

22. QUIT INDIA MOVEMENT

The failure of the Cripps Mission left no meeting ground between the Congress and the government. The government was not prepared to part with its power, while the congress insisted on the immediate transfer of power to the Indians because it believed that an effective resistance against the Japanese aggression could be organized only by a popular government. Gandhi, who was not prepared to oppose the government by a mass movement so far, was now convinced of the necessity of starting a mass movement again and, hence, changed his mind. Some Congressmen were not convinced of his argument to start a mass movement with a view to force the British to hand over power to India during the course of war, but all submitted before him and those who did not, like C. Rajagopalachari and Bhulabhai Desai, resigned from the Congress (July 1942). The Congress Working Committee met at Wartha in July and demanded the immediate withdrawal of the British from India. The All India Congress Committee ratified this 'Quit India' resolution at its meeting at Bombay on 8th August, 1942.

Major Causes

The roots of the Revolt of 1942 can be found in certain national as well as international developments. The first and the foremost cause was the new popular mood of August 1942 caused by the rout of the British by an Asian power, viz., Japan. The victory of Japan and subsequent events shattered the white prestige on the one hand and on the other, revealed the gross racism of the rulers of India once again. While the defeat of the British made the Indians believe that British rule was ending, the way the British cared about the safety of their own people in South East Asia leaving the Indian immigrants there to their own fate caused great amount of anti-white fury among all the Indians. The British in Malaya, Singapore and Burma commandeered all forms of transport in their ignominious flight and left the Indian immigrants there to find their own way. The result was a compound of anti-white fury and an expectation that British rule was ending. It is probably not accidental that east U.P., and west and north Bihar, the region where the 'August Rebellion' (Revolt of 1942) attained its maximum popular intensity, was also traditional one of the

principle catchment areas for Indian migrant labour going to South East Asia and other parts of the world.

Gandhi: In Militant Mood

This new popular mood of August 1942 was certainly sensed by Gandhi and his own statements before launching the Quit India movement are proof of this fact. That is why, the summer of 1942 found Gandhi in a strange and uniquely militant mood. 'Leave India to God or to anarchy', he repeatedly urged the British. 'This orderly disciplined anarchy should go and, if as a result there is complete lawlessness, I would risk it'. Though the need for non-violence was always reiterated, the famous "Quit India" resolution followed up its call for mass struggle on non-violent lines under Gandhi's leadership with the significant rider that if the Congress leadership was removed by arrest, every Indian, who desired freedom and strives for it, must be his own guide. Gandhi also declared in his passionate 'Do or Die' speech that every Indian should consider himself to be a free man, and also that mere jail-going would not do. 'If a general strike becomes a dire necessity, I shall not flinch', was yet another most uncharacteristic remark made by Gandhi in an interview on 6th August, 1942. It may be noted that Gandhi was, for once, prepared to countenance political strikes precisely at a time when the communists were bound to keep aloof from them in very sharp contrast to his attitude in previous of left-led labour militancy in 1928-29 or the late 1930's and early 1940's.

How was Quit India Movement Organized?

Three broad phases can be distinguished in the Quit India Movement or the Revolt of 1942. The first phase (from 9th to 15th August 1942) was massive and violent but quickly suppressed. It was predominantly urban and included hartals, strikes and dashes with police and army in most cities. Bombay, as so often before, was the main storm centre during this phase. Calcutta also witnessed many hartals. There were violent dashes with heavy casualties in Delhi and, in Patna, control over the city was virtually lost for two days after a famous confrontation in front of the Secretariat on 11th August. The violence of Delhi was largely due to 'mill hands on strike', and strikes by

mill- workers were also reported in Lucknow, Kanpur, Bombay, Nagpur and Ahmedabad. The Tata Steel

Plant was totally closed down for 13 days in a strike in which the sole labour slogan was that they would not resume work until a national government had been formed. At Ahmedabad, the textile strike which began during this period lasted for 3 months, and a nationalist chronicle later described the city as the “Stalingrad of India”. The urban middle class was extremely prominent in this first phase spearheaded by students.

From the beginning of the second phase (from 15th August to 30th September 1942), the focus shifted to the countryside, with militant students fanning out from centers like Banaras, Patna and Cuttack, destroying communications on a massive scale and leading a veritable peasants’ rebellion against white authority strongly reminiscent in some ways of the Revolt of 1857. Northern and western Bihar and eastern U.P., Midnapur in Bengal, and pockets in Maharashtra, Karnataka and Orissa were the major centers of this second phase which saw the installation of a number of local-national governments, which, however, were usually short-lived.

