
UNIT 22 POST-WAR NATIONAL UPSURGES, 1945-47*

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22.1 INTRODUCTION

The end of the Second World War brought about a sea change in the political atmosphere in India, as in other parts of the world. Of course India did not fully share in the euphoria over the defeat of the Nazi forces, as she never got the assurances she asked for to enable her active cooperation in Allied defence. However, the end of hostilities meant the end of a terrible period of food scarcity, brought about by drought and worsened by callous neglect by the government, inflation and blackmarketing, culminating in famine. In this Unit, we will discuss the various popular movements against the colonial rule.

22.2 END OF WORLD WAR II

With the end of the war came the release of the political prisoners, including the leaders of the Congress. Gandhiji had been released earlier, in May 1944, on grounds of ill-health. He had lost his wife, Kasturba, when in jail and his trusted companion of many years, Mahadev Desai. On coming out of jail, he had busied himself in constructive work, which soon became the main activity of Congressmen.

Almost a year before the final end of hostilities in May 1945, the Government in India, in its plans for the years ahead, had begun to discuss the possibility of a settlement between the two principal parties, the Congress and the League. The government was anxious to have in place a coalition government representing both communities, which would tackle the situation of political and economic instability expected to evolve on termination of the War. Demobilisation of army personnel, economic inflation, and release of political prisoners were some challenges the new government was expected to meet.

For this, the leaders of the Congress were released from prison, some after long terms of wartime confinement. Many Congress workers spent the entire War years in jail, having been incarcerated for opposing the War effort in 1939-40. Others had gone to jail for the Individual Civil Disobedience Movement in 1940, been released for a while and then detained again for their role in the Quit India

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Movement in 1942. It had been a long war for everyone, the leaders and the populace, and there was great relief at its end and more so at the release of political prisoners.

When the national leaders came out of jail after the end of the War and toured the country, they sensed that it was a matter of time before the British would go, maybe as early as two to five years. (Nehru's speech reported by the Fortnightly Report for the first half of October 1945 from United Provinces) They were amazed by the excited crowds which greeted them. The leaders had expected to find people totally dejected and subdued because of the repression of the War years. Repression, in fact, had steeled the determination of the people to continue the fight. No political activity had been permitted during the War and in any case with the leaders in jail and anti-British political parties and organisations outlawed, people had found it impossible to undertake any political activity. They awaited the release of the leaders and the legalisation of political parties with great expectations. A new era seemed to be heralded in which the struggle of the Indian people would make great strides towards freedom.

People stood atop treetops, waving in excitement or surrounding the cars of the leaders. They braved inclement weather to welcome Congress leaders and workers. The trains carrying leaders home were stopped intermittently by insistent crowds. The same scenes were repeated when the leaders went to Simla to participate in the conference convened by the Viceroy. In Bombay, where the Congress Working Committee met after three years, half a million turned out in welcome.

22.3 ELECTIONS IN BRITAIN AND IN INDIA

An interesting development was that the end of the War and the beginning of peacetime in Britain had not brought back Churchill and the Conservative Party to power as one might have expected. The architect of the Allied victory was a national hero, no doubt, and the nation was grateful for his leadership but practical commonsense influenced the popular vote. The verdict was in favour of the Labour Party, which was perceived by the populace to be best suited to lead a War battered nation in the task of reconstruction ahead.

The victory of Labour in the post-war elections signalled some changes for India. But, contrary to common perception, it remained within the broad imperialist framework as far as the colonies were concerned. Civil liberties were restored, ban on socialists lifted and elections were declared at the centre and in the provinces for the winter of 1945-1946. The Congress welcomed the opportunity to form ministries in the provinces and to elect representatives to the constitution making body that would be set up.

Election meetings soon became huge arenas of political mobilisation, much to the surprise even of Jawaharlal Nehru, who had criss-crossed the country in the run up to the elections in 1936-37. He confessed that he had not seen such crowds, displaying feverish excitement, earlier. Congress candidates fared extremely well at the polls too, and the party won over ninety per cent general seats while the Muslim League swept the Muslim constituencies. The election campaign became a massive exercise in mobilisation of the people. The issues taken up were very emotive ones; the excesses by officials while repressing the Quit India movement and the fate of the prisoners belonging to the Indian National Army (INA).

A major issue taken up in the election campaign related to the unprecedented repression witnessed against the 1942 movement. Many, including ordinary people and cadres, had been martyred in the cause. Setting up memorials to them and assisting their families was one aspect of the activity of Congressmen. The other aspect was taking up the cases where officials had exceeded their brief in repressing the movement. A typical election speech would relate the tale of repression with all details of brutality, move on to condemning the officials who were guilty and end with the promise (or threat) that Congress governments would enquire into these cases and mete out punishment to the guilty officials.

