Chapter-4

THE ‘QUIT INDIA’ MOVEMENT AND AN ALL INDIA PERSPECTIVE: AN OVERVIEW

The ‘Quit India’ movement in 1942\(^1\) was the crowning moment in the whole history of Indian nationalism. It was, in fact, the last heroic battle on the part of the masses of India to achieve National freedom. “The day of Saturday, the 8th August”, on which the All India Congress Committee (A.I.C.C.) adopted the historic Quit India Resolution, “will be considered as ushering in a new era in the history of our country and it will be inscribed in the annals of history in golden letters.”\(^2\) This great ‘August movement’ was by nature “a political protest against continuing British rule in India, launched at a moment when it was felt that the edifice of the Raj was about to crumble.”\(^3\)

The ‘Quit India’ movement, as per the historical record, was not only a ‘political protest’ against the Raj, but also a ‘open rebel’ against it on the part of the Indians who were completely disenchanted with the imperialist rule of the British Government in India and were thus earnestly eager to liberate India from the rule by any means. This is why they had fought a valiant battle in the historic ‘Quit India’ movement to make the British Government quit its Indian empire and to acquire the highly cherished freedom of India on their own capabilities. In fact,
they had thus fought this last battle of India’s independence quite vigorously and valiantly even at the absence of any organized leadership. “Despite the absence of …leadership, the movement assumed massive proportions to the extent of a civil rebellion. Not constrained by the lack of central leadership, the rebels had built a structure of the led and the leader which sprang up from within the region in which the local political leadership appropriated mass-grievances to organize the last anti-British offensive”\(^3\)

The ‘Quit India’ movement was thus a head-on collision between the exploited and expropriated Indians earnestly seeking to get free and the British Government maintaining its arbitrary and exploitative imperialist rule in India quite illegally and irrationally, and the collision had of course caused a great damage to the British rule in India and deranged it also completely. The ‘Quit India’ movement had thus immensely harassed and embarrassed the British Government in India. It was, no doubt, the greatest blow to the imperialist rule of the British Government in India. Thus “the 1942 movement in fact signaled the end of British rule by making it crystal clear that the imperialists did not have the force sufficient to govern the country in the face of the increasingly powerful and organized opposition of the people.”\(^4\) Though eventually crushed, the movement demonstrated “the continuing strength of the Indian National Congress in the
political life” of the country and raised a strong “challenge to the British”. It really caused a serious fissure in the British imperialist edifice.

THE ‘QUIT INDIA’ MOVEMENT: ACTION AND REACTION

The ‘Quit India’ movement was, by nature, a direct battle of the freedom-prone Indians against the exploitative rule of the imperialist British Government in India. Indians were, in fact, so agonized and aggrieved and thus so disenchanted and disillusioned with the imperialist British Government that they had felt mentally impelled to organize a headlong battle against the Government to compel it to quit India and to achieve thereby India’s independence. This was why they had very spontaneously and quite spiritedly launched an heroic battle against the Government in the historic ‘Quit India’ movement in 1942.

ACTION OF THE INDIANS AND THE MOVEMENT

During the period of the ‘Quit India’ movement at the national level the aggrieved leaders and workers of the movement desperately attacked what they had considered to be the symbols of British Power and Authority, namely, Government offices, record rooms, police stations, railway stations, railway lines
and signal posts, telephone posts and lines, telegraph lines, post offices, post bags, dak bungalows and all other things identified with the British empire. Not only that they had also set up and maintained too parallel nationalist Governments in different parts of India which had continued functioning incessantly despite many odds and eccentricities.  

**REACTION OF THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT AND THE MOVEMENT**

The British Government was, however, by no means a silent spectator to these rebellious activities of the disenchanted and desperate Indians seeking only to acquire freedom of India and also to get themselves free on their own efforts. In fact, the Government, extremely disturbed and distressed with the rebel, had come forward to adopt effective preventive measures to control and even to suppress the rebellious movement. It had employed for this purpose fifty-seven battalion of troops that had ruthlessly subdued the civil rebellion within a relatively short span of time. Practically speaking, the Government had attained a dramatic success in controlling and even suppressing the movement mainly due to its military preparedness in the context of the World War II.
THE BACKGROUND OF THE MOVEMENT

The ‘Quit India’ movement on an all-India level had, however, its origin in the world political developments of the late 1930s and early 1940s. On the 1st September, 1939, the Second World War broke out with its naked brutality with the German invasion over Poland, and England declared war immediately against Nazi Germany. The Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, associated India on the 3rd September 1919, with Britain’s declaration of war against Germany without at all caring for consulting the Provincial Ministers or any Indian leader. This unilateral act of associating India with Britain’s war against Germany and arbitrarily declaring her (India) as a belligerent by the Viceroy together with the assumption of autocratic powers by him created deep resentment among the Indian leaders.

