Chapter IV
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World War II broke out on 1st September 1939 when Nazi Germany invaded Poland. Earlier Germany had occupied Austria in March 1938 and Czechoslovakia in 1939. Britain and France, which had been following a policy of appeasement towards Hitler, were now forced to go to Poland's aid and declare war on Germany. This they did on 3 September 1939. The colonial Government of India immediately declared India to be at war with Germany without consulting the Congress or the elected members of the central legislature.¹

Individual Satyagraha

The Congress, was in full sympathy with the victims of fascist aggression, and its immediate reaction was to go to the aid of the anti-fascist forces. Gandhiji’s reaction was highly emotional. He told the Viceroy that the very thought of the possible destruction of the House of Parliament and Westminster Abbey produced a strong emotional reaction in him and that, fully sympathizing with the Allied cause, he was for full and unquestioning cooperation with Britain. But a question most of the

Congress leaders asked was - how was it possible for an enslaved nation to aid others in their fight for freedom?

As Gandhiji and Nehru had deep sympathy for Britain in her hours of trial, after discussion with the Viceroy Lord Linlithgow Gandhi issued a press statement supporting Britain. Subhas Chandra Bose stood against it. Long before the outbreak of the war, Subhas Chandra Bose had said, “An international crisis in the form of war would break out in the nears future and that India should make the fullest use of that crisis in order to win her freedom”.

The official Congress stand was adopted at a meeting of the Congress Working Committee held at Wardha from 8 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. 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 the democratic states of Western Europe and the totalitarian Nazi state headed by Hitler. 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 question of supporting either of the two sides did not arise. Instead the Congress

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should take advantage of the situation to wrest freedom by immediately starting a civil disobedience movement.\textsuperscript{3}

Finally the Committee passed a resolution supporting non-cooperation with war. The resolution reads: “India cannot associate herself with a war said to be for democratic freedom when that very freedom is denied to her”.\textsuperscript{4}

The War Committee, which was appointed under the Chairmanship of Jawaharlal Nehru, asked the various units to work as per the advice of the high command. In the All-India Congress Committee, which met at Wardha on October 9 and 10, 1939, the resolution of the War Committee was confirmed. It urged, “an extension of democracy to all Colonial countries and the application of the principle of self-determination to them so as to eliminate imperialist control.”\textsuperscript{5}

While there was agreement among Congressmen on the question of attitude to the war and the resignation of the ministries, sharp differences developed over the question of the immediate starting of a mass satyagraha. Gandhiji and the dominant leadership advanced three broad reasons for not initiating an immediate movement. First, they felt that since the cause of the Allies - Britain and France - was just, they should not be

\textsuperscript{4} R. C. Majumdar, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 494.
embarrassed in the prosecution of the War. Second, the lack of Hindu-Muslim unity was a big barrier to a struggle. In the existing atmosphere any civil disobedience movement could easily degenerate into communal rioting or even civil war. Above all, they felt that there did not exist in the country an atmosphere for an immediate struggle. Neither the masses were ready nor was the Congress organizationally in a position to launch a struggle. The Congress organisation was weak and had been corrupted during 1938-39. There was indiscipline and lack of cohesion within the Congress ranks. Under these circumstances, a mass movement would not be able to withstand severe repressive measures by the Government. It was, therefore, necessary to carry on intense political work among the people, to prepare them for struggle, to one up the Congress organisation and purge it of weaknesses, to negotiate with authorities till all the possibilities of a negotiated settlement were exhausted and the Government was clearly seen by all to be in the wrong. 6

Gandhiji now began to take steps which would lead to a mass struggle within his broad strategic perspective. He decided to initiate a limited satyagraha on an individual basis by a few selected individuals in every locality. 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-violent

6 Ibid., pp. 450-451.
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 carefully chosen *satyagrahis* - Vinoba Bhave was to be the first *satyagrahi* on 17 October 1940 and Jawaharlal Nehru the second - were surrounded by huge crowds when they appeared on the platform, and the authorities could often arrest them only after they had made their speeches. And if the Government did not arrest a *satyagrahi*, he or she would not only repeat the performance but move into the villages and start a trek towards Delhi, thus participating in a movement that came to be known as the 'Delhi Chalo' (onwards to Delhi) movement. The aims of the Individual *Satyagraha* conducted as S. Gopal has put it, 'at a low temperature and in very small doses'^7^ were explained as follows by Gandhiji in a letter to the Viceroy: 'The Congress is as much opposed to victory for Nazism as any Britisher can be. But their objective cannot be carried to the extent of their participation in the war. And since you and the Secretary of State for India have declared that the whole of India is voluntarily helping the war effort, it becomes necessary to make clear that the vast majority of the people of India are not interested in it. They make no distinction between Nazism and the double autocracy that rules India.'^8^

