed in”. In his view, the Congress “wanted to establish our claim to that right by expressing opposition to the war effort even during a critical phase of the war.”¹⁰⁶ He could not join the movement because of ill health. Nevertheless he ensured that the movement was effectively implemented there in letter and spirit as per Gandhiji’s directions. He asked Shri Krishna Sinha, a prominent national leader and ex-Premier of Bihar to inaugurate the movement in Bihar. Shri krishna Sinha accordingly made anti-war speech and courted arrest at the Patna on 28 November 1940.

But on this occasion there were noisy demonstrations and resistance by students.¹⁰⁷ Rajendra Prasad considered this to be against the instructions of Gandhiji regarding individual civil disobedience and issued a statement condemning it. He issued fresh instructions and asked Anugraha Narayan Sinha, Ex-Finance Minister and another national leader, not to offer Satyagraha till the people had agreed to observe the prescribed instructions strictly. Rajendra Prasad’ rebuff had a salutary effect. “People came to me in crowds”, in his own words, “and assured me that such demonstrations would not be repeated and that if the Satyagraha were to be called off it would sully the

¹⁰⁵ The satyagrahis began coining slogans like “Na ek bhai na ek pie” (“Not a recruit, not a pie”).
¹⁰⁶ What we wanted was to demonstrate to the world that we were not with the British in this so-called war for the freedom of humanity, and we wished to do so without unnecessary fuss. Collective Satyagraha was impossible without a serious conflict with the government at this critical juncture. It was a Satyagraha by individuals but it was officered on behalf of the country as a whole and thus had a collective basis.Rajendra Prasad, Autobiography, pp. 514-5.
¹⁰⁷ It had been decided that on the first day Shri Krishna Sinha would offer Satyagraha at the Bankipore Maidan and he would be followed immediately by Anugrah Narain Sinha. When Shri Krishna Sinha came to the Maidan, a large crowd, especially students, made noisy demonstration till he had been arrested and sent to jail.
fair name of Bihar." He was satisfied and permitted the resumption of Satyagraha after a couple of days. The result was peaceful Satyagraha.

By the end of 1940 all prominent leaders of the Congress, including Jawaharlal Nehru and Maulana Azad, the then President of the Congress as well as scores of the Congressmen were inside jail. Since the situation was extraordinary Gandhiji accepted the responsibilities of Congress President and desired Rajendra Prasad to stay with him to assist him in discharging his responsibilities and, therefore, Rajendra Prasad decided to stay mostly at Wardha along with Kripalani.

Throughout this period Rajendra Prasad had maintained an indifferent health and precisely for this reason had not able to join the Individual Satyagraha. But now when Gandhiji wanted him to assist him he was too happy to perform this. The participation of Congressmen in provincial governments and local bodies and subsequent behavior of some Congressmen had convinced him about the necessity of bringing discipline in the Congress. "Complaints and counterclaims became the order of the day and dissensions appeared on the surface" and he became highly concerned about it. Bihar, where had the entire responsibility of keeping discipline in the organization, was not better in this matter. He wanted to enforce discipline because in the absence of this future and battle which Gandhiji was preparing for could not have been fought. He, therefore, decided that "Congressmen should be withdrawn from the local bodies". While a majority of the

109 Jawaharlal Nehru had been arrested at Cheoki, near Allahabad on 31 October and sentenced to four years' imprisonment. According to S. Gopal, the British thought that Jawaharlal Nehru was going faster than Gandhiji. Gandhiji appeared determined to carry on with civil disobedience at a low temperature and in very small doses, but Jawaharlal seemed eager to push things to extremes. The British thought that his arrest might upset whatever long term-plans Gandhiji might have.
110 Maulana Azad was arrested at Allahabad on December 30 and sentenced to eighteen months' imprisonment.
111 Acharya Kripalani was then General Secretary of the Congress and Gandhiji had kept him deliberately out of the movement.
Congressmen complied his instructions and those who did not had to face disciplinary action by the provincial and district Congress committees.\textsuperscript{112} He enormously helped the organization coming back in shape by pushing and flushing out the opportunist elements out of the organization. According to an estimate more than 25,000 satyagrahis had been convicted for offering individual civil disobedience.\textsuperscript{113} Individual Satyagraha had served its purpose by giving expression to the Indian people's strong political feeling and it had also allowed the British Government opportunity to peacefully accept the Indian demands. Above all as Bipan Chandra writes, the people had been politically aroused, educated and mobilized\textsuperscript{114}

Rajendra Prasad, till the time of Cripps proposals, like a disciplined follower of Gandhiji, devoted himself to the work of training, arousal and preparing the masses for the forthcoming struggle. He left himself entirely at the command of Gandhiji and on his advice went to Mysore to inaugurate a political conference, organized by Mysore Congress Committee and then to Patna where he inspired formation of an organization devoted to carry the message of Charkha to every home and push the sale of Khadi.

