
UNIT 21 QUIT INDIA MOVEMENT*

Structure

- 21.1 Introduction
- 21.2 Nature of the Movement
- 21.3 War and Rumours
- 21.4 Preparations for Struggle
- 21.5 Political Situation in India in 1942
- 21.6 Regional Aspects of the Movement
- 21.7 Summary
- 21.8 Exercises

21.1 INTRODUCTION

The Quit India Movement has rightly been described as the most massive anti-imperialist struggle on the eve of Partition and Independence. 1942, the year that the movement was launched and the next five years witnessed unparalleled and tumultuous events in the political history of India. Sharp increase in popular nationalism, large-scale deprivation and death due to widespread famine conditions particularly the Bengal Famine of 1943, heightened Japanese aggression in Burma and Malaya, hopes of a military deliverance through the onward march of the 'Azad Hind Fauj' of Subhas Chandra Bose, and widening of the communal divide leading to the vivisection of the political fabric of the country were some of these developments. In this Unit, you will learn about various aspects of the Quit India Movement launched by Gandhi and the Congress to achieve freedom for India.

21.2 NATURE OF THE MOVEMENT

This movement was projected initially as the mass civil disobedience movement of 1942. The emphasis on the 'mass' aspect distinguished it from the controlled and limited individual *satyagrahas* or civil disobedience of 1941. In nationalist historiography it has been described as the 'third great wave' of struggle against the British. The movement differed radically from other movements launched by Mahatma Gandhi. The Non-Cooperation Movement of 1920-22 and the Civil-Disobedience Movement of 1930-34 were conceived as campaigns of peaceful resistance to British rule in India. Their social base had expanded gradually to accommodate wider popular participation. However, the 1942 movement from the very beginning was a massive uprising to compel the British to withdraw entirely from India. The emphasis in the struggle was not on traditional Satyagraha but on 'fight to the finish'. It therefore represented a challenge to the state machinery. Moreover, Gandhi was now also prepared for riots and violence. His preparedness was based on his reading of the mood of the public. Gandhi had tested the mood in the limited yet symbolic campaign of Individual Satyagraha in 1941 when about 23,000 *satyagrahis* had gone to jail. He now conceded that the masses could take up arms in self-defence. Armed resistance against a stronger

and well-equipped aggressor was to be considered a non-violent act as he observed in his articles in the *Harijan* in March 1942. Accepting the role of individual freedom and civil liberties in the face of state's organised violence, he affirmed that "every individual was to consider himself free and act for himself".

The 1942 movement was less ambiguous in its declared objectives. It was launched to ensure the complete withdrawal of British power from India. The projected struggle had four main features: 1) It was accommodative of violence directed against the state; 2) It aimed at destroying British rule in India. Unlike earlier movements when Gandhi had asked trained *satyagrahis* to join the movements, anybody who believed in the complete independence of the country could join it now; 3) Students were urged to play a prominent part and to lead the movement should senior Congress leaders be arrested; and 4) The movement was to be marked by total defiance of government authority.

The difference from the earlier movements has been well-established in the rich scholarship on the movement. In the official and the non-official historiography, most of the debate centres around 'spontaneity' vs. 'organisation' argument or the degree of violence and non-violence in the 'Congress rebellion'. The government was keen to denounce Gandhi on charges of planning subversion and prepared a ground for the implementation of the Revolutionary Movement Ordinance. Intelligence reports warned of a series of acts planned by the Congress and the CSP to disrupt the smooth functioning of the war machinery. In fact, official sources had reported that the CSP workers had worked out modalities in a meeting in Allahabad in July 1941 for a radical course of action in Feb 1942. The plan of action came to be known as the Deoli Plan of Jai Prakash Narayan because the latter had reasoned from his Deoli Jail cell that nationalist unity could be revived if Gandhi were to plan a radical course of action rather than a Satyagraha. These papers were seized and used as evidence of the revolutionary plot planned by the CSP.

As these allegations grew a secret report of 24 July 1942 warned that 15 September 1942 was being planned by the Congress as the date when the 'ultimatum' to the imperial authorities to withdraw from the country was to expire, heralding the beginning of a campaign. The report disclosed, '...it is reliably understood that Congress contemplates in the coming movement that the maximum effort will be made by open and subversive groups alike to paralyse the existing form of Government. There are to be no restrictions on the actions of those who choose in their own way to assist the Congress to achieve their end... Congress is prepared to encourage all groups to assist them in whatever way they choose and with whatever weapon they choose'. Based on such accounts the imperialist historiography charged the Congress with conspiracy. The nationalist historians on the other hand interpreted these accounts to highlight a degree of central direction and organisation in the rebellion and to depict the ascendancy of the Congress. Once the movement was formally launched on 8 August 1942 and the main leaders arrested, the focus shifted to its elemental and radical aspects. In official discourse the movement came to be conceived as the most 'un-Gandhian' of all nationalist struggles. The same aspect has been discussed by scholars such as Francis Hutchins in terms of the 'spontaneity' of the 'unfinished revolution'. It has also been described in terms of the 'greatest outburst ever' in the history of the national movement in India and yet, a 'patchy occurrence'.