The immediate impact of the speeches on the morale of the officials was devastating. What made it worse for them was the prospect of Congress ministries coming to power in those very provinces, such as U.P. and Bihar, where repression had been exceptionally severe in 1942. Even the Governor of U.P. admitted that some actions were indefensible when “dragged out in the cold light of 1946”. The Viceroy was of the opinion that only a gentleman’s agreement with the Congress could solve the issue.

The second issue taken up in the election campaign was that of the fate of the members of Subhas Bose’s Indian National Army taken prisoner by the Allies and put on trial for brutalities and war crimes. Jawaharlal Nehru hailed them as misguided patriots and called for leniency given that big changes were imminent in India. The Congress followed this up by passing a resolution in support of the cause. Well known Congress leaders like Bhulabhai Desai, K.N. Katju, M. Asaf Ali and Jawaharlal Nehru argued the case in court when the trials began at the historic Red Fort. In addition to legal help, Congress organised relief funds and arranged employment for the INA men. Congress election meetings were often indistinguishable from INA meetings.

The campaign for release of INA prisoners garnered massive public support. Newspapers carried the news of the Red Fort trials as headlines, giving it priority over international news. It was common for daily editorials to appear on the subject in the prominent papers, condemning the government and highlighting the sacrifices of the INA men. Pamphlets with titles like ‘Patriots Not Traitors’ were circulated widely and posters were put up in Delhi threatening death to ‘20 English dogs’ for every INA man sentenced. At a public meeting in Banaras, it was declared that if INA men were not freed, revenge would be taken on European children.

So extensive was the mobilisation around the INA issue that in the first fortnight of October, 160 public meetings were held in C.P. and Berar alone where the demand for clemency to the prisoners was raised. INA Day was observed on 12 November and INA week from 5th to 11th November. It was common for 50,000 people to turn out for the larger meetings. The largest meeting was in Calcutta at the Deshapriya Park and organised by the INA Relief Committee. Nehru estimated the crowd to be over five lakhs.

The INA campaign had a wide sweep, both in terms of social groups and political parties covered as well as geographically. The Director of the Intelligence Bureau was of the view that “There has seldom been a matter which has attracted so much Indian public interest, and, it is safe to say, sympathy.” Nehru felt that no issue had captured the imagination of the people as this one had. What was

striking about the mobilisation was that it was not confined to the cities of Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta and Madras but extended to distant places such as Assam, Baluchistan and Coorg.

Participation in the campaign was extremely diverse. Donations came in from Indians abroad, Gurdwara committees, municipalities, film stars, tongawallas and the Cambridge Majlis. Students were most active, holding meetings and boycotting classes in protest. Shopkeepers downed shutters, especially on the day the trial began at the Red Fort, namely 5 November. The demand was taken up at Kisan conferences and women's conferences. Diwali was not celebrated in some places. All parties came out in support of the cause, from the Congress to the Ahrars, Akalis, Communist Party of India, Hindu Mahasabha, Justice Party, Muslim League, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Sikh League and the Unionists. The Viceroy summed it up, "All parties have taken the same line though Congress is more vociferous than the others."

Perhaps the most important aspect of the INA campaign was that it included social groups that had not been within the nationalist fold till then. These included government officials and men from the armed forces as well as loyalists. The Director of the Intelligence Bureau perceptively noted that sympathy for the INA is not the monopoly of those who are ordinarily against Government. This was partly because INA men came from families which had traditions of loyalty. One of the trio put on trial in the Red Fort was P.K. Sehgal, son of Achhru Ram, an ex-Judge of the Punjab High Court.

Apart from loyalists, government officials sympathised with the cause and some even contributed to the relief funds. Even men of the armed forces came out in support, attending meetings, sometimes even in uniform. The Commander-in-Chief spoke of the growing feeling of sympathy for the INA that pervaded the army. He advised the government to show leniency to the INA men on trial on the ground that the general opinion in the Army was in favour of leniency. The entire campaign revolved around the right of Indians to decide their own future. The issue pitted Indians against the British.

22.4 POPULAR UPSURGES

So far we have been looking at the general campaign for the release of the INA prisoners. The movement took another turn in November 1945 and February 1946 when there were violent clashes with authority. The first was on 21 November in connection with the INA trials, the second on 11 February over the sentence to Rashid Ali, the INA officer, and the third on 18 February 1946 around the Royal Indian Navy revolt. In all cases, protests by a group snowballed into confrontation, with people in the city and other parts of the country expressing solidarity.