\textbf{The Efforts at Restoring Communal Harmony}

While he had been devoting his time and attention to these kinds of constructive works conceived in such way as to keep Congress folk organized and meaningfully engaged in these preparatory works for future struggle, the dark shadows of communal specters

\textsuperscript{112} Rajendra Prasad, \textit{Autobiography}, p. 516.
\textsuperscript{113} Bipan Chandra, \textit{et al}, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 454.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
raised its ugly head in Bihar and Bengal.\textsuperscript{115} Continued propaganda had strained relations between the two communities more and more and had ignited the flames of communalism under whose influence very serious riots had broken out in Bihar Sharif in the summer months of 1941. Rajendra Prasad, who had been body and soul devoted to the cause of Communal harmony, felt greatly shocked by these developments and leaving the work of promotion of the constructive work came back to Bihar.\textsuperscript{116} In his own words:

I returned to Patna from Mysore and after a few days’ stay left for Wardha. When I was about to entrain I learnt of the Hindu-Muslim tension in Bihar Sharif but I never imagined that it would result in anything serious. On arrival at Wardha I saw newspaper headlines on the outbreak of riots in Bihar Sharif. I received a telegram the same day speaking of terrible happenings.\textsuperscript{117}

Rajendra Prasad after reaching Patna proceeded to Bihar Sharif along with Prof. Abdul Bari, a group of teachers, students and other Congress workers from Patna and began organizing confidence building measures there.\textsuperscript{118} Many like Mathura Prasad, his

\textsuperscript{115} Unfortunately communal tension had been rising high for quite some time. Various forces had already begun to fan inter-communal discord and to widen the “angle of differences” between the Congress and the Muslim League. In the opinion of Jinnah, “democratic system of Government in the conception of a homogenous nation and the method of counting heads” was not workable in India, and under his direction the Muslim League had observed a “Day of Deliverance” as a sign of relief on the resignation of the Congress Ministries in the provinces. Further at its Lahore Session held in March, 1940, the Muslim League enunciated the theory that the Muslims were not “a minority” but “a nation”.

\textsuperscript{116} Dr. Sachchinanda Sinha on 3 May 1941 sent the telegram regarding a dangerous situation developing in Bihar.

\textsuperscript{117} Rajendra Prasad, \textit{Autobiography}, p. 518.

\textsuperscript{118} Gandhiji subsequently issued a statement from Sevagram on May 7, 1941, and expressed his conviction that “the chief burden for the voluntary preservation of peace lies on the shoulders of the Congress, the oldest, the best organized and the most popular organization in India”, and that for this it had “to invoke the assistance of all parties, the Muslim League, the Hindu Mahasabha and some others. At present Bihar is the province that can lead the way and set the example. Rajendra Babu has a gentle and unique hold in his province such as no other leader has. He is the hero of the earthquake days when the whole of India put its trust in him. May he have too the privilege of being the messenger of peace in Bihar and through Bihar may be throughout India”. Quoted in K. K. Datta, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 187-8.
secretary and Shah Muhammad Ozair, Secretary of the Bihar Provincial Congress Committee had already been in Bihar Sharif. At great personal risk they had been visiting the affected areas and had been appealing to the people to desist from violence. He himself toured the affected areas consoling and pacifying the victims and incensed men. He organized his workers in groups and sent them in batches to the neighboring villages which were reported to have been affected. He also held meeting with the President of the Bihar Muslim League, Mohmmed Ismail, who had also gone to Bihar Sharif and was touring the different localities there. He came back to Patna for a day and addressed a representative gathering of Hindu and Muslim citizens of Patna in a meeting organized under the auspices of the Patna Peace Committee. Rajendra Prasad observed that in a country like India peopled by diverse communities the way of non-violence was the only way to maintain peace and tranquility. If anybody spoke of another way, he was out to turn that land of theirs into a jungle of brutes where the law of force reigned supreme. If somebody indicated the way of violence as the basis of communal relations, he did a definite disservice to the country. If there were men who refused to play the game, there was no sense in making a grievance of it. What concerned an individual was whether he did his duty and played his part well. Patna and Bihar, despite sporadic communal outbursts, had a tradition of communal goodwill and fellow-feeling and it was up to the inheritors of the tradition to see that the fair name of the capital of the province was not sullied.119

The efforts of Rajendra Prasad produced the desired salutary effect on the psyche of the people and peace could be restored. But the entire scenario had been heart-rending and it made Rajendra Prasad extremely agonized. For him there was no unbridgeable gulf

119 K. K. Datta, *op. cit.*, p.188.
between the Congress and the Muslim League and as Gandhiji once said it was "a
domestic problem which will disappear if the British withdraw from India". He held faith
in the heritage of a common nationality between the Hindus and the Muslims in India that
had also been emphasized by Maulana Azad in his Presidential Address at the Ramgarh
session of the Congress.

