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QUIT INDIA AND ITS AFTERMATH

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BLOCK 5 QUIT INDIA AND ITS AFTERMATH

Introduction

The one-sided inclusion of India in 1939 by the British on the side of the Allied Forces and against the Axis Powers invited sharp reaction from the Indian nationalist leadership. Such declaration by the colonial rulers on behalf of India without consulting the Indian leaders was considered extremely autocratic and prejudicial to Indian interests. The Congress ministries resigned in protest. The Congress took the position that Indians should be consulted before taking such a momentous decision on their behalf. Moreover, the Congress, the Socialists and the Communists at this stage were against India's participation in an imperialist war. The Congress, following Gandhi, also started 'individual satyagraha' to register its protests. To assuage the Indian feelings, the British government sent the Cripps Mission whose proposals were also rejected by the Congress. This set the stage for a wider confrontation between the nationalists and the colonial government. **Unit 20** discusses these issues in detail.

Quit India movement was launched on 8th August 1942 by Mahatma Gandhi to end the colonial rule. It was one of the biggest nationalist upsurges against imperialism. The arrest of almost entire top leadership did not deter people from attacking the government institutions in many parts of India. In several places, the administration was taken over by the agitationists who had expelled or subdued the colonial police and administration. Urban groups, peasants, and even industrial workers had joined the movement in huge numbers. Even in the absence of clear directive from the apex nationalist leadership, the people in most of India interpreted the nationalist ideas in their own ways and acted accordingly. This has also been suggested that the militancy of the Quit India Movement partly owed to the fact that the people were themselves in command and not organised by the Congress leaders. You will find deliberations on these matters in **Unit 21**.

Although the end of the Second World War brought relief all round, the situation in India was not quiescent. Inflation, food scarcity and famines had resulted from the forced inclusion of India into British war efforts and exploitation of its resources. Moreover, the demands of the Indian nationalists for independence were not considered by the British government. The resentment against foreign rule had further intensified in the wake of the Quit India and the severe repression by the colonial government. The trial of the INA soldiers who had fought against the British forces during the War resulted in another round of confrontation between the Indian people and the imperialist government. There were large-scale protests against the trials of INA prisoners. Around the same time, there occurred a revolt among the naval ratings against bad conditions of work and mistreatment by British officers. This RIN mutiny was supported by large sections of people, and naval ratings in many parts of India also went on strike in support of their colleagues. Besides these, there occurred many peasant and tribal uprisings on various issues. There was a general disenchantment with the colonial rule and it was quite apparent that its end was rather near. However, this period also witnessed serious communal divide with Muslim League posing as the sole representative of the Muslims in India. The election results in 1946 also confirmed the fact of communal political fracture. **Unit 22** will familiarise you with these developments.

As it was becoming clear that the British intended to leave India, the modalities of future government became a matter of concern for all political parties. The British government also desired to retain India in the Commonwealth after their rule ended. For this purpose, the Viceroy, Wavell, called the Simla Conference in 1945. However, the pulls from various political interests marred the Conference. Later, the Cabinet Mission proposals, suggesting loose federation, did not find acceptance with the Congress. Meanwhile, the Muslim League saw it as an opportunity to vociferously demand Pakistan. It went to extreme lengths in voicing its demand for the creation of Pakistan. The call of 'Direct Action' given by Jinnah on 16 August 1946 saw thousands of people dying subsequently in Calcutta, Noakhali and Bihar. Description of these developments you will find in **Unit 23**.

In **Unit 24**, you will find the politics centred around the last days of the British in India. Totally unconciliatory and disruptionist attitude of the Muslim League during the period of the Interim Government discounted the possibility of a long-term cooperation between Congress and League. The failure of the Cabinet Mission Plan led towards acceptance of the partition of the country which the last viceroy, Mountbatten, announced. To avoid the communal bloodshed, the Congress accepted this partition. However, the biggest tragedy was still to be played out in Punjab where millions were displaced, lakhs killed and a very large number of women faced kidnapping and violation and mutilation of their bodies. India became independent on 15 August 1947. However, the joy of freedom was mixed with the sense of loss, of partition of the country and of the untold brutalities wrought on human beings.

UNIT 20 PRELUDE TO QUIT INDIA*

Structure

- 20.1 Introduction
- 20.2 Political Situation in India 1930-39 – A Background
- 20.3 British Imperial Strategy in India
- 20.4 Resignation of Ministries
- 20.5 Individual Satyagraha
- 20.6 Cripps Mission
- 20.7 Summary
- 20.8 Exercises

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

* Resource Person: Dr. Srimanjari

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.