The upsurge on 21 November 1945 began with a procession of students, both Hindu and Muslim, belonging to Forward Bloc, Students Federation and Islamia College. They occupied Dalhousie Square, the seat of the government in Calcutta, and were lathi-charged when they refused to disperse. There was an altercation with the police and firing led to two deaths and fifty two were injured. In protest, people in the city turned out in large numbers, leading to a paralysis of the city. Strikes quickly developed into pitched battles in which shops owned by Europeans were targeted.

On 11 February 1946 Muslim League, Congress and Communist students went in a procession to protest against the trial of Rashid Ali. Dharamtolla Street in Calcutta was the scene of the confrontation as Section 144 was imposed there and arrests were made and lathi charges took place. In sympathy, people of the city and other cities across the country, held meetings to show their solidarity. Often these meetings escalated into attacks on government and European property.

On 18 February 1100 naval ratings of HMIS Talwar went on strike protesting the treatment meted out to them. This included racial humiliation and unpalatable food. The ratings from Talwar were joined by those from Castle and Fort Barracks when the rumour spread that ratings had been fired upon. Angered at this, ratings seized Congress flags and went around the city holding these high, indulging in minor arson and threats to the police and even ordinary Europeans. In all, in Bombay city alone, thirty shops were destroyed, as were ten post offices, ten police posts and sixty four stores selling foodgrains. The workers went on strike in response to the call given by the Communists while shopkeepers shut their shops, making the paralysis of the city complete. Streets were sometimes barricaded, trains halted by crowds lying down on the tracks and police and military lorries were set on fire.

When word spread across the country, ratings revolted in other naval centres too. The ratings of the HMIS Hindustan took the lead in Karachi and another ship and three shore establishments joined in. Soon establishments in Aden, the Andamans, Bahrain, Calcutta, Cochin, Delhi, Jamnagar, Madras and Visakhapatnam were on strike. In all, 20,000 ratings, from 78 ships and 20 shore establishments, had taken part in the protest. Men from the other armed forces also came out in sympathetic support. In Bombay men from the Royal Indian Air Force struck work in Marine Drive, Andheri and Sion areas. Strikes by RIAF men were reported from Poona, Calcutta, Jessore and Ambala units. Armymen were not far behind in showing sympathy as reports from Jabalpur and Colaba showed.

The impact of these events was liberating in terms of the consciousness of the ordinary Indian. Even today when people hark back to those days, the RIN revolt looms large in their memory as an event which made the people and the government realise that the days of colonial rule were numbered. However, the upsurges were short-lived, their militancy lasting for a few days only. Calcutta, the scene of the almost revolution in February 1946, was quiet a week later, when the RIN revolt broke out. Six months later it was the scene of the Great Calcutta Killings.

The participation was limited to the militant sections of society in the urban centres. These upsurges did not directly touch the ordinary people in the villages. The unity demonstrated between the Hindu and Muslim communities, which, it is argued by some scholars, could have been the basis for averting partition, was organisational unity at best. The Communists came with their red flags, jointly hoisted them with the green League flags, but continued to turn to their own organisations for direction. The Muslim League actively took up the cause of Rashid Ali, a Muslim member of the INA. Muslim ratings turned to Jinnah for advice. Other ratings consulted the Congress or Socialist leaders.

Another perception which does not quite live up to reality is that the revolt shook the mighty empire to its foundations. The assessment of the Viceroy, a few days

after the naval revolt, was that the Indian army was most commendably steady. Erosion of colonial authority was one thing; determination to maintain the peace and ability to repress was another. Troops were used to suppress protesters in Calcutta during Rashid Ali Day and surrender of the striking ships was forced and ratings rounded up by troops. It is to be noted that Maratha troops rounded up ratings in Bombay, belying the belief that Indian troops refused to fire on their countrymen. Calcutta saw 36 civilian deaths by firing while the toll in Bombay was 228 civilians dead and 1046 injured.

Another popular misconception is that the Cabinet Mission came out to India in response to the RIN revolt. R.P. Dutt had made this connection in his classic, *India Today*. "On February 18 the Bombay Naval strike began. On 19 February, Attlee in the House of Commons announced the decision to despatch the Cabinet Mission." First of all this is factually incorrect. The decision to send the Cabinet Mission was taken on 22 January 1947. It was announced on 19 February but even this announcement was scheduled a week earlier.