Though Congress hostility to fascist attack was more forthright and consistent than Britain’s own record so far and even though “there was a considerable amount of sympathy and support for Britain”, yet the Congress leaders were now not at all mentally prepared to associate India with Britain as her ally especially on the ground of “imperialist” character of the war. They rather wanted to exploit the war-situation and repeatedly claimed (on the 10th October, 1939) and demanded that “India must be declared an independent nation and present application must be given to this status to the largest possible extent.”
The British Government, however, paid no heed to the demand of the Congress. In 1940, Lord Linlithgow made a declaration to the effect that the Government did not contemplate any immediate transfer of power, but reiterated the Government promise of ‘Dominion Status’ for India in future. Against this “unequivocal reiteration of the old imperialist policy” by the Viceroy, all the Congress Ministers had already resigned between October and November, 1939. Not only that the Congress had also decided firmly not to co-operate with the British Government in her war against fascist Germany provided Britain had not conceded the demand of ‘full independence of India’ and presently established a ‘Provisional National Government’, “which, though formed as a transitory measure, should be such as to command the confidence of all the elected elements in the Central Legislature.”

This stubborn stand of the Congress was a direct threat to the British rule in India, causing a great anxiety to the British Government, which was then deeply engaged in, and highly anxious about, her war against Germany. This rigid Congress attitude to the British war efforts, along with the war pressure imposed by the Axis powers upon the British Government, made her review her policy towards India. In such circumstances, two world developments in the latter half of 1941 forced the British Government to change her India policy, which are 1) Hitler’s invasion of Russia, and 2) the dramatic Japanese drive through South-East
Asia from December 1941 which in four months swept her empire in India to a sudden end.\textsuperscript{18}

Through these world developments the war daily came nearer to India. On the 7\textsuperscript{th} December, 1941 (7.12.1941), Japan bombed Pearl Harbour, and even at the attack of the advancing Japan, Singapore fell on the 15\textsuperscript{th} February 1942, Rangoon on the 8\textsuperscript{th} March and the Andaman Islands on the 23\textsuperscript{rd} March. \textsuperscript{19} It was against such horrible background when Japanese invasion of India was almost near at hand that the British Government felt impelled to make some gestures to win over and mobilize India’s public opinion and thereby inspire the Indians to extend their help in her war-efforts against the Axis Power including Japan, without which, as the Government now practically came to realize, it was really difficult to resist any probable Japanese invasion of India. \textsuperscript{20} The British War-Cabinet, therefore, sent a Conciliatory Mission under the direction of Sir Stafford Cripps—officially called the Cripps Mission \textsuperscript{21}—on the 23\textsuperscript{rd} March, 1942, to negotiate a political settlement with the Indian leaders.

Mr Cripps was initially very much interested in making a real solution of the-then political problems of India. \textsuperscript{22} According to the Draft Declaration\textsuperscript{23} made by the British War-Cabinet, that contained certain proposals (which he brought with him), he liberally promised India’s post-war ‘Dominion Status’ with the right of secession, a ‘constitution making body’ elected by provincial legislatures and
also with states being invited to appoint representatives. The Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, was not satisfied with the apparently liberal policy of Mr Cripps, and he thus complained to Mr Churchill, the-then British Prime Minister, against Cripps’ too much liberal proposals. Mr Churchill then assured him that “he (Mr Cripps) is of course bound by the draft declaration which is our utmost limit.”

But Mr Cripps due to his sincere desire for a respectable solution of the Indian political problems, seems to have gone considerably beyond that ‘utmost limit’ in his talks with Mr Jawaharlal Nehru and Mr Abul Kalam Azad who were apparently told by him that the proposed Dominion Government of India would really approximate to Cabinet Government. But Mr Nehru and Mr Azad refused to accept Cripps’ proposals, for the specific demand of a ‘Responsible National Government’ for India was ignored in the very proposals. Beside, Gandhiji had also criticized the Cripps’ proposals as “a post dated cheque on a crushing bank.”