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 confrontationist 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.

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

Structure

- 22.1 Introduction
- 22.2 End of World War II
- 22.3 Elections in Britain and in India
- 22.4 Popular Upsurges
- 22.5 Struggles of Workers, Peasants and People of Princely States
- 22.6 Summary
- 22.7 Exercises

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?

UNIT 23 TOWARDS FREEDOM-I*

Structure

- 23.1 Introduction
- 23.2 Simla Conference, 1945
- 23.3 Elections of 1945-6
- 23.4 Election Results
- 23.5 British Decision to wind up their Rule
- 23.6 Unite and Quit
- 23.7 Interim Government
- 23.8 Pakistan Demand and its Consequences
- 23.9 Summary
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23.1 INTRODUCTION

This Unit traces the main political and constitutional developments following upon the termination of hostilities in 1945 to the end of 1946. Some of these milestones are the Simla Conference, the elections of 1945-46, the formation of popular provincial ministries, the ministerial level Cabinet Mission, the Interim Government, Direct Action by the Muslim League and Gandhiji in Noakhali and Bihar.

23.2 SIMLA CONFERENCE, 1945

The Viceroy, Lord Wavell, had been laying the ground for a political settlement which would be in place before the War ended. The end of the War was expected to bring with it a host of intractable problems, including pent up economic discontent and a standoff between the two principal parties, Congress and the Muslim League. He was of the view that a successful settlement of the Indian question would strengthen the future security of the Empire, ensure British prestige in the East, and even lead to India remaining within the Commonwealth. The specific steps of the settlement were to secure representation of the Congress and Muslim League on the Executive Council, to put in place elected coalition ministries in the provinces and elect representatives to the Constituent Assembly.

Soon after being released from prison in June 1945, important Congress leaders headed towards Simla, the summer capital of the Raj, to participate in the Conference convened by the Viceroy. Gandhiji took the line that he did not hold any official position in the Congress and that Maulana Azad, the Congress President, would be the Congress representative. However, he, Gandhi, would be present in Simla to advise the Viceroy during the Conference, should he so desire. The Simla Conference was held at the Viceregal Lodge, the summer residence of the Viceroy, in June-July 1945. The Muslim League was represented, among others, by its pre-eminent leader, Mahomed Ali Jinnah.

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The crucial point at issue at the Simla Conference was Jinnah's contention that the Muslim League was the sole spokesman for Muslims. Congress insisted on its right to represent Muslims, including nationalist Muslims, a venerable one being Maulana Azad, the President of the Congress. The British also found it difficult to ignore the claims of the Unionist Party of the Punjab, which represented Muslim landlords of West Punjab and Hindu smallholders of South East Punjab, and had contributed handsomely to the War effort in men and money. To underscore their point of not being a mere Hindu party, Congress included in its list of members for the Executive Council, representatives from non-Hindu communities. Jinnah insisted on his position as sole spokesman of Muslims being upheld and the Viceroy chose to ditch the Unionist allies of the British in favour of Jinnah and the League, whom they had helped during the War to make quick strides. Failure of the offer did not really put out the government: what was important was that the offer was shown to have been made.

The Simla Conference demonstrated, if a public avowal was still needed, given the government's overt espousal of the League during the War years, which the government considered its ally in the scenario that was to unfold in the post war period. However, the challenge posed by the Congress, indeed by the nationalist forces, continued to be formidable and the situation the government found itself in increasingly precarious with the rapidly eroding pillars of the state.

23.3 ELECTIONS OF 1945-6

The hopes for some political advance, dashed by the failure of the Simla Conference, once again revived with the coming to power of the Labour Party in Britain. An important initiative taken by the Labour Government was the declaration that elections to the central and provincial assemblies would be held in the winter of 1945 and spring of 1946.

The main parties in the contest were the Congress and the Muslim League. The elections were particularly important for the League in its quest for Pakistan. If it could gain a majority in the Muslim majority provinces, which could comprise the future Pakistan, this would strengthen its case for Pakistan. Its main weakness was organisational, but it was balanced by the active role played by the religious leaders, the *ulema*, *pirs* and *sajjada nashins*, especially in the Punjab. Some religious leaders gave *fatwas* in favour of the League while others portrayed the vote for Pakistan as a vote for the Koran. Another factor, which contributed to the success of the League in the elections in Punjab, was the local patronage network in which the landlords and *pirs* worked together.

