

Quit India: The Historic Mass Movement for Independence

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ABSTRACT

The Quit India Movement (Bharat Chhodo Andolan) was a spontaneous mass upheaval in the history of India's struggle for Independence. It was the next major milestone after the Salt Satyagraha. The success and failures of the Movement are debated. But, the great significance of this historic movement was that it placed the demand for independence on the immediate agenda of the national movement.

Key Words : Do or Die Mantra, Civil Disobedience Movement, Quit India Resolution

INTRODUCTION

The Quit India Movement, also known as the August Movement was a Civil Disobedience Movement launched by Gandhi for Satyagraha (independence). Its aim was to bring the British government to the negotiating table through determined, but passive resistance. This historical movement played out in the backdrop of World War II. The British government entered India in the war unilaterally and without consultation with the Indian people. 1939 saw the outbreak of World War II, following which Britain went to war with Germany. Since India was an important part of the British Empire, India also became part of the war. On 10th October 1939 the Congress Working Committee (CWC) declared their unhappiness regarding the hostile activities taking place in Germany and announced that India refused to be a part of the war because it was against fascism. Simultaneously, important political changes were taking place in England. Churchill came to power as the Prime Minister and being a conservative, he was not moved by the demands of the Indians. Following the rejection of the demands made by the Congress and the large-scale dissatisfaction that was prevailing across the country, Gandhi decided to launch the Civil Disobedience Movement.¹

In March 1942, the British government sent a delegation to India under Stafford Cripps, in what came to be known as the Cripps Mission. The purpose of the mission was to negotiate with the Indian National Congress a deal to obtain total co-operation during the war. The talks failed because they did not address the key demand. It offered only limited dominion-status that was wholly unacceptable to the Congress Party.² Before, during, and after the Cripps Mission, the Government of India was engaged in suppressing even the "normal political and public activities."³ Apart from that, there were other factors that made a struggle both inevitable and necessary. Popular discontent, a product of rising prices and war-time shortages, was gradually mounting. High-handed government actions such as the commandeering of boats in Bengal and Orissa to prevent their being used by the Japanese

had led to considerable anger among the people. The news of Allied reverses and British withdrawals from South-East Asia and Burma and the trains bringing wounded soldiers from the Assam-Burma border confirmed this feeling.⁴

In May 1942, Mahatma Gandhi called on Britain to “leave India to God. If this is too much then leave her to anarchy.” In July 1942, the Congress Working Committee met at Wardha. Here a resolution was passed, The Wardha Resolution is also known as *Quit India Resolution*. The resolution demanded, “The British Rule in India must end immediately.” And it declared that free India “will assure the success by throwing his great resources in the struggle for freedom and against the aggression of Nazism, Facism and imperialism”.⁵ The resolution further stated that the immediate ending of the British rule in India is an urgent necessity both for the sake of India and for the success of the cause of United Nations. This resolution was ratified in the All India Congress Committee at Bombay session with minor amendments and a nonviolent mass struggle under the leadership of Gandhi was sanctioned. The historic session of the All India Congress Committee began on the 7th August and was concluded after midnight of 8th/9th August 1942 at Gowalia Tank Maidan, Bombay. The movement was accompanied by a mass protest on non-violent lines, in which Gandhi called for “an orderly British withdrawal from India”. Through his passionate speeches, Gandhi moved people by proclaiming “every Indian who desires freedom and strives for it must be his own guide. Let every Indian consider himself to be a free man”, Gandhi declared in his fiery “Do or Die” speech the day the Quit India Movement was declared. He first made it clear that ‘the actual struggle does not commence this moment. You have only placed all your powers in my hands. I will now wait upon the Viceroy to plead with him for the acceptance of the Congress demand. That process is likely to take two or three weeks.’ But, he added: ‘you may take it from me that I am not going to strike a bargain with the Viceroy for ministries and the like. I am not going to be satisfied with anything short of complete freedom. Maybe, he will propose the abolition of salt tax, the drink evil etc. But I will say: “Nothing less than freedom.”’ He told the people “There is a mantra, short one, that I give you. You imprint it on your heart and let every breath of yours give an expression to it. The mantra is “do or die”. Indians were to wage one last struggle to achieve independence, or die in that attempt. We shall either free India or die in the attempt: we shall not live to see the perpetuation of our slavery.”⁶ The same night police arrested Mahatma Gandhi and almost the entire Congress leadership was put into confinement less than twenty-four hours after Gandhiji’s speech, and the greater number of the Congress leaders were to spend the rest of the war in jail. Mahatma Gandhi was taken to the Aga Khan Palace in Pune and members of the Congress Working Committee were sent to Ahmednagar Fort. The Congress Party was declared an unlawful association. Its offices were raided all over India and funds were frozen. Due to the arrest of major leaders, a young and till then relatively unknown Aruna Asaf Ali presided over the AICC session on August 9, 1942. The Government issued an order banning public processions, meetings & assemblies. Despite the police warning large crowd had gathered at Gowalia Tank Maidan. Aruna Asaf Ali hoisted the Indian flag.