On the contrary the Muslim League had started taking positions which widened the
gulf further between the Congress and the Muslim League. The league under the
undisputed of leadership of Jinnah claimed to be "authoritative and representative organisation" of the Muslims in India. In the opinion of Jinnah the democratic system of Government in the conception of a homogeneous nation and the method counting heads was not workable in India. It was at his direction that the Muslim League had observed a "Day of Deliverance" as a sign of relief on the resignation of the Congress ministries. Further at Lahore session in March 1940 the Muslim had enunciated that the Muslims were not a minority but a “nation” and they must have their homeland, their territory and State (Pakistan). The areas, in which the Muslims were numerically in the majority, as in the north-western and eastern zones of India, should be grouped to constitute independent States in which the constituent units shall be autonomous and sovereign. In April 1941 at the Madras session of the Muslim League Jinnah reiterated his demand for Pakistan and leveled several charges against the Congress. Further he said that he “would tell Babu Rajendra Prasad to ask his Working Committee to discuss it, if they had already not done so, apply his mind to it honestly and without prejudice”. 120

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120 Ibid., 180.
Rajendra Prasad felt that Jinnah and the Muslim League were making mockery of the facts and in a furious state he issued the following statement in the press in response to what Jinnah had observed:

I have seen Mr. Jinnah’s statement issued from Madras on the 17th April in which he has sought to make two points and charged me with turning and twisting things. The first point is that Congress need not wait for the details of the scheme of Pakistan but should accept the principle forthwith and then the details may be worked out. The second is that the Congress is responsible for the failure of negotiations to arrive at a settlement and the Congress position has been most arrogant and dictatorial...I take it that Mr. Jinnah agrees that in the conversations which have taken place during the last three or four years between him and the representatives of the Congress, the two parties could never progress beyond the preliminary stage of settling their respective status and no concrete proposals for a settlement of the communal question had arisen. Coming to the second question of Pakistan, I do not know why and how Mr. Jinnah has gathered that I am not opposed to the basic principles of the scheme of partition of India. I want details of the scheme of partition of India as embodied in the resolution of the Muslim League to enable me to judge its implications and to understand what I am expected to accept. The analogy of the joint Hindu family with which I am undoubtedly familiar does not apply in this case at all. For one thing, does Mr. Jinnah admit that the Hindus and Muslims of India have so far constituted one joint family and that a
partition has now become necessary? As I understand it, the *raison de être* of the proposal is that Hindus and Muslims have always been, today are, and ever shall be in future two irreconcilable groups whose safety and salvation lie in a complete cutting of all relations and setting them up as two independent states.\(^\text{121}\)

Rajendra Prasad also rebuffed Jinnah for his bluff that the Hindus and the Congress aimed at subjecting the Muslims to the Hindu rule. On the contrary, he pointed out, that under his scheme, Jinnah and the Muslim League wanted to subject the Hindus and the non-Muslims to the Muslim rule. He also discussed and analyzed various schemes\(^\text{122}\) embodying a possible Pakistan and pointed out their shortcomings and inadequacies. To quote him again:

One would have thought that Pakistan was suggested as a solution of the communal problem. It does not touch that question at all as it leaves Muslim minorities in the so-called Hindu India and Hindu minorities in the so-called Pakistan as they are today. The problem will not cease to exist because Pakistan has been created any more than it has ceased to exist because there are in existence today the independent Muslim States of Afghanistan, Persia, Turkey and the Arab States and the

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\(^{121}\) *The Searchlight*, 20 April 1941. In support of his view, Rajendra Prasad quoted published correspondence which had passed between the Congress President Subhas Chandra Bose and Jinnah in 1938.

\(^{122}\) There were various schemes in the air and Rajendra Prasad analyzed them all. One scheme was by Punjabi in his book *Confederacy of India*, according to which the continent of India was to be split up into various countries and then a confederacy formed out of these. Another scheme was by Dr. Latif of Hyderabad University in his *Muslim Problems in India*, which was not a separatist scheme although it sought to divide India into cultural zones. One another scheme put forth was by Dr. Ambedkar in his *Thoughts on Pakistan*, which pointed out possibility of creating homogeneous Muslim States out of the Punjab, Bengal and Assam by drawing their boundaries in such a way that the areas which were predominantly Hindu would have got excluded.
independent Hindu State of Nepal. One would like to know from Mr. Jinnah how and in what respects Pakistan will differ from these existing independent Muslim States and if it will not differ how it will be able to give protection to the Muslim minorities in the rest of India any more than these existing independent Muslim States have been able to give.  