With this Congress refusal of Cripps’ proposals, occurred an interesting event; the Muslim League Working Committee on the 11th April, 1942, also refused the proposals on the ground of Mr. Md. Ali Jinnah’s complaint that “the talks (of Mr. Cripps) had been carried on with the Congress leaders over the heads of the Muslim; and other parties had been utterly ignored.” Consequently the Cripps Mission came to an unfortunate end.
This failure of the Cripps Mission was, however, thought to be the direct product of the “reactionary attitude”\textsuperscript{30} of Mr. Churchill in particular, and the British Government in general,—the attitude that seriously handicapped Mr. Cripps in affording a real solution of the-then Indian political problems. It is viewed to be true that Mr. Cripps, who had really a soft-corner to the problems of Indian politics, could have made a satisfactory solution of the problems by accepting the major demands of the Indian leaders, had Mr. Churchill empowered him to act according to the requirement of circumstances, but he rather “Stayed the hands of Cripps at a moment when success was within sight.”\textsuperscript{31}

In fact, the practical and apparently liberal policy of Mr.Cripps failed to satisfy the British Government. The Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, and Commander-in-Chief, Mr. Wavell, were seriously worried that Mr.Cripps was conceding far too much real power to the Congress, and thus together with Mr. Churchill, they were able to block the settlement at the last moment.\textsuperscript{32} Thus a War-Cabinet telegram to Mr. Cripps on the 9\textsuperscript{th} April, 1942 sharply pulled him up for not adequately consulting Mr. Linlithgow and Mr. Wavell and also for giving Mr. Johnson, the personal representative of Mr. Roosevelt, too much power in military affairs, and emphasized the need “to bring the whole matter back to Cabinet’s plan which you (Mr. Cripps) went out to urge.”\textsuperscript{33}
This internal reactionary policy of the British Government psychologically pressurized Mr. Cripps to sing a completely different tune the same evening (9.4.42), and he thus now directly refused to meet the Congress demand of a wartime Responsible National Government with full powers on the plea that the Muslim League, the Hindu Mahasabha and the Indian Princes would not consent to it because of the politico-communal question. His talks with the Indian leaders, thus, broke down abruptly.

Experiencing this traditional British game of bluff and double-dealing, now incidentally played by Mr. Cripps, the Congress leaders felt impelled to launch a struggle to enforce the national demand for India’s independence. Accordingly the A.I.C.C. in its Bombay session passed a resolution on the August 8th, 1942, declaring that “An immediate ending of British rule in India is an urgent necessity both for the sake of India and the success of the cause of the United Nations”.

Thus started the famous Quit India Movement—the August Movement—with a call for “Mass struggle on non-violent lines on the widest possible scale” inevitably under the leadership of Gandhiji, who urged in a highly passionate speech on the same day (8.8.42) to follow the “Do or die” policy to make India free. According to him, “I am not going to be satisfied with anything short of complete freedom… We Shall do or die. We shall either free India or die in the attempt.”
But the British Government was not at all a silent spectator; it rather made heavy preparations to nip any serious act of revolt on the part of the Indians in the bud. Thus just after the termination of the A.I.C.C. meeting late at night on the 8th August, 1942, it started its planned operation; and before the dawn of the next day, police arrested Gandhiji and all other members of the A.I.C.C.; and all (Provincial) Congress Committees except in North West Frontier Province (N.W.F.P.) were banned. 39 At the time of his arrest, Gandhiji Suggested quite categorically; “Create a complete deadlock by means of strikes and other non-violent means. Do or Die.” 40

**THE MOVEMENT : A STARTLING START :**

The early-morning round-up of Congress leaders on the 9th August led to a country-wide wave of violent popular demonstration. 41 “The people grew insensate and were maddened with fury …”, as the official version of the Congress stated, “The mob on their part began to stone running Railways and stop trains and cars, damage Railway stations and set fire to them or property therein, loot grain-shops, cut telegraph wires, rip open the tyres of cars, harass victorias, bullock carts and tongas. Besides these excesses initiated by the people at large, there were hartals throughout India despite the Ordinance prohibiting them, in which the school and college students took a big hand in picketing. Educational institutions
and Universities very soon emptied and closed from one end of the country to another, from Dacca to Delhi excepting Aligarh and from Lahore to Madras.” 42 The Viceroy, Linlithgow, thus described the ‘Quit India’ movement in a telegram to Mr. Churchill on the 31st August, 1942, as “by far the most serious rebellion since that of 1857, the gravity and extent of which we have so far concealed from the world for reasons of military security.” 43