Scholars have also focussed attention on the 1942 movement in order to either question or to establish the Congress ascendancy or leadership in different parts of the country. The nationalist writers have demonstrated that the nation stood united behind its leaders in 1942. And, since Gandhi had sanctioned violence in this movement most of what happened was as he had wished. In more recent times, scholars have explored the movement as it developed at the grass-roots. Paul Greenough in his work on the underground literature of the movement in Medinipur, Bengal, had observed that it was the move away from the issues, themes and symbols which Gandhi had articulated that provided Quit India Movement with a distinctive character and lent internal tension to it. However, Gyanendra Pandey has argued that popular anger and action cannot merely be interpreted as deviation from Gandhian norms. Rather, activities in the wake of the movement may be interpreted in terms of the appropriation of the name and symbols of Gandhian nationalism for a politics that was essentially their own (Gyanendra Pandey, p. 125). In recent times numerous other accounts have also added to our understanding of the nature of the movement as it spread in different parts of the country.

21.3 WAR AND RUMOURS

The intensity of the movement was primarily due to conditions related to World War II (1939-45). A variety of factors such as the immediacy of the war in different parts of the subcontinent, the rapid increase in inflationary conditions, Government's preparedness to put down any resistance that might interfere with War supplies and the sharp difference of opinion among nationalist leaders and parties about the stand to be adopted in the face of the national and international crisis, affected the participation of people in the movement of 1942.

World War II and the possibility of its impact on developments in India had caught the attention of the political leadership in India and in England. Military and strategic considerations were cited to withhold political concessions to Indians. As the war progressed and as the forces of nationalism challenged the colonial systems in Asia, the Raj hardened its position further. It was relatively easy to influence opinions in Britain at this time. Evidently, India was the backbone of British defence east of Suez. Now the focus was on defending the Empire. Thus the political opinions that favoured granting Dominion status to India were overruled and the rigid and uncompromising position of Winston Churchill carried the day.

In 1939-40, the imperial state trumpeted the need for stepping up the war effort. At the same time, the military defeats faced by the Allied powers in the hands of the Japanese army indicated that countries like Burma and India would be left in the lurch on the face of successful attack from Japan. This feeling grew stronger as the Japanese forces occupied Burma and raided Akyab, the region bordering Chittagong in east Bengal, twenty-five times! Refugees poured in narrating woes of war, destruction and abandonment. The retreat of the British Indian Army from Burma was tame indeed. The British Navy did not seem strong enough to counter the Japanese in the Indian Ocean. Japanese air and naval superiority over the Bay of Bengal during 1942 made the East Coast ports of Calcutta, Chittagong, Madras and Vizag largely unusable. Thus, India faced an imminent threat on her eastern land frontier and on the almost undefended eastern seaboard at a time when the Germans were advancing in the West. That the triumph of the

Japanese in South and Southeast Asia had unnerved the British military establishment is evident in the plan for the defence of north-east India, drawn up on 12 February 1942. In this the Gen. Staff had worked out a 'demolition policy' to deny the Japanese forces access to essentials. The policy involved destruction of power stations, oil installations and wireless, cable and telegraph stations. The military authorities also planned to destroy the ports of Calcutta and Chittagong and carry out the sinking of river craft and removal of railway stock as part of the demolition policy. The Denial Policy in Bengal, that involved removal of rice and other essential items and boats and bicycles from the inland areas in order to prevent Japanese intrusion, was the consequence such fears.

The ill thought-out Air-raid Precautionary Schemes undertaken in areas that faced a direct military threat, the inflationary spiral and the growing shortage of food resources, exposed the hollowness of the claim of the British military preparedness. The economic situation in the interiors of the country, particularly eastern India had affected millions of people. Although scholars have pointed out that there need not always be a cause and effect relationship between economic crisis and political upheavals, yet the deteriorating economic conditions, for instance in Bengal, did affect the growing uneasiness among the people, particularly in the rural areas. It was evident that the authorities were doing very little to address their economic grievances. This was true of the jute growing areas of east Bengal. From 1940 onwards war-related developments had a scissors effect on the price of jute which crashed and the grain prices which increased.

The district officials neglected the signs of distress and permitted the export of rice from these areas. In addition, the rice and the boat denial policy resulted in the removal of nearly forty thousand tons of rice from the interiors of rural Bengal and affected the movement of large sections of population in the rice growing areas of Bengal and further reduced the supply of foodstuffs. This gave rise to an atmosphere of great insecurity and prompted speculation and large-scale hoarding of essential goods. Items such as matches, salt, kerosene, mustard oil, sugar and finally, rice disappeared from the village markets. There was a synchronisation of rising prices and shortages with the coming of a large number of Allied troops. Thus the fears that the food reserves of the country were being depleted to feed the army were not unfounded. At the same time in mid-1942 the British had little confidence in their capacity to defend Bengal and Assam in the event of a Japanese invasion. The educated sections feared the implementation of some kind of a 'scorched earth' policy in Eastern India. Grievances springing from an acute economic crisis and the lack of any political or administrative mediation to conciliate the affected population while enforcing military imperatives such as the denial policy provided a renewed lease of life to anti-state activities.

