
UNIT 20 PRELUDE TO QUIT INDIA*

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20.1 INTRODUCTION

At the very outset of the World War II in September 1939, it became evident that India would be in the forefront of the liberation struggle by the subject countries. In fact, support to Britain in its war efforts rested on the assurance by the former that India would be freed from British subjection after the war. Imperial strategy as it was shaped in Britain was still stiff and rigid. Winston Churchill who succeeded Neville Chamberlain as the Prime Minister of Britain on 10 May 1940, declared that the aim of the war was, “victory, victory at all costs... for without victory, there is no survival... no survival for the British Empire...”. (Madhushree Mukerjee, 2010, p.3.) More than ever before, the mainstream political parties of India had to make their moves on the basis of both national politics and international developments. It is in this context that the Quit India Movement of 1942 heralded one of the most tumultuous phases in the history of the Indian national movement. The developments leading up to it were also momentous because of their long term ramification. In the course of this Unit, we will establish the pulls and pressures working on mainstream Indian politics and their regional manifestations prior to the beginning of the Quit India Movement of 1942. We will also see the extent to which the imperial state steered the course of these developments and how different groups in the political mainstream perceived and interpreted them.

20.2 POLITICAL SITUATION IN INDIA 1930-39 – A BACKGROUND

The nationalist offensive in the form of the Civil Disobedience Movement in the summer of 1930 [see **Box-1** for a summary of these activities] had compelled the government to enter into negotiations in the first session of the Round Table Conference held in London from November 1930 to January 1931. The Congress had kept aloof from it. However, when the government yielded some ground to the Indian businessmen by imposing a surcharge of 5% on cotton piece goods imports, and thus came to grant some protection to the Indian mercantile interests, the former put pressure on Gandhi to negotiate with the government. In the Gandhi-Irwin Pact of March 1931, Mahatma Gandhi came to accept Viceroy

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Irwin's proposals and temporarily withdrew the movement. As per the conditions of the Pact, thousands of prisoners jailed during the Civil Disobedience were to be released. While the bargaining power of the Congress was clearly evident in this move, there was widespread disquiet at the withdrawal of the movement. A sense of betrayal, particularly among the youth, because young revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru were executed on 23 March 1931 without Gandhi seeking any reprieve for them, was also palpable.

Box 1

The Civil Disobedience movement (1930-31) had witnessed two waves of struggle in the countryside. Firstly, from the Congress organisation downwards with the mobilisation of peasants through accepted Gandhian forms. Secondly, with the interpretation of the Gandhian message in a less inhibiting manner. From the summer of 1930 to February 1931, 60,000 people were arrested compared to 30,000 during 1920-22. The movement attracted large number of women. Out of 71,453 convicted between January 1932 to February 1933, 3462 were women. The highest number of women arrested were from Bombay, Bengal and UP. Following the withdrawal of the movement and subsequent to the arrest of Mahatma Gandhi in 1932, there was widespread rural discontentment in different parts of the country. David Hardiman's study of peasant agitations in Gujarat has shown how the dominant caste of Patidar peasantry who had emerged as Congress loyalists since the Non-Cooperation Movement defied the Congress and continued a no-revenue campaign in some of the villages till 1934 (David Hardiman, 2004) In Bihar, the Kisan Sabhas had to accept a more radical agrarian programme to match the grievances of the tenants. This was particularly the case after the formation of the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) in April 1934. In the neighbouring region of UP, growing peasant distress and protest pushed the Congress to publish a report *on Agrarian Distress in the UP* in 1931 (Gyanendra Pandey, 2004). In N.W.F.P, the popularity of the *Khudai Khidmatgar* or the Red Shirt Movement grew in close unison with the popularity of the Congress. Compared with the discontentment among the peasantry, the mill-workers remained relatively aloof during the Civil Disobedience Movement.