These were, indeed, tough and trying times for Rajendra Prasad. The communal frenzy was being whipped up by the Muslim League and the way out of it, he was convinced, was to propagate the message of non-violence and communal harmony. He countered the Muslim League propaganda by touring and addressing public meetings where he would often lay emphasis on need for a communal harmony and peace. He visited Motihari and Purnea districts and emphasized the need for communal harmony and expressed his hope that there would be no further communal disturbances in this province. He also presided and addressed a meeting at Tikapatti where he exhorted the people to take to spinning and other industries that were yet being carried on in the villages, such as basket-making, mat-weaving, etc. and exhorted them to keep the Congress flag flying and carry on the programme of the Congress.

Back to Wardha by middle of the June 1941, Rajendra Prasad again confined himself to the work of assisting Gandhiji. These were, indeed, very crucial moments.

123 *The Searchlight*, 20 April 1941.
124 The meeting was organized by The Azad Muslim Conference at Bagha on 29 May in the Motihari district under the presidentship of Maulana Hafizur Rahman.
125 The meeting at Purnea was also organized by The Azad Muslim Conference and presided by Maulana Hannan of the Frontier Province. Besides Rajendra Prasad those who attended it were Professor Abdul Bari, Mathura Prasad and Shah Ozair Munimi. A large number of eminent Mussalmans from the frontiers were also present.
126 The occasion was annual meeting of the Tikapatti Ashram. From this area many persons who were organizer of the Ashram, like Kishori Lal Kundu, Lakshmi Narayan Sudhansu, Bijnath Prasad Choudhary, and Phani Gopal Sen were in jail.
Most of the Congress leaders and workers had been imprisoned in wake of the Individual Satyagraha and Gandhiji had been looking after the work of the Congress President as well and Rajendra Prasad had been staying at Wardha to assist him. He had very consciously avoided, these days, undertaking any work without Gandhiji’s consent. His dedication and commitment to Gandhiji was so unparallel that he even sought his permission for going to Visakhapatnam to lay the foundation-stone for a ship building yard of the Scindia Steam Navigation Company.\(^{127}\)

Dark clouds were hovering over the horizon as the communal frenzy had again raised its head. By the third week of June communal riots had again broken out in country, Dacca being the worst affected. No sooner was he back at Wardha from Visakhapatnam than he had to start on a peace mission to riot affected areas, accompanied by Mathura Prasad and Acharya Kripalani. Riots had broken very vigorously in Dacca and nearby rural areas and caused loss of many human lives and huge property. Confident that Satyagraha was adequate, sufficient and effective to deal with this situation, he proceeded to Dacca. Before starting he shared his thoughts and concern with the Bengal Congress workers.\(^{128}\) He stayed there in the house of Shirish Chandra Chatterjee, an old Congress Worker and President of the Dacca Congress Committee. The Muslims of the city invited him to tea at the place of the Nawab of Dacca, where he held long discussions with them about the measures to be adopted for restoration of communal harmony. He visited the countryside for two or three days and was greatly

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\(^{128}\) On June 23, 1941, Rajendra Prasad and Acharya Kripalani discussed the communal situation in the country and other matters at a conference of the Bengal Congress Workers in the office of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee.
shocked to see the wide-spread ravages perpetrated by the rioters at different places. To quote him:

I visited the villages nearby which had been looted and burnt down. They presented a piteous site....In some of the villages, one could see nothing but charred stumps of wooden pillars and cement floors to remind one that there had once been human habitation on the spot....Bihar Sharif could not compare with Dacca in the matter of arson and looting.\(^{129}\)

Such was the ferocity and intensity of the Dacca riots that it left Rajendra Prasad totally stunned and deeply shocked. Even while he was in Dacca and holding talks with Jogendra Narayan Majumdar\(^{130}\), a representative of the Government of Bengal, who had been staying aboard a steamer in the river Hooghly, communal riots flared up again in the city with a horrifying intensity. Rajendra Prasad found it impossible to continue with his work there anymore and deeply shocked and anguished left for Patna along with Kripalani. On the way back in Calcutta he met Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, Fazlul Haque, then Chief Minister of Bengal and Nazimuddin, the Home Minister of Bengal and apprised them with impressions. On reaching Patna he ventilated his anger and shock in a joint communiqué with Kripalani in which he said that "what happened in the villages was absolutely one-sided and appeared to be brought about by mendacious propaganda

\(^{129}\) Rajendra Prasad, *Autobiography*, p. 520. In one of the riot-ravaged villages, he saw two men who had come there from Zeradei, his own village in Bihar, for employment. Referring to this, Rajendra Prasad observed that the adventurous spirit of the uneducated Biharis was in sharp contrast to that of the ease-loving, educated Biharis.