As in the earlier phases of the national movement, rumours played a significant role in formulation of opinion regarding the onward march of the war, the British imperial policy and the fate of the British in the war. These rumours acted as a form of resistance as well as expressing a form of subaltern knowledge and understanding of the political struggle in which people found themselves. A few examples will establish the point. As the war progressed, there were rumours in the tribal areas of Central Provinces in May 1941 that the blood of the Gonds was being used to restore the limbs of the injured British soldiers (Crispin Bates, 2007, p. 158)! In Jabalpur in the same province, a rumour circulated that owing to food shortages the government was about to order a general evacuation of the

city. David Hardiman's work on Gujarat has highlighted the chaos in different parts of the region following the increase in Japanese aggression in East Asia. In Dec 1941 there was a rush on banks as also a renewed hoarding of precious metals on the spread of rumours. In early 1942 many Gujarati families of Bombay fearing bombing and subsequent chaos left the city for their ancestral homes in Gujarat. These evacuees further disseminated the stories and rumours current in Bombay. Merchants and businessmen of Gujarat were apprehensive about a scorched earth policy and its devastating impact as witnessed in Rangoon when the city was evacuated. Their fears were reinforced by reports of how the British had favoured whites over coloured people during evacuation. Thus people were warned not to depend on the British in such times of crisis. By May it was feared that the Japanese fleet would soon attack the west coast of India. This encouraged widespread hoarding of food and a sharp rise in food prices throughout Gujarat and Saurashtra. One month before the beginning of the Quit India Movement, in July 1942, the authorities in Gujarat reported a feeling of great insecurity in the villages and a big demand for weapons for self-protection.

Rumours played an important role in the dissemination of information of a certain kind in militarily vulnerable regions such as Bengal, particularly with the increase in Japanese aggression in December 1941. Rumours were afloat regarding the impending British defeat. Peasants were advised to withhold food from the forces, seamen to decline work except in coastal waters and dock workers were asked not to handle war material. The fortunes of seamen, port and dock workers were directly linked to the ups and downs of the war. Their pliability was strategically significant for the war. The state hoped for their passivity as their militancy would have spurred anti-state activities.

21.4 PREPARATIONS FOR STRUGGLE

The political mainstream had responded to the war-related developments in Asia and Europe differently. While the Congress Working Committee banned participation in the war effort, it shared and supported Britain's anti-Fascist position in international politics. Thus, Britain and the Congress were on the same side as far as their anti-Fascist stance is concerned. But there were acute differences of opinion within the Congress on international developments. Subhas Chandra Bose, re-elected to the post of the President of the Congress in 1938 proposed that Britain should be confronted with the ultimatum that she should free India or face direct action and disorder. Gandhi was opposed to this. With his intervention, Bose was forced out of office in May 1939. The differences between the two leaders explain, to some extent, Gandhi's attitude towards the British in the early stages of World War II. His views were also at variance with those of Jawaharlal Nehru who favoured an immediate declaration of independence as a precondition for the Congress lending support to the war. Ultimately, the Congress Working Committee Resolution of September 1939, declared that Britain should state clearly her war aims and recognise that freedom was her goal not only in relation to the occupied and un-free European nations but in relation to India too. It must be mentioned that in the early stages of the war there were hardly any political concessions made to enlist Indian cooperation.

The international political situation altered considerably from the summer of 1940. The Axis powers grew aggressive in Britain and Europe. As India's role in imperial defence grew in importance on account of her resources, manpower

and economic potential in the region east of Suez, Britain equipped herself with both, a Revolutionary Movement's Ordinance to crush civil resistance and a plan to pacify the Congress with the promise of grant of political concessions. However, the offer known as Viceroy Linlithgow's 'August offer' of 1940 fell short of expectations. In the meantime, Gandhi who had insisted on non-violence in the international arena, launched an 'individual satyagraha' in 1940 against British Indian Government's war-efforts and against the prohibition to protest against it.

From the winter of 1941 and following the failure of the Cripps' Mission in March 1942, there were growing differences within the Congress largely due to war-related circumstances. After the collapse of Cripps' negotiations, the British Cabinet, including its Labour members, did nothing to demand a 'national government' in India during the course of the war. Administrative highhandedness in India, as witnessed in the continuance of Governor's authoritarian rule in the provinces, was accepted almost unquestioningly. Moreover, the British Cabinet gave Linlithgow and the government of India full support in their repression of the Quit India Movement. Their authoritarian attitude towards the Congress can be explained through their anger that Congress had sought to destroy British position in India at the time when it faced a major crisis in the war with Japan.

21.5 POLITICAL SITUATION IN INDIA IN 1942

There were many contradictory stances and many conflicting tones in the statements and messages put out by many Congress leaders at different times and in different parts of the country a little before the beginning of the Quit India Movement. Gandhi's own language was distinctly more militant in the wake of 'the Cripps fiasco'. In May 1942 he wrote: "I waited and waited until the country should develop the non-violent strength necessary to throw off the foreign yoke. But my attitude has undergone a change. I feel that I cannot afford to wait... That is why I have decided that even at certain risks, which are evidently involved, I must ask the people to resist the slavery" (D.G. Tenulkar, 1956, p. 124, p. 135).