This was the time when the radical nationalists and Nehru contemplated building alternatives to the Gandhian anti-imperialist programme and strategy. The Left groups had begun to intervene in strikes from 1929 and were also functioning through the Workers and Peasant Parties (WPPs). The Trade Disputes Act of 1929 made strike a punishable offence. After a period of relative isolation when the Communists worked through the WPPs, the group grew in strength because the Left gained from the new Communist International strategy of organising a broad anti-imperialist movement of the working-class, peasantry and the middle-class through the consolidation of the Left and other likeminded groups both within and outside the Congress. However, there was a lull in mainstream Indian politics following the withdrawal of the Civil Disobedience Movement at the time of the Round Table Conference (September – December 1931). In contrast to this, there was an increase in revolutionary nationalism in the years preceding the passing of the 1935 Act. In Bengal, rise in individual acts of violence against officials saw an increase in participation of women in such activities. The assassination of B. Stevens, the District Magistrate of Tippera on 14 December

1932 by two school girls, Shanti Ghosh and Suniti Chaudhury, exemplifies this. As such activities spread to towns and cities like Chittagong (east Bengal, now in Bangladesh), the Government adopted repressive measures to contain them. There were other developments as well, for instance the increasing mobilisation of Hindus and Muslims along communal lines. The Congress Report on the 1931 (Kanpur) Riot showed how a sense of unease had affected relations between the two communities and had affected the public space commonly shared by these communities. It was precisely in the years after 1931 that Mahatma Gandhi's differences with Bhim Rao Ambedkar on the issue of the grant of the Communal Award grew acute. In 1933-34 Gandhi undertook fasts, campaigned against untouchability and formed the Harijan Sevak Sangh. That the imperial government was breaking the back of the national movement was evident when it supported the anti-reform groups and defeated the Temple Entry Bill in the Legislative Assembly in August 1934. It is in the background of these developments that we need to briefly discuss the 1935 Provincial Autonomy Act of 1935.

From 1920 Congress had rejected devolution by stages and demanded immediate *Swaraj* and in 1929 *Poorna Swaraj* or complete independence and sovereignty. The Nehru Report of 1928 had envisaged a unitary constitution rather than a federal one. However, this vision was not shared by two groups whom the imperial authorities claimed they were obliged to protect – the princes and the Muslim minority of British India. The British statesmen had never encouraged the princely states to bring their states into constitutional harmony with the provinces. Thus these states had constantly sought an assurance that the imperial authority would never transfer its paramount power to a responsible Indianised central authority. If the princes sought exclusion, as far as British India is considered by the late 1920s Muslim leaders subscribed to a strong-province-but-weak-federation strategy. By the time of the decennial revision of the constitution of the 1919 Act, the princes had emerged as opponents of a fully responsible self-governing Dominion, and the Muslim League as the opponent of a unitary self-governing British India. At the same time, on the basis of claims of upholding constitutional and social heterogeneity, Britain was also unprepared to recognise Congress as the representative of India at large, nor to accept the possibility of India providing for its own defence, nor to jettison its own financial and commercial interests. With the Congress stiffening its position, Raj looked to the minorities and the princes to help with the work of constitutional devolution (D.A. Low, 2004, p. 381). The Government of India Act 1935, also known as the Provincial Autonomy Act, was the result of such endeavours. In brief, the 1935 Act provided for central responsibility within a strong federation. However, defence and political relations were 'reserved' subjects and therefore under imperial control. Subjects such as finance, the civil services, commerce, the minorities and the safety, stability and interest of British India were subject to imperial safeguards. While the imperial authorities hailed the 1935 Act, and the ministries were formed after the 1937 elections as a significant step towards the goal of responsible government, it actually contributed to disunity.

The Congress and the Muslim League continued to denounce certain eventualities embodied in the 1935 Act. The idea of federation, central to the Act, was one such eventuality. Federation would have come into operation only if the Indian princely states agreed to join the Indian federation. This had given these states an opportunity to haggle with the centre over the terms of entry. Even under the existing clauses of the 1935 Act these states were to continue to enjoy substantial