Could it then be said that these struggles forced the British to move towards a substantive political settlement? Even here the British perception of their eroded authority was a long term one, in which they realised that their legitimacy to rule had been undermined by years of non-violent struggle. They were not thrown off gear by three upsurges in 1946-47, however militant they may be. Also, they understood that these upsurges were part of the widespread political activity spearheaded by the Congress; they only differed in form. One kind of activity was peaceful nationalist expression. The other was violent, militant confrontation with authority. The argument that Congress defused the revolutionary situation in the fear that disciplined armed forces were vital for when they would rule India does not appear tenable given government's apprehension of a Congress led revolutionary movement in the future.

The relationship of the Congress with the three upsurges was rather complex. Individual Congressmen and women took part in the agitation. Congress-minded student organisations were involved in the protests along with those linked with the Communists, Socialists and the Muslim League. Congress leaders condemned the repression in no uncertain words. The overall assessment of the Congress leaders was that the time was not yet right for an all-out struggle. They understood the repressive power of the state was intact and advised the protestors to heed this. Vallabhbhai Patel wrote to Nehru that "the overpowering force of both naval and military personnel gathered here is so strong that they can be exterminated altogether and they have been also threatened with such a contingency." Communists also realised this and their peace vans too went around the city asking people to stay peaceful.

The issue was not only about wrong timing or bad tactics, it was one of strategy. The Congress believed that the possibility of negotiations had to be exhausted before struggle could be contemplated. This was set out in a resolution of the AICC on 22 September 1945. "The guiding maxim of the Congress must remain: negotiations and settlement when possible and non-cooperation and direct action when necessary." This was the strategy of the Congress on the whole. In 1946 this strategy was buttressed by the understanding that colonial rule was nearing its end and a final settlement was on the cards. Given this scenario, it was prudent to be prepared for a struggle but ensure that no hasty steps upset the possibility

of a settlement. Negotiations were the first move in such a strategy, struggle was the card held in reserve. This is the strategic perspective within which the post war national upsurge and its relationship with the Congress is best understood.

22.5 STRUGGLES OF WORKERS, PEASANTS AND PEOPLE OF PRINCELY STATES

One common feature of most of these movements of workers, peasants and people from princely states was participation by the Communists. The Communist Party of India had not been in favour of mass struggles during the War years as it believed that the participation by the Soviet Union in the War made it a people's war. It was only when the War ended that the Kisan Sabha took up the cause of the jotedars in Bengal and the trade unions espoused the cause of the workers. Even then there was little strategic clarity. On the one hand the Communists supported Congress-League-Communist unity and looked to Congress to lead the anti-imperialist struggle. On the other, in August 1946, cadres were encouraged by the Central Committee resolution to sharpen local conflicts, the struggles around which could coalesce into a revolutionary alternative.

The common feature of these movements was that they were a protest against illegal, unjust, exploitative practices and exactions and low wages. In the case of the Warlis, forced labour and debt slavery were the main practices which were opposed. Couples were unable to get out of the debt trap they got into when they took a loan to get married. Sexual exploitation of women by the landlords and contractors was pervasive. The leadership of the Red Flag, combined with the respect with which the Warli tribals looked up to the Parulekars, the Communist Party leaders, empowered the people tremendously. In many instances, thousands of Warlis marched to the houses of landlords and freed slaves. Elsewhere the Kisan Sabha fought for improving the wages for grass cutting and felling trees.

In Bengal the struggle was for two thirds of the share, *tebhaga*, rather than the half share the cultivator was given by the landlord. The practice was that the landlord would, at the time of the harvest, stack the paddy in his godown and give the cultivator the one-third share. When the Flood Commission laid down a two third share as just, given that the *bargadar* (sharecropper) contributed manure, seed and plough too, the struggle gathered momentum and cultivators took the harvested crops to their own barns to signal that they were done with the old ways.

The strike wave of 1946 was on an extensive scale, by all standards, be it number of stoppages, number of workers affected and number of man days lost. Workers were hit badly by inflation and retrenchment. The issues taken up were wages, hours of work, bonus and food rations. A rise in wages was demanded as real earnings had fallen to 73.2 in 1946 (with the base year as 1939). The number of strikes were 1629, double the figure in the earlier year. Apart from industry, strikes also took place in government agencies such as the Post and Telegraph Department, South Indian Railway and North Western Railway, police units and ordnance depots.