Story-1: Selection of Slogan ‘Quit India’ :

(Gandhiji conferred with his colleagues for the appropriate slogan for the movement against British to leave India. One of them suggested ‘Get Out’. Gandhiji rejected it as being impolite. Rajagopalachari suggested ‘Retreat’ or ‘Withdraw’. That too was not acceptable. Yusuf Meherally presented Gandhiji a bow with an inscription bearing ‘Quit India’. Gandhiji said in approval, ‘Amen’. That is how the historic slogan was selected).

Movement and Repression by the Government:

Despite lack of direct leadership, large-scale protests and demonstrations were held all over the country. Workers remained absent and strikes were called. Not all the demonstrations were peaceful.

At some places bombs exploded, government buildings were set on fire, electricity was cut, and transport and communication lines were severed. Leaders like Ram Manohar Lohia, Achyuta Patwardhan, S.M. Joshi, Ramananda Mishra, Jayprakash Narayan and officer bearer of the 'Congress Working Committee' including Sucheta Kripalani and Sadiq Ali decided to carry forward the Quit India movement from underground. The students left their schools and colleges to join the movement. The students of Banaras Hindu University, Allahabad University, Patna University, Annamalai University etc. besides workers, peasants etc. transformed it into '*a spontaneous mass upheaval*'. Many national leaders went underground and continued their struggle by broadcasting messages over clandestine radio stations, distributing pamphlets, and establishing parallel governments. The reaction to the arrests was most intense in Bihar and Eastern U.P. Particularly important centres of resistance in this phase were Azamgarh, Ballia and Gorakhpur in East U.P. and Gaya, Bhagalpur, Saran, Purnea, Shahabad, Muzaffarpur and Champaran in Bihar.⁷

A significant feature of the Quit India Movement was the emergence of what came to be known as parallel governments in some parts of the country. The first one was proclaimed in *Ballia*, in East U.P. under the leadership of Chittu Pande, who called himself a Gandhian. *Tamluk* in the Midnapur district of Bengal, the Jatiya Sarkar came into existence on 17th December 1942 and lasted till September 1944. Tamluk was an area where Gandhian constructive work had made considerable headway and it was also the scene of earlier mass struggles. *Satara* (Maharashtra) emerged as the base of the longest-lasting and effective parallel government.

The Government of India pressed into service its entire machinery to suppress the movement. A total of over 100,000 arrests were made nationwide, mass fines were levied.⁸ Police and army fire killed hundreds of resisters and innocent people. By the end of the year (1942), the police and the army resorted to firing 538 times, and, as a result, 40 persons were killed, and 1630 injured. About 26,000 persons were convicted and 18,000 were detained during the same period. Rs. 25,000,000 were collected by way of fines upon the peoples.⁹

Story-2: The Congress Radio: A Unique Experiment :

(The Congress Radio, as it termed itself, calling on 42.34 metres was perhaps the only one and first of its kind in India. It broadcasted the news of underground activity and directed the freedom fighters in their struggle. It was located 'somewhere in Bombay' and was frequently moved from place to place. The brain behind this brilliant activity was Dr. Usha Mehta; she was then a student in Bombay.)