\(^{130}\) For an enquiry into the Dacca riots the Government of Bengal had constituted a committee and in this connection Jogendra Narayan Majumdar, an old and intimate friend of Rajendra Prasad, had gone to Dacca and was staying on board a steamer anchored in the river Hooghly. As fresh riots broke out in Dacca he had decided to abandon the enquiry and subsequently returned to Calcutta with Rajendra Prasad.
and successfully roused religious frenzy”. He held the Muslim League responsible for it.

On the one hand the scourge of communalism had appeared again in a more frightening manner and on the other hand the British Government continued with its old policy of hollow promises without any intention of a befitting response to India’s national demands. The constitutional deadlock had continued so far. In order to break this deadlock and secure communal harmony some liberal statesmen, including some Muslims made an attempt. They held a Non-Party Leaders’ Conference under Tej Bahadur Sapru, first at Bombay on 14 March 1941, and then at Poona on 26 and 27 July 1941, and suggested ending of the constitutional deadlock by a temporary reconstitution of the Central Government during war period. But their efforts did not bear any fruit and the Secretary of State for India, Amery, rejected them out rightly. Another cause that raised the increasing discontentment of the Indians, and also the distrust towards the British during this period was the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill’s declaration in the House of Commons on 9 September 1941, that the Atlantic Charter was not applicable to India. There would not have been a worst demonstration than this of Britain’s lack of sincerity towards the cause of the Indian Independence. It generated an enormous sense of disappointment among Indians.

131 Quoted in K. K. Datta, op. cit., p. 193.
132 The Atlantic Charter issued in August 1941, to which both the British and the American Governments were committed, contained significant provision: “They respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of Government under which they will live, and they wish to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them”.
Chapter Four

The Growing Impatience with War

The patience of the people was running out because of the dithering policy of the British Government regarding constitutional developments. The leaders and workers of the Congress, who were in detention during the course of the Individual Satyagraha, had been released. The meeting of the Working Committee was convened after a gap of fourteen months at Bardoli to make an assessment of the situation. In its resolution on 30 December 1941 it expressed its unhappiness over the British attitude and reiterated its previous position very emphatically and said that “full freedom for the people of India is essential even, more especially, in the present state of turmoil, not only for India’s sake but for the sake of the world.” It further reiterated that “real peace and freedom can only be established and endure on the basis of world cooperation between free nations.” But it also categorically announced that only “only a free and independent India can be in a position to undertake the defense of the country on a national basis and be of help in the furtherance of the larger causes that are emerging from the storm of war.” Pointing to the obduracy of the British attitude and the level of hostility it was brutally frank when it said that the atmosphere in India is that of “hostility and distrust of the British Government and not even the most far-reaching promises can alter this background, nor can a subject India offer voluntary or willing help to an arrogant imperialism which is indistinguishable from fascist authoritarianism.”

The creed of non-violence which was core to a person like Rajendra Prasad however was not allowing him even to make a small allowance in the Congress

\[133\] Resolution on the political situation issued by the Congress Working Committee at its meeting held at Bardoli on 30 December 1941. RPCSD, Vol. 5, pp. 299-301. This resolution was subsequently on 16 January 1942 was ratified by the AICC at Wardha.

\[134\] Ibid.

\[135\] Ibid.
supporting the war in any manner. This was evident in his being neutral in Wardha when AICC met on 15 and 16 January 1942 and considered the Working Committee resolution of Bardoli. He expressed his deep held credo when he said this resolution may open, small may be but for “for armed help in this war, particularly for the defence of the country and for the larger causes which are emerging out of it, provided that British Government accepts India’s demands.” He was further expressing the sacred horizon of faith that he shared with Gandhi, i.e., non violent resolution of conflict when he said “Our belief is that arms have not settled any dispute in the world nor are they ever likely to do so in future... We, therefore, consider that the opening that this resolution provides for armed assistance in this war is not in the best interests of the country and we wish that India should not in this war and on the present occasion also in the least relax its hold on the principle of Ahimsa”.\textsuperscript{136}

\textsuperscript{136} Cited in K. K. Datta, \textit{op. cit.} pp.194-5.