Thus, the Individual *Satyagraha* had a dual purpose - while giving expression to the Indian people's strong political feeling, it gave the British

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^8^ The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, New Delhi, Vol. 73, p. 72.
Government further opportunity to peacefully accept the Indian demands. Gandhiji and the Congress were, because of their anti-Nazi feelings, still reluctant to take advantage of the British predicament and embarrass her war effort by a mass upheaval in India. More importantly, Gandhiji was beginning to prepare the people for the coming struggle. The Congress organization was being put back in shape; opportunist elements were being discovered and pushed out of the organization; and above all the people were being politically aroused, educated and mobilized. By 15 May 1941, more than 25,000 satyagrahis had been convicted for offering individual civil disobedience. Many more - lower level political workers - had been left free by the Government.

Caste Hindu - Dalit cooperation

Many caste Hindus supported dalits during this time. Their support attracted dalits towards Congress and hence many dalits joined in the individual satyagraha programmes.

Maruthai was a dalit leaders from Puthur, Tiruchirappalli. He was respected by Congress men. In one occasion, when Gandhiji visited Tiruchirappalli, he had an opportunity to read a welcome address. He was encouraged by caste Hindu leaders like V. O. Chidambaram Pillai, Santhanam and T. S. Arunachalam.

This encouragement of Congress leaders was a boost to the activities of Maruthai and he brought thousands of dalits to the Congress. When Gandhiji announced Individual Satyagraha, they responded in large
number. Though Maruthai was arrested for his role in individual satyagraha movement, his lieutenants stepped into the shoes.\(^9\)

Balakrishnan, a leading dalit leader from Palani, was also encouraged by caste Hindus. Earlier, he had participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement. He was very close to N. M. R. Subbaraman, and Vaidhya Natha Aiyar. Though Subbaraman belonged to Sourashtra Community, he did many welfare works to dalits. He opened hostels and schools to dalits. His activities encouraged the dalits to participate in large number in the Congress Programmes.

Balakrishnan created awakening among the members of his dalit community. Followed by Balakrishnan, many persons participated in the individual satyagraha programme. For their participation, Balakrishnan as well as other dalit individual satyagrahais were arrested.\(^10\)

Many dalit political leaders emerged during this period. Caste Hindus realised the importance of associating them in the freedom movement. Hence the participation of dalit leaders during this period was more than the previous satyagraha programmes.

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\(^9\) Interview with Gandhimathi, daughter of Maruthai, Puthur, Tiruchirappalli, dated 20th June 2004.

\(^10\) Interview with Selva Pandian, son of freedom fighter Balakrishnan, Aikudi, Palani, dated 28th August 2004.
Dalit individual Satyagrahis

The dalit participation in the Individual Satyagraha Programme of Mahatma Gandhi increased day by day. They went to different parts of Tamil Nadu and delivered speeches against the war efforts of the Government. Many of them were imprisoned. The following is a brief list of dalit individual satyagrahis who meted severe punishments.

1. R. Maruthai, son of Rangan, born in 1886 at Puthur, Tiruchirappalli Taluk, took part in the individual Satyagraha in early 1941 and got arrested and remanded in custody for one year at Tiruchirappalli central jail. He was a member of Tiruchirappalli Municipality and also the leader of Harijan Welfare Association and member of Legislative Council.\(^\text{11}\) He was released after the request of various leaders.\(^\text{12}\)

2. Krishna Kudumban, son of Chellandi Kudumban, born in 1909, participated in the liberation of India from British rule. He got arrested and sentenced for four months under Defense of India Rules for his part in Individual Satyagraha Movement. He was kept in Coimbatore central jail. He was a member of the Legislative Assembly in Udumalaipatti, Coimbatore district.\(^\text{13}\)

\(^{11}\) Bundle No.20, Supplement to the Madras Police Gazette, 1941.
\(^{12}\) Confidential letter of District Magistrate to Collector of Tiruchirappalli, 12th December 1941.
\(^{13}\) Ibid.
3. Palaniandi, son of Kaali Kudumban Pannadi, born in 1919, participated in this struggle in 1941 in Veeramangalam, Coimbatore. He was imprisoned and sentenced for one year.

4. Balakrishna, son of Sundara Kannappa Kudumban, born in 1909, joined the Congress party in 1935. He participated in this struggle in 1941 and got arrested under Defense of India Rules Sec.38(5) and sentenced to six months imprisonment and fined rupees hundred or if not one more month of imprisonment. He was from Madurai district.\textsuperscript{14}

5. Periyapulisin, son of Azhagan Kudumban, born in 1921, involved in individual \textit{Satyagraha} in 1941 and he was kept in Alipuram jail for six months. He was also from Madurai.