The election campaign of the Congress, in contrast, was anti-British in its thrust. Congress slogans were "Release the misguided patriots" of the INA and "punish the guilty" officials who committed excesses in 1942. It was not anti-League in its tenor despite the elections being fought by the League on the issue of Pakistan. Given the primacy of the issue of Pakistan, it is surprising that the Congress leaders dismissed Pakistan as a slogan of imaginary fears. However, the Congress leaders increasingly conceded that if Muslims spoke out in favour of Pakistan, "it will not deny it to them".

For the League, the elections were extremely important, as they would give legitimacy to its claim to be the sole spokesman for the Muslims, who were, in

turn, decisively for Pakistan. The results in the Muslim seats did vindicate the stand of the League to represent Muslims, winning as they did all Muslim seats at the centre and gathering most of the Muslim vote. The same story appeared to be repeated in the provinces.

When it came to Muslim seats, Congress found it difficult to find Muslim candidates in the provincial elections. Many of those who contested appeared unlikely to win. This was a change from the optimism of Jawaharlal Nehru in November 1945 when he declared that Congress would put up candidates for every seat and that they would do well. In some provinces, Congress supported nationalist Muslim candidates, who often wanted the upper hand in the partnership, had big demands for funds and workers, and whose perspective was at times different from that of the Congress. While Congress preferred the straightforward Congress appeal in reaching out to the Muslim voter, nationalist Muslim organisations stressed cultural and religious rights. The worst blow was when those who promised an alliance with the Congress joined the Muslim League after being nominated or even after winning. This was the case with some candidates in Bengal and with the Ahrar Party in Punjab.

Congress leaders were divided on the issue of how to best contest Muslim seats. Maulana Azad felt there was an advantage in going along with nationalist Muslim organisations. Jawaharlal Nehru went along with Vallabhbhai Patel who felt the Congress should go it alone. In practice, the Congress joined Nationalist Muslim Boards and worked out sharing of seats with Ahrars, Jamiat-ul-Ulema and Momins, etc.

The case of Bihar showed that campaigning for Muslim seats involved large funds, amounting to three fourths of the total sum spent on the election campaign. As nationalist Muslim organisations generally took up the issue of religious rights of Muslims, they could hardly question the manner in which the Muslim League brought religion into politics. They could only pit *ulemas* inclined to their point of view against the *ulemas* and *pirs* fielded by the League. Nationalist Muslim propagandists ended up being no match for the sharper propaganda of the Leaguers. Early optimism on the part of the Congress leaders about winning many Muslim seats was replaced soon by the expectation that the League was likely to do well in the Muslim seats.

Some Congress leaders rued that they had not sharply targeted Pakistan as unworkable and injurious to the Indian Muslims. The Congress attempt to win over Muslims was ill timed, as Muslim voters saw the party as only interested in their votes, not in addressing their concerns. In Punjab, Congress leader Bhim Sen Sachar had predicted only two Muslim seats for the Congress. The election results returned the League as the single largest party in the Punjab.

Even after this disastrous showing in the Muslim seats, the Congress did not experience any profound realisation. It continued to interpret the political attitude of the Muslims in the old grooves. Congress leaders spoke of the need to improve the economic conditions of Muslims and ensure their representation in the Congress. It was as late as 6 October 1946, many months after the election results were known, that Jawaharlal Nehru accepted that the Muslim League was the authoritative representative organisation of an overwhelming majority of the Muslims of India. Here, too, a caveat was introduced, which the League was

unlikely to accept. This was that the League in turn should recognise the Congress as the authoritative representative organisation of the non-Muslims and such Muslims as have thrown in their lot with the Congress. The last clause negated the claim of the League to be the sole spokesman of the Muslims.

23.4 ELECTION RESULTS

In the elections to the central assembly in December 1945, out of 102 seats, Congress won 57, League 30, Independents 5, Akalis 2 and Europeans 8. In the elections to the provincial assemblies, Congress won 923 of 1585 seats, 23 of 38 labour seats but was defeated by the Muslim League in the Muslim seats. In NWFP, the League contested all 33 Muslim seats and won 15 of them. 19 Muslim seats were won by the Congress and 58.75 per cent of the Muslim vote went to the non-League parties. In Punjab, the League gained 73 seats, with its share of the Muslim vote being 65.10 per cent. The League gained 83.6 per cent of the Muslim vote in Bengal. It won 76 per cent of the total Muslim vote in India. This was a sharp rise from the 4.8 per cent vote in its tally in 1937. Elections of 1946 were a watershed. The results made it clear that the Congress represented the large masses of the country. It was equally clear, however, that the Muslim League spoke for most Muslims.