Kisans in Punjab waged no-rent struggles in Ferozepur, Kangra, Patiala, Pathankot and Una. In Nili Bar, tenants agitated against illegal levies. Elsewhere, peasants protested against remodelling of canal outlets (*moghas*) which reduced water

supply while keeping water rates high. Harsa Chhina Mogha Morcha in Amritsar district was one of the more well known agitations led by Communists and participated in by Akalis and Communists.

In Travancore, fish workers, coir factory workers, toddy tappers and agricultural workers were mobilised by the Communist Party. The popular slogan around which the people were rallied was “Sink the American model constitution in the Arabian Sea”. This constitution, devised by the Dewan, Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, placed an executive nominated by the Maharaja at its core, instead of an assembly elected by adult franchise demanded by the people. Combined with political issues was protest at economic oppression by jenmis (landlords) and demand for higher wages on the part of the workers. The revolt of 1946 became associated with the names of its principal centres, Punnapra and Vayalar, though it spread widely in the Shertallay and Ambalapuzha talukas. 1000 men marched with lathis to seize rifles from a police station in Punnapra which had 20 armed policemen. Initially the attack was successful and rifles were seized from policemen, some of whom died in the attack. However, other policemen reclaimed the police station, killing many workers and forcing them to flee to camps where they sought refuge from martial law. On 27 October, some 400 workers in the camp were encircled and when 200 of them came out to face the bullets, almost 150 lost their lives. What took place in Punnapra was a cold blooded massacre.

It is often said that these movements constituted an alternative of mass struggle “from below” which could have brought unity; an alternative to the politics “from above” which brought the country to partition. However, these movements were not directly anti-imperialist in that the demands they took up were primarily economic, against local oppressors, zamindars, landlords, princes, notables, contractors, and capitalists. These vested interests were of course the social base of colonial rule and hence the movements against them also undermined colonial authority, but only indirectly. In a sense they could be described as the first round of post-independence struggles, which took up economic and social issues which had not been taken up in the concern of the movement with the primary contradiction with imperialism.

For one, some of these movements took place in later 1946, after the modalities for transfer of power were well under way. Second, they were not a continuation of the wave of anti-imperialist struggles in the winter of 1945-46, which had directly challenged the colonial state and its policies. These were often around economic issues such as wages and working conditions. They were directed against the landlords, capitalists and the princes, not against the colonial state itself. This does not mean that they did not have political significance, placed as they were in the context of impending freedom. Yet there is still a distinction to be made between economic struggles with a political dimension and direct, political action.

In my view, it is untenable that the Congress leaders moved to a compromise with imperialism because of their fear of these popular movements getting out of hand. The Congress leaders had always first gone in for negotiations with the colonial rulers. In fact struggle was intended to end in truce, which would then be worked to its full extent and preparedness built for the next round of the movement. Negotiations were to be entered into from a position of strength, not weakness. Years of mass struggle had eroded colonial hegemony irreparably and

pressurised the colonial power to enter into negotiations for setting up the mechanisms for transfer of power. In 1946 the Congress was not practising moderation as sometimes argued; rather, its leaders did not want to embark on a confrontation until it was known what the new initiative of the government, the Cabinet Mission, had to offer, in the context of statements made by senior British ministers that the British intended to leave India in the immediate future. However, a movement was to be prepared for which would be launched after the elections, when Congress ministries would be in power in the crucial provinces. Within this perspective, it was important to ensure that while pressure was to be kept up there were to be no premature outbreaks, as might have been the case had the agitations around the INA prisoners and the RIN revolt developed further momentum. Gandhiji commented that the ratings should not have revolted without a call from a prepared revolutionary party and criticised Aruna Asaf Ali, who was personally close to him, for “inciting” them. He explained that her call for unity at the barricades was misplaced as fighters do not always live at the barricades. The barricade has to be followed by the constitutional front.

22.6 SUMMARY

After the end of the Second World War, it was clearly felt in India that the days of British colonial rule were numbered. The election of the Labour government in Britain also helped in softening the imperialist sentiments. The elections in India were highly charged with the electorate split along communal lines. While the Congress won on most of general seats, the Muslim League swept the reserved Muslim seats. It was also a period of great national upsurges. The campaign for the release of INA prisoners, the RIN revolt, the peasant revolts in Bengal, Punjab and Kerala, strikes of industrial workers in many cities, and several such movements created an atmosphere of general disaffection among the Indian people. All these played their role in impressing upon the British that it would be better to end their rule in India.

22.7 EXERCISES

- 1) Describe the political situation during the 1945-46 elections in India.
- 2) Discuss the various forms which the popular protests took after 1945.
- 3) What was the role of the Congress with respect to the popular movements during 1945-47?