representation in the Lower House (Federal Assembly) and the Upper House. The princes enjoyed the prerogative of appointing their representatives to the legislature. This would have deprived the 81 million States people living under their absolute domain of any representation. Thus feudal despotism was to continue without any compulsion on the princely states to introduce any reforms to curtail their unbridled power over their subjects. There was no provision in the 1935 Act for voting in the Native States. Till 1935, the Congress had been by and large non-interventionist in the affairs of these states. Encouraged by the Praja Mandal groups, which were spearheading the state-subjects movement in states like Baroda, the Congress now sought a more responsible government in the princely states. In the Provinces, property requirements limited the total vote to 150,000 people. *Only 150,000 were to vote out of a total population of 365 millions!* The seats in the Legislature were divided along communal lines. The Congress was particularly disturbed by the fact that there were special seats for communal minorities in addition to general seats. Muslims, Sikhs, Scheduled Castes, Christians, *etc.*, were to have separate elections. Each territorial constituency was split up into communal groupings when voting took place. Thus for the Congress the 1935 Act harmonised well with the British 'divide and rule' traditions. Mahatma Gandhi's Civil-Disobedience Movement which was directed primarily against separate electorates had been overlooked by the framers of the Government of India Act, 1935. Federal finances would have also tightened the noose around provincial necks. Over 80% of the Federal budget was non-votable and outside Legislative control. 90% of Federal revenue was to be drained from the British provinces; only 10% from the princely states. The revenue flow provided for would have been directed toward the central government and would have left the provinces responsible for the upkeep of the various public services. Thus there was deep resentment in some sections of the Indian political circles about the inefficacy of the 1935 Act in politically and economically empowering Indians. In their opinion the Act would have allowed the growth of Indian economy to remain stunted and undeveloped. The illiteracy, disease and poverty of the people would have also continued to be as rampant as they had been.

The participation of the Congress and the Muslim League in the 1937 elections and the formation of Provincial Ministries after the elections, however, highlighted both, the political ambitions of these parties and the introduction of a new element in the protracted debate that had begun as early as the formation of the INC itself regarding the relevance of the 'constitutional way' on the road to self government (D.A. Low, 1997). The contest for popular loyalties between the British and the Congress was no longer principally revolved around popular peasant grievances. It was determined in the course of an election campaign and electoral results. The parliamentary road after the success of the 1936-7 elections proved to be very attractive. Even Jawaharlal Nehru in the opinion some scholars was now a partial convert. However, the more radical sections both within and outside the political parties were aspiring for a more popular course of action.

20.3 BRITISH IMPERIAL STRATEGY IN INDIA

World War II began on 3 September 1939. In September 1939 itself, the Viceroy Linlithgow announced that following the beginning of the Second World War (between UK, France, and the USA, i.e., the Allies and Germany which headed the Axis powers) India, which was still an integral part of the British Empire,

was also at war with Germany. Many argued that Linlithgow's declaration of war on India's behalf without consulting the Indian leadership was an autocratic act. Doubts were expressed about whether Britain would keep faith in the political promises made before the outbreak of the war. The main concern of the new Secretary of State for India, Leopold Amery, and the Viceroy of India since 1936, Lord Linlithgow, was how to maximise India's contribution to the war. The question, however, did not elicit a satisfactory response. The political impasse with the Indian nationalists and the war-time expectations of the political parties in India, particularly opportunities for determining the nature of Indian politics in the post-war years, were instrumental in shaping the British imperial policies in India as also the stance of the political parties in India.

As far as Britain is concerned, the advantages of the empire had a definite role to play in policy decisions taken in London. As long as India was a major area of trade and investment, a large contributor to the costs of imperial defence and employed a fairly large number of British civil and military officers, there was an advantage in gradual devolution of power. This was the situation till the 1930s. But since then the relative advantage of the India trade had declined sharply. In 1917, i.e. the year preceding World War I, India imported £ 83.5 million worth of British goods, in 1938 i.e. the year preceding the beginning of World War II, £35 million. Correspondingly, Indian export to Britain was £ 39 million and £41.25 million respectively. By 1939, according to one estimate, India had a favourable balance of trade with Britain. The Lancashire lobby of industrialists had virtually lost its cotton trade with Britain. With considerable 'Indianisation' the civil services were no longer attractive to Britain's youth. The Indian Army remained vital for imperial defence.