**NATURE OF THE MOVEMENT**

However, all these above-mentioned events, which occurred in the course of the ‘Quit India’ movement, can be broadly categorized into three main phases.44 1) “The first, massive and violent but quickly suppressed, was predominantly urban, and included hartales, strikes, and clashes with the police and army in most cities” (like Bombay, Calcutta, Ahmedabad, Lucknow, Cawnpore, Nagpur etc) 2) In the Second phase, “From about the middle of August, the focus shifted to the countryside with militant students…, destroying communications on a massive scale, and leading a veritable peasant rebellion against white authority” (in the rural areas like Northern and Western Bihar, Eastern Uttar Pradesh, Midnapore in Bengal etc.) 3) The third phase starting from about the end of September was “characterized by terroristic activity by educated youth directed against communications and police and army installations, occasionally rising to the level
of guerrilla war” (as in the cases of the North Bihar-Nepal border, Tamluk in Bengal, Talcher in Orissa etc).

It is, however, to be mentioned here that the violent outbursts manifested in India during the ‘Quit India’ movement were chiefly the direct measures against the indiscriminate arrest of the leaders by police and the brutal repression of the government which Gandhiji described as ‘leonine violence.’ \(^{45}\)

**THE MOVEMENT : A TRAGIC END**

It’s a tragedy however that the ‘Quit India’ movement in India ultimately failed due to the absence of any sort of integrated leadership and systematic plan or programme of operation. \(^{46}\) The Government forestalled the movement by arresting the Congress leaders and banning the political organizations, like the Congress. This unleashed, in turn, an unprecedented country-wide wave of mass-fury which, due to its unorganized nature for the lack of any leadership, was adroitly controlled by the Government by the repressive methods of indiscriminate lathi-charge, beating, arresting and even firing.

In fact, the large number of people, engaged in violent outbreak of 1942 movement, were really unorganized, for, Gandhiji, under whose leadership the
movement was decided to be launched, did not get any scope to clearly formulate any definite programme of action for organizing and conducting the movement, as he himself was arrested on the early morning of the 9th August. He only urged the people just “to do or die,” but strictly within the limits of non-violence, for he sincerely believed “that India will never succeed in attaining her freedom through violence. If a vast country like ours, with a population of four hundred millions, takes to the path of violence, the world can not escape destruction.”

But Gandhiji’s principle of non-violent direct action, to speak very realistically, had no real impact on the large number of unorganized but spontaneous participants of the ‘Quit India’ movement; thus struggles involving wide-spread sabotage and terrorism, launched by the underground revolutionary groups along with popular outburst, broke out at once, but were soon crushed by the British Government through its mightier Power. Jay Prakash Narayana of the Congress Solialist Party(C.S.P) was deeply engaged in such violent struggles, and Subhash Chandra Bose who organized the Indian National Army (I.N.A.) to liberate India with the Japanese aid, made laudable attempts in this direction. But all of their efforts did not yield any immediate result.

Now a period of lull began to prevail over India National Movement, and obviously the Quit India Movement on the national scale came to an abrupt end.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


2. The quoted lines are the opening part of the “Program given to the Provincial Committees And Public from The All India Congress Committee”, quoted in David Hardiman, The Quit India Movement in Gujarat, paper presented in a seminar organized by the Centre for Studies in Social Science Research Calcutta (C.S.S.S.R.C), Calcutta, 1982.


It is however to be noted that the August movement was less organized and less planned. Mr. Gyanendra Pandey in his paper “Anticipation of Power: The Bhojpur Region in 1942,” (p.1) presented in the above mentioned seminar, clearly expressed the view that:
“…It (the movement) was, all said and done, a most unusual rising—initiated by Gandhiji but scarcely controlled by it, radical and violent but not developing into a major class war …The Congress was (or was not) responsible, or alternatively, the movement was spontaneous, led by Socialist-minded students, or what you have.”

6b. ibid.
7. Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, op.cit.,p.491.
12. Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, op.cit.,p.493.
13. In a statement, The Congress Working Committee declared,
“The Committee cannot associate themselves or offer any co-operation in a war which is conducted on imperialist lines and which is meant to consolidate imperialism in India and everywhere.”

The Committee thus asked,

“Do they (the British) include the treatment of India as a free nation whose policy will be guided in accordance with the wishes of her people?” (September 1939)

Quoted in A.R.Desai, op.cit.,p.34.

14. Quoted in Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, op.cit.,p.494.

15. A.R.Desai, op.cit.,p.34. For a detailed discussion see Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, op.cit.,pp.494-5.

16. Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, op.cit.,p.497; see also Sankar Ghose, op.cit.,p.122.