By early August 1942, considerable preparations had been made to launch the movement. As soon as Gandhi's plan was known Viceroy Linlithgow geared himself up to nip it in the bud. London suggested opening of negotiations with Gandhi when Stafford Cripps had left. However, Gandhi was not open for negotiations at this stage. Popular unrest, the deterioration in the war situation and the refusal of the British to allow any involvement of the Congress in government during wartime compelled Gandhi to decide upon a more militant line. Various pronouncements were made to this effect from the summer of 1942. The first draft of such a course of action was rejected in a meeting of the AICC on 27 April. In May, Gandhi gave a speech asking Britain to "leave India to God. If that is too much, then leave her to anarchy". On 14 July, AICC adopted a resolution proposing a programme of civil disobedience if the British did not concede to their demands. Within a month of this ultimatum the All India Congress Committee session commenced on 7 August 1942 in a grand pandal of 35,000 sq. feet at Gowalia Tank Maidan in Bombay. Apprehensions due to the uncertainties of the war compelled Gandhi to begin his speech, delivered in Hindi, by saying that he did not believe that the British would be defeated, but if they were defeated they would follow a scorched earth policy as they did in Burma and Malaya. In that event Japan would have attacked India. Hence the urgency

of the British quitting India”. On 8 August 1942 the Quit India Resolution, modified by Nehru, was finally adopted. This is what Gandhi had to say towards the end of his speech:

‘Here is a mantra, short one, that I give you. You may imprint it on your hearts and let every breath of yours give expression to it. The mantra is: ‘Do or Die’. We shall either free India or die in the attempt; we shall not live to see the perpetuation of our slavery. Every true Congressman or (Congress) woman will join the struggle with an inflexible determination not to remain alive to see the country in bondage and slavery. Let that be your pledge ... Take a pledge with God and your own conscience as witness, that you will no longer rest till freedom is achieved and will be prepared to lay down your lives in the attempt to achieve it. He who loses his life will gain it; he who will seek to save it shall lose it. Freedom is not for the coward or the faint-hearted’. (Speech at Bombay, 8 Aug, 1942, Gopalkrishna Gandhi, 2008, p.486)

The Government of India was determined to neutralise the Congress leadership. Its determination was sharpened by the danger from the Japanese in Asia. It was militarily prepared to crush any civil disobedience movement. Thus, within hours of the launch of the ‘Quit India’ movement on 8 August 1942 at the All India Congress Committee session in Bombay by Mahatma Gandhi, the entire CWC leadership was arrested and taken to different prisons. The next day, Gandhi, Nehru and many other leaders of the Indian National Congress were arrested by the British Indian Government. This heralded the spread of the movement in different parts of the country.

In the early hours of 9 August Gandhi was arrested along with other leaders and was rendered temporarily incommunicado. On 9 August Congressmen still at large were Maulana Azad, Sadiq Ali, Dhayabhai Patel, Pyarelal Nair, Ram Mahohar Lohia, Achyut Patwardhan and Sucheta Kripalani. These individuals in Bombay then drew up a programme of action – the Twelve-point programme. The original programme is said to have been prepared by the Congress leaders under Gandhi’s instructions or with his consent before 9 August. It began with a call for day-long *hartal* and incorporated all the methods of non-violent non-cooperation and civil disobedience which had been employed under Gandhi’s leadership since 1920. The final stage of the movement included actions such as the breaking of salt laws on a large scale, picketing of foreign cloth and liquor shops, promoting industrial strikes, holding up of railways and telegraph, calling to soldiers of the British Indian Army to come out and join the people, non-payment of taxes and the setting up of parallel Government. (Hiteshranjan Sanyal, pp. 20-21) This was copied and circulated among people between 9 and 11 August soon after the arrest of the Congress leaders. As is evident from the kind of activities mentioned, the Twelve Point Programme was very broad in nature. It addressed the concerns of diverse sections of people. As a result several versions of this programme prepared by the CSP and lesser known outfits like the Khadi group appeared to have gained wide currency. The course of action laid stress upon militant activities. This explains the uniformity in the course of the uprising in different parts of the country despite the absence from the scene of the important Congress leaders.

A comprehensive British Intelligence report on the Quit India Movement prepared by T. Wickenden had indicated that the Congress leaders had decided to work

out the details of the programme after the AICC meeting in Bombay which ended on 8 August 1942. However, the arrest of the majority of the Congress leaders between 9 and 11 August deprived the Congress of the opportunity to conduct the movement. Consequently, the initiative passed into the hands of the lower-rank of political workers, students and the common people. These groups undertook a confrontationalist attitude and advocated direct and drastic mass actions. A central directorate for continuing the movement was set up after 9 August, but it took considerable time for it to establish links with the autonomous developments in different parts of the country.

Officials like Sir Reginald Maxwell (Home Member, Government of India) and Sir Richard Tottenham (Additional Secretary, Home Department) played an active role in establishing that the Congress and its leaders had organised the Quit India Movement in order to jeopardise the war efforts of the imperial government. The authorities issued a secret circular dated 17 July 1942, signed by Sir Frederick Puckle, secretary to the Government of India, which read as – “...The threat of Civil Disobedience is a direct invitation to the Japanese ... If Congress cannot get their own way... (they) will throw India to the Japanese and Germans... The object is to mobilise public opinion against the Congress. ..The National War Front should be used to the fullest to oppose proposals which can only be detrimental to the war effort. Speeches, letters to the local Press, leaflets, cartoons, posters, whispering campaigns are possible media for local publicity”. (K.K. Chaudhari, 1988, p.102) Imperial officials were therefore determined to demonstrate that any defiance of British policy in India during the war amounted to hostility towards the Allied Powers, mainly Britain. Since the USA was critical of Britain’s imperial interests in India and elsewhere it was useful to argue that the Congress was encouraging fascist forces and therefore it was justified to deal with the national movement with an iron hand. The panic-stricken government even contemplated deporting Gandhi to Aden or Nyasaland and the other main Congress leaders to Uganda or elsewhere in East Africa!