World War II drew upon the human and material resources of the colonies on an unprecedented scale. Of all the colonies, India perhaps was the most indispensable. India was essential to Britain's planning of the war. The Indian Army was central to the strategy being followed in the Middle East. In 1939, the British Indian Army consisted of one hundred eighty nine thousand soldiers. By 1945, India had contributed two and a half million men to the British Indian Army; 28,538 to the Royal Indian Air Force; thirty thousand to the Royal Indian Navy; and ten thousand women to the Women's Auxiliary Corps. Recruitment to the armed forces was high because of unemployment. In the course of the war, India emerged as a major production centre for food grains and materials like jute, which was used largely in packing for commercial and military purposes and other military supplies. Once Japan entered the war in 1941, eastern India became a strategic base of operations for the Allied Powers in Southeast Asia. With it began yet another period of hesitant promises by the imperial government to the colonial subjects regarding their political future.

In 1939, the colonial Indian state had to tread extremely carefully to avoid charges of neglect and abandonment of the colonies. Strategic and economic expediency demanded that it heeded some of the concerns of the colonies. The British Indian Government was mainly concerned about the position undertaken by the Congress and the Muslim League. At the very outset of the war in 1939, it became evident that India would be in the forefront of the liberation struggle by the subject countries. In fact, support to Britain in its war efforts hinged on the assurance by the former that India would be freed from British subjection after the war. At the beginning, there was an intense debate across the political spectrum on how

crucial it was to support the war. The debate rested on the position of each political party on domestic and international politics.

The support of these and other political parties in India was vital to the imperial state because the war required the state to make unusual demands on society and to extract greater resources than usual. Since the demands were not justified, a fact that the imperial state was hardly in a position to acknowledge, it wanted to guard against any articulation of Indian nationalist aspirations during the war. It is important to note that at this early stage no political party, except the Forward Bloc – founded by Subhas Chandra Bose and his brother Shishir Bose in 1939 – had voiced its active opposition to the war [see **Box-2**]. Mahatma Gandhi had openly expressed his anxiety at the thought of German bombs falling on London. The relatively uncritical stance of other prominent nationalists during the early stages of the war was to some extent due to the principle of democratic benevolent liberalism in which most of the Congress leaders had been educated. It also had much to do with the intense dislike of Nazi racism (evident in Jawaharlal Nehru’s writings). Britain could have capitalised on that qualified support by winning the goodwill of the Congress leaders. However, she failed to do so and devoted all her attention on winning the war. The Indian leadership was reduced to the position of onlookers at an event in which they could play no part.

Box 2

Subhas Chandra Bose was born in 1879 in Orissa. He was educated at Cambridge and joined the ICS. Following the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919 and Mahatma Gandhi’s rise to power in Indian politics, Subhas Bose resigned from his post and joined Congress in 1921. He was imprisoned between 1924 and 1927. He could not rise higher in the Congress Party. After the brief period of exile in Europe he returned to India in 1936. He founded the Forward Bloc in 1939. He was considered a public menace by the authorities in Bengal. He was eventually arrested in 1940. In his powerful and inimitable style he said: “Forget not that the greatest curse for a man is to remain a slave. Forget not that the greatest crime is to compromise with injustice and wrong. Remember the eternal law: you must give life if you want to get it. And remember the highest virtue is to battle against iniquity, no matter what the cost may be”. Kept under house arrest soon after, he escaped and travelled to Kabul and thereafter to Berlin. Eventually he was transferred to Japan. When the war moved to East Asia, he was the inspiration behind the Indian National Army (INA) that fought against the British in Burma.

There was a political deadlock at this stage. The talks between the Congress and the Muslim League, held between 16 and 18 October 1939, had failed to make headway. Apart from differences of opinion on the functioning of ministries in different provinces, the basic difference between the two was based on Jinnah’s non-acceptance of any conflict with the British Government during the war and Nehru’s anti-imperialist stance. As early as July 1939, at the time of impending war in the West, the Congress made its stand clear that it will not support Britain in any ‘imperialist’ war. When the war began, Gandhi was the only one in the Congress Working Committee who suggested extending unconditional support to the British on a non-violent basis. However, the Congress resolved on 14 September 1939, that the issue of war and peace “must be decided by the Indian

people, and no outside authority can impose this decision upon them, nor can the Indian people permit their resources to be exploited for imperialist ends". In the same resolution the British government was invited "to declare in unequivocal terms, what their war aims are in regard to democracy and imperialism and the new world order that is envisaged; and in particular, how these aims are going to apply to India and ... be given effect to in the present". The Congress also sought the right of Indians to frame their own constitution through a Constituent Assembly and to participate in the war effort through representations in the Viceroy's Executive Council. A resolution of this nature amounted to demand for immediate political and constitutional concession, something that the British were not willing to concede.