The Congress was to go on to form **governments in the provinces** of Madras, Bombay, United Provinces, Bihar, Orissa, Central Provinces and Berar and NWFP. The League formed ministries in Bengal and Sind. In Punjab, after the elections of 1946, some negotiations between Muslim League and Akalis were carried out with a possible coalition in mind. This had been unsuccessful and Akalis joined with Unionists and Congress to form a coalition ministry.

23.5 BRITISH DECISION TO WIND UP THEIR RULE

As we saw in the last Unit, the hegemony of the national movement over the Indian people was substantial by the time the war was over. Correspondingly, the influence of the colonial state was on the wane. The ideological instruments on which the state had relied to buttress its rule no longer served the purpose. The pillars of the colonial state, the army and bureaucracy, had been eroded. Diminishing numbers of British recruits had become a problem, which reached a head during wartime. By 1945 Indian recruits outnumbered British ones. Dealing with nationalist protest and long years of service without leave during the War had undermined the morale of the British officials. This erosion of colonial hegemony was apparent not only to colonial officials but also to the mass of people.

Bipan Chandra has described the strategy adopted by the Congress against the colonial state as struggle-truce-struggle. Colonial officials found this combination of phases of struggle alternating with phases of non-struggle extremely impossible to deal with. Policy moved between the two opposite poles of repression and conciliation. When non-violent movements were met with repression, the power behind the government stood exposed. Conversely, the government was seen to be too weak when it went in for a truce or appeared helpless in the face of open challenges. When the ship was seen as sinking, sections loyal to the government

deserted. Many who had stood by the government over the years no longer believed in its capacity to govern with prudence. They were shocked by the brutal repression of the 1942 movement and the callous attitude of the government to Gandhi's condition during his 21-day fast in detention in 1943. This led the services to wonder whether to take action against nationalist forces or not. Part of the difficulty was that the same set of officials had to carry out the opposite policies of repression and conciliation, often against the same political activist.

By the end of 1945 the government had reached a situation of responsibility without power. The prospect of a revolt by the Congress a few months down the line was considered formidable as Congress governments, by then likely to be in power in the provinces, would be on the side of the revolt. Here again it is significant to note that the assessment of the Viceroy was that "We could still probably suppress such a revolt" but "have nothing to put in its place and should be driven to an almost entirely official rule, for which the necessary numbers of efficient officials do not exist."

In late 1946, the British Prime Minister, Attlee, rejected the option of changing the nature of British rule to coercion and staying on in India, citing the following grounds: inadequate administrative machinery to implement a policy of rule by coercion; armed forces pledged elsewhere in line with international commitments; adverse opinion in the Labour Party; questionable loyalty of the Indian troops and the unwillingness of British troops to serve; adverse world opinion and an uncomfortable position in UNO. As colonial rule could not survive on the old basis for long, a graceful withdrawal from India became the overarching aim of policy makers. Of course, the details of the post-imperial relationship had to be negotiated and modalities of transfer of power worked out.

But we have gone too far ahead and need to retrace our steps to New Year Day 1946. It was in keeping with his government's understanding of imminent departure that the Secretary of State in his New Year's Day speech on 1 January 1946 made it clear that Britain would be leaving in the near future. On 19 February 1946 Prime Minister Attlee announced in Parliament that a three-member Cabinet Mission would go out to India to set up the constitutional machinery for transfer of power. The decision to send a mission was taken on 22 January 1946. The announcement about a statement to be made in Parliament on 19 February was made a week earlier. A time limit to British rule was proposed but not accepted by His Majesty's Government as was the plan for the British to withdraw in phases to the provinces which would make up Pakistan. The apprehension of the Viceroy was that the government might not be in a position to wield power after March 1948. Hence a time limit was proposed as a way of giving time to reorganise and manage with limited powers.

From the side of the Congress, too, negotiations were generally tried out before going in for a confrontation. When independence seemed to be on the cards, Congressmen were willing to wait to see the substance of the offers being made. As Gandhiji said, a great nation has declared its intention to quit, what would be lost by waiting? Congress kept up preparedness for a mass movement, however, in the eventuality that agreement was elusive.