The controversial Revolutionary Movements’ Ordinance, which was intended to wipe out the Quit India Movement, was signed by the Viceroy on 12 August 1942. It was withheld from being issued in the Gazette of India because most of the provinces argued they could make do with powers under the Defence of India Rules (DIR). Martial Law was not declared because civilian officials were already equipped with plenipotentiary powers to suppress the uprising. During the war, DIR permitted the Government to take any arbitrary action against persons and property in the name of war effort. Thus officials could now undertake punitive actions not covered by law. Indian Penal Code was to be used as a shield against any demand for enquiry into police excesses.

The government also brought into force the Special Criminal Courts Ordinance II of 1942 which was originally intended to apply to cases arising directly from ‘enemy’ (Axis) attack. The Ordinance was made applicable to cases arising from the disturbances from 26 October 1942. This empowered the government to short-circuit the process of criminal justice. Under this ordinance special criminal courts could be set up which would have summary jurisdiction over the suspected offenders. They could be imprisoned for a maximum duration of two years and there was very limited scope for appeal to the higher courts. The judiciary however continued to be reluctant to ratify actions by the Government. Even the *London Tribune* condemned atrocities by the British in Bombay – “Our armoured cars

are going into action against Congress supporters in Bombay. Our political warfare has reached new inspiring heights. We proclaim a Whipping Act for the people of India. Every step taken by the Government of India since the dawn of the 9th August has been a stab in the back of the men and women who work and fight and die in the cause of freedom... The suicidal policy of the Government of India must be reversed” (*London Tribune*, 14 August 1942, Chaudhari, pp. 118-119). As government repression increased, so did the saga of nationalist upsurge in various parts of the country, most significantly certain pockets in Gujarat, Satara in Maharashtra, Ballia in United Provinces, Medinipur in Bengal, and many areas in Bihar. Press censorship encouraged underground literature like the *Bombay Congress Bulletin* that was printed on 10 August in English, Gujarati, Marathi, Hindi and Urdu; *Vande Mataram* in Gujarati; *Ittehad* in Urdu in Bombay; *Biplabi* in Bengali in Medinipur.

21.6 REGIONAL ASPECTS OF THE MOVEMENT

The Quit India Movement had two phases: an initial mass movement phase from August until September, followed by a longer quasi-guerrilla insurgency phase. In the cities, strike action continued from 9-14 August in Bombay and in Calcutta from 10-17 August. There were strikes in Kanpur, Lucknow and Nagpur and violent clashes with striking millworkers in Delhi. In Patna, the police almost completely lost control over the city for two days after clashes in front of the Secretariat on 11 August. Thereafter those activists who had not been arrested, including militant groups of students spread out from the cities to join the insurrection in rural areas. Mass participation was inspired by inflammatory underground publications, such as the *Bombay Provincial Bulletin*, *Free India*, *War of India Bulletin*, *Do or Die News-sheet*, *Free State of India Gazette* and the *Congress Gazette* which flourished after the official Congress leadership had been imprisoned and their offices, assets and printing presses seized.

In most places the movement declined within two to four weeks from 9 August 1942. This was due to both government repression through the army and the police and because the leaders responsible for guiding the movement failed to consolidate the spirit of rebellion among the people. But the quick spread and the intensity of the movement took the British Indian government by surprise. The intelligence machinery of the government had failed to warn the authorities about the likely extent of the movement. Thus during the first two weeks of the uprising the authority of the government practically collapsed over vast tracts in the United Provinces, Bihar, Bengal, Orissa, Central Provinces, Maharashtra and in some parts of the Madras Presidency.

In Western India the movement was slow to grow in August 1942. But as it gained momentum it continued into 1943 and in some cases even longer. In districts such as East Khandesh, Satara, Broach and Surat large number of peasants took part in guerrilla-style attacks on government property, lines of communication, and people known to be sympathetic to British rule. The agitation was remarkable also due to the strength and duration of protest in towns such as Pune, Ahmadnagar and Ahmedabad. One commentator named Ahmedabad as ‘the Stalingrad of India’! Western India also took a lead in bomb and sabotage activities. Of the 664 bomb explosions recorded in India from August 1942 to January 1944, nearly 76 per cent occurred in Bombay Presidency.

The strong bases of the Congress were Ahmedabad, Baroda and Surat cities, the districts of Kheda and Surat and the Jambusar taluka of Broach district. One important group from the viewpoint of the movement was the *Gujarat Vyayam Prachark Mandal* (Gujarat Society For the Propagation of Physical Training). Its leader, Chhotubhai Purani was associated with extremist nationalist organisations. He had later become an active member of the Gandhian Congress but had never fully accepted the principle of non-violence. He founded a network of gymnasiums throughout Gujarat in which boys and young men were taught that they should train both their bodies and minds to fight the British. The boys were mostly Brahmans, Baniyas, Patidars from urban middle-class and prosperous rural families. Gandhi approved of these activities in part because Purani had refused to allow right-wing Hindu and anti-Muslim sentiments to be voiced in his gymnasiums. By 1942 there were as a result a large number of young men in Gujarat who were mentally and physically prepared to support a violent struggle against the British. It was in this explosive atmosphere that the Congress leaders launched the Quit India Movement in which the likes of Vallabhbhai supported the agitationist mood of the people whereas Morarji Desai took a more cautious approach since he believed that Gandhi's work for non-violence would be undone if popular violence was condoned and encouraged.