The British government reiterated its offer of Dominion Status after the war on 18 October 1939 but failed to declare its political objectives or war aims. The Viceroy Linlithgow only stated that the British were willing to consult representatives of different communities, parties and interests in India and the Indian princes on the issue of constitutional reforms for India after the war. He also assured the representatives of minorities that full weightage would be given to their views and interests during modification of the British imperial position on the matter. A statement to this effect, did not satisfy the Congress, but bolstered up the Muslim League. Thus the Muslim League Working Committee announced that it empowered M.A. Jinnah, as President of the League, to assure Britain of Muslim support and cooperation during the war. Some scholars are therefore of the view that the outbreak of the war saved the League and made it a representative Muslim body. The contention is that the British deliberately boosted Jinnah's prestige at the all-India level for their war-purpose though at the provincial level they subordinated this objective. This was done to operate the war machine with efficiency (Anita Inder Singh, 1987). Linlithgow also admitted that the government was aware of the 'nuisance value' of the Congress but was still keen to seek its support. In the meantime, the Muslim League in its resolution passed on 18 October 1939, offered its support for the war effort if the Viceroy would accept the League as the only representative body of the Muslims of India. Its contention that India did not constitute a national state because it was composed of various nationalities echoed the British imperialist views since the late nineteenth century. A few days later the Congress Working Committee rejected the offer of Dominion Status after the War for being a continuation of the old imperialist policy and called for the resignation of the Congress provincial ministries.

20.4 RESIGNATION OF MINISTRIES

In December 1939, the Congress withdrew the Ministries from the seven provinces where it had a majority. This was not an easy decision to take, particularly because in the two and a half years of their existence these ministries had exercised to the full the powers that the 1935 Act had granted them. Some of the important measures undertaken by them included educational and agrarian reforms, for instance in Bihar and UP. The question of release of political prisoners like those jailed in the Kakori Conspiracy Case of 1925 was undertaken and hundreds of prisoners were released. The issue had raised considerable flutter in the imperial circles. Because there did exist a working relationship between the British Governor and his Congress Chief Minister, there was a sense of unease

among nationalist leaders like Nehru that the Congress ministries were 'tending to become counter-revolutionary'.

In December 1939 when the Congress ministries handed over their resignation such apprehensions were set aside. This was a major step in the direction of withdrawal of support to the government. But for the next two years the local congressmen continued to contest local board elections. Some scholars like Judith Brown have perceived this as support to the political system by participation in it at the individual level. (Judith Brown, 1984, p.317) These Congress-controlled provinces were now administered by the Governor, who used the special powers allotted under Section 93 of the Government of India Act, 1935. The non-Congress ministries continued to cooperate with the government. The All India Congress Committee (AICC) adopted an anti-war position. The Congress now asked its members to join the war committees only in their individual capacity. The Forward Bloc, formed when Subhas Chandra Bose and his brother Sarat Chandra Bose moved out of the Congress due to acute differences between the former and Mahatma Gandhi at the Tripuri Congress in 1939, was opposed to the war. It continued to be anti-British and anti-imperialist throughout the war. The Communist Party was keen to revive the sagging spirits of the national movement through anti-imperialist struggles during the war. This was the position adopted by the party till the USSR joined the war on the side of the Allied Powers in the summer of 1941.

Earlier the All India Muslim League (AIML) had wanted a complete agreement between Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the main political leader of the party and Viceroy Linlithgow on the issue of dividends before offering unconditional support to Britain. Now the strategy of the Muslim League was to turn the situation to its favour by publicly rejoicing at the development. Jinnah announced that to celebrate the resignation by the Congress Ministries, 22 December 1939 should be declared as the 'Day of Deliverance' and thanks-giving. In this announcement of 2 December, he appealed to the imperial officials "to enquire into the legitimate grievances of the Musalmans and the wrongs done to them by the outgoing Congress Ministry". (C.H. Philips et al 1962, p. 353) The appeal and the fact that the Governors had made such announcements while taking over the government of various provinces under Section 93 of the 1935 Act indicate that the resignation of Congress ministries was used as an opportunity both by the Muslim League and the administration to whip up the issue of maltreatment of minorities in Congress-led provinces.