6. Munusamy was born in 1910. He involved in individual \textit{Satyagraha} in 1941 and was imprisoned. He was kept in Vellore jail for two months. He was from Thiruvannamalai, North Arcot district.\textsuperscript{15}

7. Chinnasamy was born in 1919. He took part in the Individual \textit{Satyagraha} in 1941 and he was imprisoned and kept in Madras jail for six months.

8. Marimuthu, son of Murugaiya was born in 1895. He joined Congress party in 1940 and participated in Individual \textit{satyagraha}. He got

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{15} Fortnightly Reports.
arrested under Indian Defense Rule and kept in Tiruchirappalli jail for six months. He was from Pudukottai, Thanjavur district.\textsuperscript{16}

9. Maruthaiya was born in 1918. He joined the Congress in 1937 and participated in Individual \textit{Satyagraha} in 1941. He was from Dindigul.

10. Kandan, born in 1914, took part in Individual \textit{Satyagraha} in 1941 and was arrested and sentenced for three months under Sec. IPC-143 and 447. He was kept in Coimbatore jail. His native place was Salem.\textsuperscript{17}

\begin{quote}
Ayeegudi Saliyapuli Vanangamudi Balakrishnan Devendarar was a very important individual satyagrahi. He was held in high in Indian politics either as MLA or MP or leader of Congress Mahajan Saba and held many posts. He was MLA for Congress party in 1940. He rebelled against the British for joining India in the Second World War in 1939. For that he was put in jail. Many others were also punished. The name of Devendra Kula leaders and punishment given to them in connection with individual \textit{satyagraha} were kept like this as follow:

1) Balakrishnan, Member of Parliament, Palani district.

\textit{Crime}: Satyagraha.

\textit{Punishment}: Imprisonment for six months with fine of rupees hundred, if not paid again one month imprisonment. [FNR -1940/241]
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Ibid.}
2) Mr. Krishna Kudumbanar, Ex Parliament member, Kovai district.

*Crime:* Distribution of pamphlets against war and for involving in *satyagraha.*

*Punishment:* On the bases of IPC-38 one month imprisonment and fine of rupees two hundred, if he refuses to pay the fine then two month additional imprisonment.

3) Mr. Palanisamy Kudumban, Ex Parliament member, Salem district.

*Crime:* Satyagraha.

*Punishment:* One year imprisonment with rupees five hundred, if he opposes then three months imprisonment. [FNA 1940/p 244]

From official documents we come to know that in 1940 and 1941 many Devendras and other Dalits involved in Indian Freedom Struggle. However, the names of many of them are not known.\(^ {18} \)

R. P. Perumal of Sholavandan, R. S. Perumal of Madurai, Kulasekara Dass of Tindivanam, M. P. Perumal of Namakal, R. Muthiah of Devakottai, P. S. Muthiah of Madurai and M. Manickam of Madurai were the other important dalit leaders who were imprisoned in connection with individual *satyagraha.* They were released only after the punishment period.\(^ {19} \)

\(^{18}\) Mallar Malar, August 2003, p. 22.

\(^{19}\) Public G. O. No.421, dated 4th February 1942.
Change in British Policy

Two major changes in British politics occurred during 1941. Nazi Germany had already occupied Poland, Belgium, Holland, Norway and France as well as most of Eastern Europe. It attacked the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941. In the East, Japan launched a surprise attack on the American fleet at Pearl Harbour on 7 December. It quickly overran the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Burma. It occupied Rangoon in March 1942. War was brought to India’s doorstep. Winston Churchill, now the British Prime Minister, told the King that Burma, Ceylon, Calcutta and Madras might fall into enemy hands.

The Indian leaders, released from prisons in early December, were worried about the safety and defence of India. They also had immense concern for the Soviet Union and China. Many felt that Hitler’s attack on the Soviet Union had changed the character of the war. Gandhiji had earlier denounced the Japanese slogan of ‘Asia for Asiatics’ and asked the people of India to boycott Japanese products. Anxious to defend Indian territory and to go to the aid of the Allies, the Congress Working Committee overrode the objections of Gandhiji and Nehru and passed a resolution at the end of December offering to fully cooperate in the defence of India and the Allies if Britain agreed to give full independence after the war and the substance of power immediately.  

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20 Bipan Chandra, op. cit., p.454.
As the war situation worsened, President Roosevelt of the USA and President Chiang Kai-Shek of China as also the Labour Party leaders of Britain put pressure on Churchill to seek the active cooperation of Indians in the war. To secure this cooperation the British Government sent to India in March 1942 a mission headed by a cabinet minister Stafford Cripps, a left-wing Labourite who had earlier actively supported the Indian national movement. \(^{21}\)

\(^{21}\) Ibid., p. 455.