17. The Congress Working Committee also declared:

“… If these measures are adopted, it will enable the Congress to throw its full weight into the efforts for the effective organization of the defence of the country” (July Resolution,1940)
Quoted in Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, op.cit.,p.498 and also in A.R. Desai, op.cit.,p.31.


19. Ibid.p.385; see also Sankar Ghose, op.cit.,p.123.


23. For the Summary of the Draft Declaration containing the Cripps proposals, See Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, op.cit.,pp.514-5.


25. Quoted in ibid.

26. In his cable to Mr. Churchill on the 4th April, Mr. Cripps made a reference to the ‘new arrangement whereby the executive Council will approximate to a Cabinet; N. Mansergh (ed.), Transfer of Power, Vol.I, p.636. See also Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, op.cit.,p.518.

27. In a letter on the 10th April, 1942, Azad wrote to Cripps:

“While we cannot accept the proposals you have made, we want to inform you that we are yet prepared to assume responsibility,
provided a truly National Government is formed… The National Government must be a cabinet government with full power and must not merely be a continuation of the viceroy’s Executive Council.”

Quoted in Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, op.cit.,p.519.

28. See R. C. Majumdar (ed.), *Struggle for Freedom*, op.cit.,p.639. (emphasis is ours)

29. Quoted in Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, op.cit.,p.519.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.


35. For playing this traditional imperialist game of the British Government of playing off one community against another simply on under communal ground in refusing the Congress demand of Responsible National Government, Mr. Cripps is thought in Indian opinion as being the villain of the piece. But we should not forget that he was a mere agent of Mr. Churchill,
having no real power to reform the reactionary British policy. See Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, op.cit.,p.523.


38. Speech of Gandhiji on the 8th August, 1942, quoted in Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, op.cit.,p.532.

Again about Gandhiji’s attitude to the ‘Quit India’ movement Abul Kalam Azad wrote in his India Wins Freedom:

“Gandhiji’s mind was now moving from the extreme of complete inactivity to that of organized mass effort…”

“… he mentioned during our discussions… that unlike previous occasions, this time the people would not court imprisonment voluntarily. They should resist arrest and submit to Government only if physically forced to do so.

“Gandhiji made it clear that like other movements, this would also be on the basis of non-violence. All methods short of violence would however be permissible. During the discussions, Jawaharlal said that what Gandhiji had in view was in fact an open rebellion even if the
rebellion was non-violent. Gandhiji liked the phrase and spoke of an open non-violent revolution several times.”


Besides, *Azad Patrika* of Gujrat had also expressed Gandhiji’s message regarding the ‘Quit India’ movement.

“India is free’. ‘Everyone should do his best to free India by acting within the bounds of non-violence.’ ‘Completely paralyse Government administration by strikes and all non-violent means.’ ‘Do or die.’

Quoted in David Hardiman, *op.cit.*, p. 41.


40. Gandhiji’s speech, quoted in D. Hardiman, *op.cit.*, p. 44.

41. See Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, *op.cit.*, p. 534. See also Gail Omvedt, *op.cit.*, p. 4.


44. This categorization has been made by Sumit Sarkar in his book *Modern India: 1885-1947*, *op.cit.*, pp. 394-6.

46. See R.P. Dutt, *India Today*, op.cit., p. 570. See also Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, op.cit., pp. 558-60.

47. But David Hardiman in his paper, *The Quit India Movement in Gujarat*, quoted different programmes of action, published in the *Azad Patrika*, *Azad India* and ‘Programme given to the Provincial Committees And Public from the All India Congress Committee,’ published by the Gujarat Provincial Committee etc., all these, collected from British records, contained detailed programmes of action of 1942 Rebellion. See his paper, op.cit., pp. 41-55.

48. Regarding Gandhiji’s attitude to the programme of action of the 42 movement, Nehru wrote:

“Neither in public nor in private at the meetings of the Congress Working Committee did he hint at the nature of action he had in mind, except in one particular. He had suggested privately that in the event of failure of all negotiations, he would appeal for some kind of non-co-operation and a one day protest hartal, or cessation of all works—symbolic of a nation’s protest … So neither he nor the Congress Working Committee issued any kind of directions, public or private,
except that people should be prepared for all developments and should in any event adhere to the policy of peaceful and non-violent action.”

Quoted in Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, op.cit., p.546.

49.  Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, ibid.

50.  As quoted in Buddhadeva Bhattacharyya, op.cit., p.314.


52.  Ibid.

53.  Ibid.

54.  According to Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, “The campaign of 1942 would go down in history as an instance of hopeless incompetence and utter mismanagement on the part of the Congress leaders.” See Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, op.cit., p.559.