There were similar stories in almost all the major cities across the country. As soon as the news of the arrest of Gandhi broke, the millworkers downed their tools, the merchants closed their shops, students left their schools and colleges, and large crowds flocked the streets. In Ahmedabad, the crowds targeted policemen and anyone wearing the symbol of colonial culture like the solar topi. On 10 August about 2,000 students took out a procession. When the police tried to break it up with lathi-charges, the students counter-attacked, throwing bricks. Demonstrations and clashes with the police continued at a high pitch for another two weeks.

In Kheda, a total of ten agitators were killed by the police between 11 and 19 August. In addition to the open clashes, there was widespread cutting of telegraph wire and other minor acts of sabotage on public property. According to Sir Roger Lumley (Governor of Bombay from 1937-43), Kheda was the most disturbed district in the Bombay Presidency during August. In Baroda State, by 17 August the moderate Praja Mandal leaders were forced by popular pressure to declare their support for the Quit India Movement. On 18 August when the organisation was banned and the leaders were arrested there were turbulent demonstrations. The underground movement remained strong. Most effective were the big mass protests. Notably absent from these protests were the Muslims, who made up twenty per cent of the population of Ahmedabad and fifteen per cent of the population of Baroda. There had been a definite change in the political loyalties of substantial sections of Muslims since the founding of the branches of Muslim League here since 1937.

Relationship between the working classes and middle class nationalist remained cordial. In 1942 there were 75 textile mills in Ahmedabad with 116,000 workers. Work in the mills was divided on communal lines – majority of the spinners were *harijans*, weavers were mostly patidar immigrants from north Gujarat and Muslims. Most powerful of labour unions were with Majur Mahajan Sangh which was closely connected with the Congress for over two decades. In 1942, it organised protests and strikes for the political cause and not for higher wages.

Workers were persuaded to return to their home towns in times of inflation. The mill-owners were frightened that if the Japanese advanced into India, the British might destroy their textile mills as they retreated. As there was not much to gain from cooperation with the British war effort they had sympathy with the Congress suggestion that the Indian people should negotiate with the Japanese. They realised that if the Congress would form government after war it was in their interest not to alienate the party at this critical juncture. They also feared sabotage if they kept the mills open. But they did not support the Quit India Movement openly.

Protest in rural areas was the strongest in Kheda district. The most noticeable difference between rural agitation in 1942 and earlier Congress agitation in Gujarat was that this time revenue refusal was on the nationalist agenda from the beginning. Revenue collection was resumed in December 1942 only when the movement had begun to slacken. Collective fines were levied on villages which had provided violent support to the struggle. In 1932-34, the land of all the peasants who had participated in the civil-disobedience campaign was confiscated and returned only in 1938. They did not want a repeat of the ordeal. The draconian measures adopted by the authorities with show of troop strength also had a dampening impact in the rural areas. Moreover, the rich peasants had made profits due to war-time inflation and were therefore not too eager to lend support to the movement. The lower caste peasants - the Baraiyas, Patanvadiys and Thakardas - by and large remained aloof from the movement. Their belief that the Congress was primarily a Patidar party was confirmed when in 1938 the Congress government in Bombay forced them to return the land that had earlier been confiscated due to revenue refusal during the civil disobedience movement and which they had bought at low prices.

The movement in Gujarat was not socially very radical. A very successful parallel government was nevertheless established in Ahmedabad. It duplicated the existing administrative machinery with underground leaders in charge of each municipal ward. This was the 'Azad Government'. It organised protests, levied taxes, issued information in 'patrikas', collected intelligence through a network of spies and punished certain notorious policemen. The leadership was in the hands of young Congress socialists. The parallel government drew its legitimacy from the broad mass of the Hindu middle classes of the city. No attempt was made to establish such bodies in the rural areas. Thus when rural underground activists were hounded down by the police in early 1943, the peasantry had no alternative programme to turn to. According to David Hardiman, only in the adivasi areas of south Gujarat were there indications of a more radical movement, for there the struggle was directed chiefly against Baniya moneylenders and Parsi landlords-cum-liquor dealers. Local high caste Gandhian leaders proved very sensitive to the implications of such activities, and did their best to discourage them. The Quit India Movement strengthened the hold of the Gandhian Congress over Gujarat. In 1944 Congress swept the polls in the Gujarat local elections of that year with huge majorities.

In Bihar and eastern UP as elsewhere, the cities were the first to experience action in the course of 1942 disturbances. There was, as Max Harcourt observes, intense rioting in the cities between 8-10 August. Then the focus shifted to the rural areas. Large crowds of armed villagers converged on the semi-isolated administrative centres in the localities and targeted the police posts and the local courts at the district and *tehsil* level. There were instances of looting of shops,

godowns and residences as well. Bihar, like Bengal and Orissa, was under Permanent Settlement. Some like the Darbhanga, Bettiah or Darbhanga Rajahs were very big landlords. However, the majority were medium level landholders. Rich peasants dominated over the rest of the village population. In eastern UP villages were under the domination of Bhumihar-Brahman or Rajput-Brahman peasants who had a leading role in the 1942 movement. With the growing problem of food shortages and the tales of horror recounted by the refugees returning from different parts of South East Asia, there was an increase in the activities organised by the Kisan Sabha which supported the Quit India campaign.