Weakened by the brutal repression (no less than 57 army battalions were used), the movement, from about the beginning of October 1942, entered its longest but also the least formidable phase, i.e., the third and final phase. This phase was characterized by terrorist activity by educated youth directed against communications, police and army installations occasionally rising to the level of guerrilla war, such as the one along the north Bihar-Nepal border led by Jayaprakash Narayana. Part-time peasant squads engaged in farming by day and sabotage activities by night and, in some pockets, secret parallel ‘National Government’ functioned most notably at Tamluk in Midnapur, Satara in Maharashtra and Talcher in Orissa. Extremely impressive and heroic by any standards, such activities, however, were no longer a threat either to the British rule or to the war plans of the Allies.

Response of Different Classes

An examination of the social composition of the movement reveals the role of different social groups and classes in it. Unlike in the Civil Disobedience days, students, belonging to the middle class, were very much in the forefront in 1942, whether in urban clashes as organizers of sabotage, or inspirers of the peasant

rebellions. What made the August movements formidable however, was a massive upsurge of the peasantry in certain areas. But as the one available attempt at statistical analysis of the “crowd” in the east U.P. and west Bihar regions indicates, the Revolt of 1942 was essentially an upsurge of peasant, small holders, and hence far from being a movement of habitual ‘criminals’ or rootless ‘hooligans’.

The role of the labourers was somewhat short lived. The mill element (participation by mill workers) in general was dropping out by August 14-15. The industrial belts of Calcutta and Bombay were largely quiet, probably because of the communist opposition to the movement. Labour participation in the movement was, however, considerable in some centers like Jamshedpur, Ahmedabad, Ahmadnagar and Poona, where there had been little communist activity and where Gandhian influences had contributed to cordial relations between labour and capital.

No detailed study has been made so far of the extent of business participation but it seems to have been considerable at least in the city of Bombay. Stories are, in fact, current about considerable covert upper-class and even Indian high official support to secret nationalist activities in to set up a fairly effective illegal apparatus, including even a secret radio station under Usha Mehta for three months in Bombay.

Impact of the Movement

The British realized that it would be wiser to try for negotiated settlement rather than risk another confrontation as massive and violent as the Revolt of 1942. It is true that by the end of 1942 the British had come out victorious in their immediate total confrontation with Indian nationalism and the remaining two years of the war in the country. Yet, the victory was ambiguous and with several limitations and was possible only because war conditions had allowed really ruthless use of force.

Negotiations Became Necessity: The British were not prepared to risk such a confrontation again and that the decision in 1945 to try for a negotiated settlement was not just a gift of the new labour government is indicated by the attitude of Lord Wavell. In a letter to Churchill dated 24th October 1944, Wavell pointed out that it would be impossible to hold India by force after the war, given the likely state of world opinion and British popular or even army attitudes, as well as the economic exhaustion of Britain. Hence, he felt, that it

would be wise to start negotiations. Churchill's pig-headedness delayed the process somewhat, but this was precisely what the British were able to persuade the Congress leadership to do after 1945. Thus, it is amply clear that the decision of negotiated transfer of power taken in 1945 was not just a gift of the new labour government; rather, it was primarily the result of the above realization.

Benefits to Rightists: Imprisonment and defeat paradoxically brought certain benefits to the Congress leaders. Isolation in jail helped them to avoid taking a clear public stand on the anti-Japanese war issue, something which, otherwise, would have become very ticklish indeed for a few months in 1944 when Subhas Chandra Bose's Indian National Army appeared on the borders of Assam at a time when, on a world scale, the Allies were clearly winning the war. Much more important was the fact that the glamour of jail served to wipe out the unimpressive record of the Congress ministries in office, thereby restoring the popularity of the organization among the masses. Rightist Congress leaders, who throughout the 1930's had urged more and more cooperation with the British and pursued increasingly conservative policies as minister, could not sit back in the halo of patriotic self-sacrifice, as much as the Socialists who had done most of the actual

fighting in 1942, while the Communists were rated in the eyes of a big section of nationalist public opinion as collaborators and traitors. Thus, if the British ultimately came to realize the wisdom of a negotiated transfer of power from the Quit India experience, the 1942 Revolt and its aftermath also strengthened forces preferring a compromise on the nationalist side by giving a new prestige to the rightist Congressmen.

Weakening of the Left: The Revolt of 1942 weakened the left alternative in two ways. Brutal repression exhausted, at least temporarily, many peasant bases built up through years of Gandhian constructive work or radical Kissan Sabha activity. It is significant that the country side of Bihar, U. P., Maharashtra, Karnataka and Orissa played little or no part in the anti-imperialist upsurge of 1945-46, while most of the rural Gandhians of Midnapur and Hooghly found themselves largely pushed aside in the Bengal Congress politics of the post-war and post independence years. In the second place, the left was now divided as never before. The searing memory of 1942, with its charges and counter-charges of 'treachery' and its 'fifth-columnist' activity, erected a wall between the socialists and followers of Bose on one side and the Communists on the other, which had not been entirely overcome even after a generation.