After the resignation of Congress ministries, the party demanded a new constitution and independence at the Ramgarh session of the party in March 1940. It was on an offensive now. It made it clear in no uncertain terms that, "The recent pronouncements made on behalf of the British Government in regard to India demonstrate that Great Britain is carrying on the war fundamentally for imperialist ends and for the preservation and strengthening of her Empire, which is based on the exploitation of the people of India as well as of other Asiatic and African countries. Under these circumstances, it is clear that the Congress cannot in any way, directly or indirectly, be party to the war, which means continuance and perpetuation of this exploitation" (CH Philips et. al, 1962; pp.338-339). This was by far one of the most powerful statements issued out by the Congress. At the same session the Congress also announced a new campaign of non-cooperation and civil disobedience.

India's role in imperial defence changed significantly following the 'blitzkrieg' in Europe in May and June 1940. She was now all the more crucial on account of her resources, her manpower and the economic potential east of Suez. War production now stepped up with inclusion of six more divisions into the British India Army. There was development of aircraft production for the first time in India. On 7 June 1940, Linlithgow launched his plan of pooling the resources and production of the countries of the British Empire in the Indian Ocean with India as its 'natural' centre (Johannes H. Voigt, 2004; p. 356). However, material support from India was not enough. It was equally necessary to keep India politically quiet. By the end of May 1940 Linlithgow asked for the enactment of a Revolutionary Movements Ordinance to give the Government of India emergency powers to deal with any act of political resistance. Thus the imperial strategy at this stage was to be prepared both to crush the Congress by pre-empting any civil disobedience campaign as also to allow administrative concessions in order to avoid political conflict in India. Thus, in August 1940, the Viceroy came up with the 'August offer'. The offer provided encouragement to Muslim separatism. Secondly, it promised that at an 'appropriate time after the war' the British Government would introduce a representative constituent body in India to frame the country's new constitution in accord with dominion precedent. It was observed that this would open the way for 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' (Nicholas Mansergh, 1971; pp. 338-346).

Thus in August 1940, Linlithgow repeated the offer earlier made to the Indian leaders in October 1939 of a consultative role in the war effort with the promise of dominion status after victory in the war and that a post-war assembly should frame a new constitution. The suggestion was rejected by both the Congress and the League which was now beginning to demand a separate state of Pakistan. In the meantime, Subhas Chandra Bose, who openly questioned the credibility of the empire through his strident anti-war position, proved a greater threat to the British. In fact, after his house arrest and escape to Berlin and his activities thereafter through the formation of the Azad Hind Fauj (Indian National Army), he inspired a following among thousands of fellow-citizens.

20.5 INDIVIDUAL SATYAGRAHA

The Individual Satyagraha or passive resistance campaign was launched when the Government refused to heed the Congress resolution of lending support to Britain in its war efforts if she would grant the formation of a provisional national government. Mahatma Gandhi on his part was in principle opposed to Indian participation in the war. It may be therefore suggested that there were two strands of opinion in the Congress at this time – those who were prepared to support the war effort but were not ready to compromise on the issue of full independence and 'national government' and Gandhi himself who was perhaps willing to accept a compromise solution on the issue of a national government before the end of the war but was staunchly against India's participation in the war. The suggestion of a civil disobedience campaign brought both the strands of opinion together.

The campaign began in October 1940 and continued till December 1942. It was started mainly to protest peacefully against the war. That the move was not stridently aggressive was evident at the very beginning. Gandhi formulated a protest not against India's war effort as such but against the prohibition to protest against it. The struggle was mainly based on the principle of freedom of speech, not on the principle of non-violence in the circumstances of the war. It was to be a controlled 'individual *satyagraha*' because non-Congress members could not offer it. Replying to a query to this effect, Mahatma Gandhi had replied in March 1941 that Satyagraha could be offered by only those who had become "four anna" (anna is denomination denoting 1/16 of a rupee) members of the Congress and fulfilled other conditions. Thus the movement remained confined to the Congress. Mahatma described the campaign in glowing terms as the most glorious and disciplined campaigns ever launched by the Congress. Some scholars have described it in terms of perhaps the weakest and the least effective of the Gandhian campaigns. In more recent times however, scholars have drawn attention to the regional variations in this short-lived campaign. In the United Provinces, the Congress Committees were asked to convert themselves into Satyagraha Committees. Those who were not in agreement with the programme proposed by Gandhi were asked to resign from the organisation. Sucheta Kripalani was one of the first Congress members to be arrested from the region (Visalakshi Menon, 2003).