The underground movement grew very strong in Bihar and proved to be a major law and order problem for the British during 1942-44. Despite severe repression several terrorist organisations and dacoit gangs were formed in different parts of Bihar by 1943. Many of these groups had links with the Congress Socialist Party. They allied with socialist groups called 'Azad Dastas' and carried out activities in the name of the Congress. Vinita Damodaran equates these dacoit groups with Eric Hobsbawm's 'social bandits' and observes that they roamed the countryside with the support of the village population and filled the political vacuum between 1942-44. Their activities increased as Gandhi undertook a 21-day fast in prison in February 1943. In places like Muzaffarpur, Monghyr, Saran and Patna prisoners escaped from the overflowing prisons. There was a spurt in the publication of underground literature.

There was an increase in dacoities committed mainly for food. In Bhagalpur district the monthly incidence for dacoit crime in June 1943 was 310 as against a previous monthly average of 50. The targets were commonly food stores but attempts were also made to loot post offices, post bags, government treasuries and ammunition depots. These acts were often accompanied by cries of 'Gandhiji ki jai'. In Darbhanga, attacks on the local zamindar's *kutcheri* (office) was organised by Suraj Narayan Singh, a leader of the Congress Socialist Party who had received training in armed activity in Nepal. He was in constant contact with CSP leaders in Bombay. In Bhagalpur, dacoit gangs led by Sitaram Singh found wide support in the hands of villagers who provided food and money. Jayaprakash Narayan, one of the founder members of CSP, escaped from the prison in Nepal in November in 1942, and with the assistance of another socialist leader, Rammanohar Lohia, formed a parallel government on the Nepal border which lasted till 1944. In the neighbouring regions of Eastern UP, mainly the Ballia district, police stations were captured and a 'national government' was declared under the leadership of Chittu Pandey. In Azamgarh, the British could restore control only after massive use of troops and armed police (Crispin Bates 2010, p.162). In the Ghazipur dist of U.P. many recalled that the leadership was Gandhi's but the spirit was that of Bhagat Singh. (Gyan Pandey, 1996, p. 12).

The Quit India Movement in Medinipur in Bengal and the famine of 1943 are the two most significant markers of the turbulence that gripped Bengal during 1940-44. Highhandedness by the state in the wake of World War II, administrative apathy and widespread hunger and destitution provided the context for heightened public anger and protests. District officials had earlier voiced their concern that a protest movement would gather momentum if the grievances were not promptly and effectively removed. The provincial coalition government of the Krishak Praja Party (KPP) and the Muslim League under the leadership of the premier Fazlul Huq implemented the Defence of India Rule and announced that, "There

is no doubt that a mass movement capable of arousing the passions of hundreds and thousands of people during a period of war, may lead to serious consequences affecting the welfare of all sections of Indians. Such a movement cannot be allowed to spread anywhere in India to-day and not certainly in Bengal which falls within the danger zone”.

Following Gandhi's arrest, the students of Calcutta like their counterparts in Bombay and Bihar vented their anger on services crucial to the war efforts. Interestingly, while the Calcutta Tramways, declared an essential service for the war period, was damaged, buses were ignored! Telegraph wires, railway lines and post offices were damaged. Masks covering the street lights as a precaution against air-raids were removed. Total collapse was prevented in the cities as the administration exploited the differences between the 'pro-war' (largely the Communists and members of the Radical Democratic Party) and 'anti-war' groups. The Priority Classes Scheme which provided for the industrial working-class of the cities also contributed to the relative lack of continued participation in the movement by industrial labour.

In east Bengal, the movement was restricted to towns and cities. Nationalist propaganda was intense here. Warnings against train journey is provided in leaflets like '*Rail Bhraman Bipadjanak*' (Train Journey's are dangerous') affected the normal functioning of such indispensable means of communication. Other leaflets like 'Why Are We Neutral in the War?' explained the position of the Congress in the war. The underground press remained very active in the Dacca Division even when the movement did not. In Mymensingh leaflets propagated that the Indian soldiers headed by Rashbehari Bose had occupied Imphal and that Subhas Bose was in Burma awaiting the moment to invade Bengal with an army of 10,000. The information was provided in anticipation because it was only in 1944 that this happened and the Indian National Army (INA) succeeded on the Manipur front. Leaflets of this kind perhaps appeared when the regular Bengali newspapers ceased to be published. *A War of Independence Bulletin* published by the Assam office of Japanese-German-Indian Association advised people to withdraw from Calcutta as Bengal and Assam were to witness the first drive of the Azad Hind Fauj.

The Congress had a strong presence in Medinipur in west Bengal since the days of the Non-Cooperation Movement. It had faced additional problems in the wake of the war due to the Denial Policy and rice exports to the industrial metropolises. War-related tensions and the political receptiveness of the area had a role to play in the flaring up of an 'open rebellion' here. Hiteshranjan Sanyal's study shows how a number of established Congress leaders had initially held aloof from the Quit India Movement. Thus the initiative passed to militant young students many of whom were without distinct party affiliations but had turned towards the Forward Bloc in the late 1930s. Amidst the rising tensions in 1942, the most significant development in Medinipur was the formation of a parallel government with the formidable name '*Mahabharata Yuktarashtra: Tamralipta Jatiya Sarkar*'. The government remained functional till 1944. The repression that followed took the life of Matangini Hazra, an eighty-year old political worker who was killed in a lathi-charge on September 29, 1942. *Biplabi*, the underground newsletter of the Jatiya Sarkar reported on atrocities on women by the military and the police mainly to stifle protest. Women were asked to take-up arms in self-defence since Mahatma Gandhi had advised the same.