Gandhiji's Fast and Release from Jail:

The entire Congress leadership was cut off from the rest of the world for over three years. Gandhiji's wife, Kasturba Gandhi, and his personal secretary, Mahadev Desai, died in a short space of months, and Gandhi's own health was failing. Despite this, Gandhiji went on a "*21-day Fast*" and maintained a superhuman resolve to continue his resistance. Gandhiji fell seriously ill. Lord Wavell taken over from Linlithgow as Viceroy in October 1943. Rather than see Gandhiji die in prison Lord Wavell preferred to release him on May 6, 1943. With Gandhiji's release on medical grounds, political activity regained momentum. Constructive work became the main form of Congress activity, with a special emphasis on the reorganization of the Congress machinery. Congress Committees were revived under different names *Congress Workers Assemblies or Representative Assemblies of Congressmen* rendering the ban on Congress Committees ineffective. The task of training workers, membership drives and fund collection was taken up. This reorganization of the Congress under the 'cover' of the constructive programme was viewed with serious misgivings by the Government which saw it as an attempt to rebuild Congress influence and organization in the villages in preparation for the next round of

struggle? A strict watch was kept on these developments, but no repressive action was contemplated and the Viceroy's energies were directed towards formulating an offer (known as the Wavell Offer or the Simla Conference), which would pre-empt a struggle by effecting an agreement with the Congress before the War with Japan ended. The Congress leaders were released to participate in the Simla Conference in June 1945. That marked the end of the phase of confrontation that had existed since August 1942.¹⁰

Attitude of other Political Parties of India towards this Movement:

The important feature of the movement was that the Communist Party of India (CPI) did not join the movement of 1942. The Communist Party had described the World War, when it broke out, as 'Imperialistic'; but when Russia joined the War; they began to regard it as the 'People War'. They advocated full support for the Government in the War efforts and demanded the withdrawal of the Quit India Resolution by the Congress Party. They also wanted the Congress to start negotiations with the Muslim League on the basis of Pakistan. The Government now released the communist leaders, who were imprisoned in the earlier stages of War.¹¹ In response the British lifted the ban on the party.¹² The Muslim League tried to make capital out of the situation, all through the movement, maintain the attitude of "benevolent neutrality" towards the government.¹³

The Hindu Mahasabha and RSS openly opposed the call for the Quit India Movement and boycotted it officially.¹⁴ Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, the President of the Hindu Mahasabha, appealed to all Hindus, on the very day Gandhiji and Congress leaders were arrested, not to lend any support "to the Congress Move."¹⁵ Shyama Prasad Mukharjee, leader of the Hindu Mahasabha in Bengal, wrote a letter to the British Government as to how they should respond, if the Congress gave a call to the British rulers to Quit India. In this letter, dated July 26, 1942 he wrote: "Let me now refer to the situation that may be created in the province as a result of any widespread movement launched by the Congress. Anybody, who during the war, plans to stir up mass feeling, resulting internal disturbances or insecurity, must be resisted by any Government that may function for the time being."¹⁶ In 1942, the RSS, under M.S. Golwalkar refused to join in the Quit India Movement as well. The Bombay government (British) appreciated the RSS position by noting that, "the Sangh has scrupulously kept itself within the law, and in particular, has refrained from taking part in the disturbances that broke out in August 1942".¹⁷

Importance of the Movement:

The quit India movement affected many aspects of both British and Indian lifestyles. One of the greatest achievements of the Quit India Movement was that it kept the Congress Party united all through these challenging times. The great significance of this historic movement was that it placed the demand for independence on the immediate agenda of the national movement. After Quit India there could be no retreat. Any future negotiations with the British Government could only be on the manner of the transfer of power. Independence was no longer a matter of bargain. And this became amply clear after the War.¹⁸

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