Regional studies have shown that the Individual *Satyagraha* campaign was fairly successful in the United Provinces. In western India prominent leaders like Vinoba Bhave were arrested in October 1940 and went to jail. By June 1941 about 20,000 Congressmen had been arrested in different parts of the country. However, it failed to impress the popular masses everywhere. Besides the restrictions placed on the campaign by Gandhi himself, the agitational potential present in the late 1930s in places like Bihar and United Provinces, had also either been suppressed or assuaged by the provincial Congress governments through some modest land reforms before their resignation. By October 1941, the campaign lost its initial impetus and only about 5,600 *Satyagrahis* had remained in jail. Thus, by and large the campaign was limited to symbolic acts of defiance. Individual Satyagraha did not completely jeopardise war effort. Nor did it bring the two sides – the imperial government and the Congress on to the negotiating table.

However, recent studies have shown that despite the limited impact of the Individual Satyagraha campaign, several relatively unknown and marginal individuals joined the campaign to also protest against local excesses. For instance, in 1940-41 tribal leaders like Laxman Naiko in the Malkangiri district in Orissa, along with seven local villagers launched individual *satyagraha*. It was through these *satyagrahas* that a movement was built against the immediate grievances of illegal exactions, forced and unpaid labour etc. Ultimately, the movement failed to jeopardise the war efforts of the state. As the Congress emphasised on discipline and discouraged militancy, the officials, who had expected acts of daring and aggression, dismissed the campaigns as 'stillborn'. In places like Burdwan in Bengal, the District Magistrate noted that even the Satyagrahis were becoming impatient with the restrictions on their activities and there was every possibility of their attempting a more active programme. In any case, it was difficult to retain sustained levels of patience and endurance once food scarcity, price-rise and state repression began raising their ugly heads and fundamental issues remained un-addressed. Political groups like the Forward Bloc, the

Congress Socialist Party, the Revolutionary Socialist Party and the Communist Party became more belligerent in their anti-war rhetoric and were more vociferous in their criticism of the war effort. Right-wing organisations flexed their muscles too. The Hindu Mahasabha and the semi-militarised Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) spread its net in different parts of the country.

20.6 CRIPPS MISSION

The political mood in India was certainly becoming belligerent in the backdrop of the individual acts of defiance against the war-effort as witnessed in the individual *satyagraha* campaigns and the increase in the lack of faith in the British Indian Army's capability of defending the east against the aggressive onward march of Japan. There was an attempt made by Sir Tejbahadur Sapru, a leading lawyer from Allahabad, to bring the Congress and the League together to resolve the existing impasse. When the attempt failed he presided over a conference called the Bombay Conference to arrive at a settlement with the government and to put across the Indian perspective. This conference was organised on 13-14 March 1941 in Bombay. It was largely attended by prominent non-Congress members many of whom had attended the Round Table Conference in London in 1931. The conference proposed that Britain should make a declaration promising India Dominion Status after the war. Secondly, in the interval, all central government portfolios should be transferred to the hands of non-official Indians. These proposals, thus, differed from the Congress proposals in that they did not demand immediate independence and they also proposed that the central executive in India should remain responsible to the Crown at least for the duration of the war. The proposals aroused considerable expectations. However, the talks with the government ultimately failed. The government refused to concede to any of the proposals. Amery, the Secretary of State scuttled the issue on Dominion Status after the war by playing the communal card. He observed that Jinnah had denounced the proposals as a trap by 'Congress wirepullers'.