However, government repression remained unabated even when the region experienced nature's fury in the form of a cyclonic storm in October 1942 and as the famine progressed in 1943.

In Satara, in western Maharashtra, the Satyashodhak Samaj founded by the reformer Jyotiba Phule in the late nineteenth century provided the base and the main striking force to the Quit India movement. Here the peasantry had joined the nationalist movement in the 1930s with hardly any link with the Congress or the Left. Still Gandhi, in the opinion of Gail Omvedt, was an important symbol for all. Thus the main slogan of the 1942 movement – 'do or die' – produced the 'Prati Sarkar' which she describes as the most powerful and long-lasting of the parallel governments established during the Quit India Movement.

The activities of the 'Prati Sarkar' included people's courts or *nyayadan mandals* as well as various types of armed activities and constructive programmes. Its last armed encounter with the police which resulted in two deaths took place after the naval mutiny in 1946. In caste terms Satara was dominated by Kunbis. Other sections of the population included the Dhangara artisan castes and the Mahars, Mangs and Ramoshis classed as a criminal tribe by the British. All these groups represented the 'bahujan samaj' or the majority and included a wide range of people across castes and classes. The first wave of activities in 1942 in Satara included sabotage, jailbreak and armed encounters with the police. People came with spears, axes and other home-made weapons and believed that they could put an end to colonial power. The govt imposed heavy fines and arrested people. 2000 people were in jail in Satara by the end of 1942.

The activists of the Prati Sarkar that was formed in early 1943, carried out both constructive as well as military and administrative tasks. They were organised into groups that were in touch with socialist groups of Bombay and established structures that included volunteer squads organised as Rashtra Seva Dal, Tufan Dal etc. The underground activists consisted of the young and educated sections of diverse castes of the 'bahujan Samaj'. Brahmans and merchants, Maratha middle-caste peasants and workers were very well-represented here. Dalits and women were under-represented. Between June 1943 and early 1944 as the movement spread here, attempts were made to build a viable and credible power structure by suppressing criminal activities including dacoity. In the middle of 1944 Gandhi gave a call to surrender since after his release from jail in May 1944, he was disturbed by the more violent underground activities. On 1 August he gave an open call for all those still underground to cease struggle and surrender. All over the country the nationalists, ranging from the disappointed socialist leadership to the loyal Congressmen, followed Gandhi's advice except in Satara.

21.7 SUMMARY

There were certain strands common to the 1942 movement in different parts of the country. One such was the appropriation of nationalist symbols by popular classes. Wider participation of large sections of people in mainstream movements had forced the pace of these movements. This was evident earlier during the peasant movements in northern Allahabad and Awadh, among the plantation workers in Assam and during the Gudem-Rampa rising led by Alluri Sitarama Raju in Andhra in the early 1920s. However, the enthusiasm of the general public was greater in 1942. Their sentiments were represented by socialist leaders like

Jayaprakash Narayan when the bulk of the peasantry of the Prati Sarkar refused to surrender as late as August 1944 even after Mahatma Gandhi expressed his desire that those who were still underground should surrender. There were different centres of political initiative due to the preceding three decades of militant nationalist activity. There was definitely a concern over outbreak of violence. But it was attributed to the provocative action of the Government and brutal repression.

In recent times it has been argued that the history of the Quit India Movement has been neglected primarily because none of the major political parties played a central role in it. It was mainly a movement of the subaltern classes. Had the political elite been in the forefront, the campaign would have been more conservative in form. Numerous accounts have established that in the absence of conventional leadership, marginal groups proved their mettle. The national movement gained from the convergence of local and national interests. However, the socially transformative character of the movement remained incomplete.

The Quit India Movement failed to end British rule in India. Yet, this was one movement that demonstrated the will and reserve of diverse communities of Indians to withstand both the highhandedness of imperial authorities and the elitism of the Indian political class. The Quit India Movement stands apart from the earlier movements in terms of the spirit and enthusiasm that it infused in ordinary people to support indigenous institutions and structures of power. The parallel governments that such efforts produced indicate the basic difference between the 1942 movement and the earlier movements. The Non-Cooperation Movement was urban based and was supported mostly by rich peasant groups like those in Gujarat. Compared with it the Civil Disobedience campaign was more widespread. It involved many more poor peasants and was radicalised by the impact of the depression. But the Quit India Movement, as the preceding discussion demonstrates, was the most radical and violent of them all. It was supported by the poor and labouring classes, who were the hardest hit by war time inflation and food shortages. Although every major city saw action in 1942, yet in most urban areas British control was too tight for Congress activism to last very long. By 1945 the Congress was moving in the direction of focusing its attention and energies on the 1946 elections.

21.8 EXERCISES

- 1) What were the immediate factors which prompted the launch of the Quit India Movement?
- 2) Discuss the basic aims of the Quit India Movement.
- 3) Describe the regional spread of the Quit India Movement.