In the meantime, government's policy of appeasing the minorities in Indian politics continued. It had almost acceded to the demand of the Muslim League for secession from the Indian state if the Congress was to acquire control at the Centre. At the same time, however, Britain could not risk inaction. The British War Cabinet announced certain measures for the conferment of Dominion Status on India. In the meeting of the War Cabinet it was declared that 'The object is the creation of a new Indian Union which shall constitute a Dominion, associated with the United Kingdom and the other Dominions by a common allegiance to the Crown, but equal to them in every respect, in no way subordinate in any aspect of its domestic or external affairs' (Nicholas Mansergh, p. 342). The Cripps Mission was thus formulated under the stewardship of Sir Stafford Cripps, the Lord Privy Seal in the Home Government, on 30 March 1942, as a preventive measure to thwart all attempts at withdrawal of support to Britain.

The Cripps Mission was fraught with ambiguities in terms of its purpose. Stafford Cripps, a Socialist in British politics, was ready to concede considerable ground to the demands of the Indian nationalists. For instance, in the press conference at Delhi on 28 March 1942, he went as far as to say that the Indian state had the right to secede from the Commonwealth at a future date. In his discussions with leaders like Rajagopalachari and Nehru, knowing that the basic objection of the

Congress was to the emphasis attached to the 'Dominion Status' for India in all negotiations to discuss the post-war political status of India rather than '*poorna Swaraj*' or complete independence as was the demand of the nationalists, he underplayed the use of the term. He explained that it had been used chiefly to silence possible objections in the House of Commons or from the dominions themselves. Cripps made it clear that it was a question of terminology not substance. However, Churchill was not so charitable or conceding. He continued to hold the view that the main problem preventing the future course of political affairs in India was not British imperialism but the aspirations of the Muslims, the Princes and the 'Hindu Untouchables'. The imperial strategy of denying India national independence by citing the presence of 'different sects or nations in India' was again at work here. Due to rigidity of this kind, Stafford Cripps could not manoeuvre much. Moreover there was nothing very reassuring about Britain's fate in the war. Singapore surrendered on 15 February and Rangoon fell to the Japanese on 8 March 1942 – a day prior to the announcement of Cripps Mission (9 March 1942). The bleakness of the possibility of Allied victory in World War II, prompted Gandhi to remark that the Cripps Mission was like a post-dated cheque upon a falling bank. The imagery drawn indicated that Britain had little to offer in the immediate situation.

The collapse of the Cripps negotiations did not disturb the equanimity of political circles in Britain. The rush to clinch the demand for a 'national government' in India following Japanese victories in Southeast Asia failed to come through. Many like Cripps and Clement Attlee, the leader of the British Labour Party and the Deputy Prime Minister in Winston Churchill Wartime Coalition Government, blamed Mahatma Gandhi's opposition to the Cripps Mission for the failure of negotiations. This was an unfair assessment of the situation. The War Cabinet in Britain and Linlithgow and the Commander-in-Chief of the British Indian Army, Wavell, had in fact earlier expressed alarm at Cripps conceding too many concessions to the Congress (Sumit Sarkar, 1983; pp. 387-88) and thus been responsible for the ultimate failure of the Mission. Five months after the announcement of the Cripps Mission, on 8 August 1942, the Bombay session of the All India Congress Committee (AICC) passed the 'Quit India' resolution and thus triggered off a movement that surpassed almost all the earlier 'Gandhian' movements in terms of widespread and popular participation.

20.7 SUMMARY

In this Unit, we have discussed the circumstances leading towards the Quit India Movement. The declaration of the Second World War prompted the British colonial rulers to make India a part of it. Indian armies were sent to fight the enemies of the British and Indian resources were used for this purpose. This was done without taking the nationalist leadership into confidence. The Congress ministries, which were formed in the provinces in the wake of 1937 elections, resigned in protest against such unilateral decision by the colonial government. Individual Satyagraha was started in various parts of the country against this decision. In order to placate the nationalists, the British government sent the Cripps Mission to negotiate dominion status for India, but its proposals were completely rejected by the Congress. This set the stage for confrontation between the nationalists and the colonial government resulting in the launch of the Quit India movement which we will discuss in the next Unit.

- 1) Why did the Congress ministries in the provinces resign?
- 2) What steps did the British colonial government in India take to counter the nationalist demands?
- 3) Write a note on the individual satyagraha started by the Congress in this period.