23.6 UNITE AND QUIT

By early 1946 the British had moved to the position that when they left India it was better to leave it united. The old stance of propping up communal forces was given up once it was decided that British rule was no longer to be continued. Post imperial strategic interests, which envisaged India as a partner in Commonwealth defence, implied reworking of their relationship with Congress. Moreover, Pakistan was not seen as workable by the governors of the crucial provinces, Punjab, U.P., Sind and Assam. Hence a policy change was warranted by both long term and short term considerations. Whereas a pro-Muslim League stance had been adopted at the Simla Conference in 1945, Attlee stated in the House of Commons on 15 March 1946 that a minority would not be allowed to veto the progress of the majority.

However, the Viceroy and some of his officials continued to believe that Jinnah would deliver better than the Congress. The Secretary of State on the other hand believed that Congress could create more trouble than the League. So did the Home Member of the Government of India, whose assessment was that a challenge from the League could be met, whereas a Congress rebellion would be difficult to suppress. So unity was preferred, both from the point of view of getting out of the political impasse and from the long run strategic perspective. One must not forget, however, that there were voices in the government who spoke out for Pakistan being a natural ally. This included the powerful voice of the Viceroy, who trusted Jinnah more than the Congress, which he dubbed as totalitarian.

The **Cabinet Mission Plan** was spelt out in two statements dated May 16th and June 16th, 1946. Whereas the latter statement hinted at the partition of the subcontinent and was rejected out of hand by the Congress, it found great favour with the Muslim League. Both parties accepted the 16th May statement in a manner of speaking, albeit with varying interpretations.

The Mission Plan envisaged three sections: A: comprising Madras, Bombay, United Provinces, Bihar, Central Provinces and Berar and Orissa, B: consisting of Punjab, Sind and NWFP, and C: made up of Bengal and Assam. The centre would look after foreign affairs, defence and communications. Constitutions would be framed at the group and union level. Provinces could leave the group after the first general elections. A province or a group could ask for reconsideration of the group or union constitutions after ten years.

The difference of opinion between the League and the Congress was primarily over whether grouping was optional or compulsory. The Congress said it was assured by members of the Mission that provinces need not join if they did not wish to. It recommended this interpretation to Assam and NWFP, which did not want to be part of the League dominant Sections B and C. It challenged grouping and worked towards a strong centre, rather than a weak one. Patel discerned a shift from the earlier policy of the government of giving the League a veto and saw the Plan as a clear authoritative pronouncement against Pakistan. On the other hand, the League wanted to be able to question the constitution at the very start, rather than wait for ten years. The League accepted the Mission Plan to the extent Pakistan was implied in the compulsory grouping clause.

Clearly there was some doublespeak involved here on the part of the Mission. It said that sections were compulsory but grouping was optional. Members of the Mission, influenced by their personal predilections, gave contrary assurances to both parties, Congress and the League, in an attempt to bring them together despite their seemingly irreconcilable standpoints. The Viceroy thought he was trying to tease out the ambivalences but could not do so as he was partial to the League.

Nehru declared on 7 July 1946 that Congress reserved the right to give shape to the Constituent Assembly as it wished. This invited the League's charge of insincerity on the part of the Congress in working the plan. The League withdrew its acceptance of the plan on 29 July 1946 on the ground that Nehru's statement made Congress intentions not to play the game evident.

As British initiative and authority declined, a popular government appeared to be on the cards. Both the Viceroy and the Secretary of State agreed on the need for one, with the difference that the Viceroy did not want only a Congress government. He had feared this would happen given that the Congress held out the threat of launching a movement to pressurise the government to accept its demands. Admittedly, the possibility of this threat being put into practice had receded after the Cabinet Mission begun its deliberations. The British government feared a Congress government could adversely influence foreign policy in Indonesia, take up uncomfortable issues like that of the official excesses in 1942, retention of Gurkhas in the British Army etc. What is worth noting is that the government in London did not want a break with Congress and hence was willing to go far to accommodate the positions of the Congress on many of these issues.

23.7 INTERIM GOVERNMENT

So a pure Congress Interim Government was formed on 2 September 1946. Jawaharlal Nehru was sworn in as Vice-President of the Executive Council. This marked an important milestone in achieving independence and the inauguration was marked by festivities. The League, however, declared civil war and warned that Pakistan could no longer be prevented. No Muslim League members joined at this point, making the government inherently unstable, especially as the Viceroy was convinced that their presence was vital. He even put the blame for Direct Action on the Congress and the stances it took. He lost no opportunity to bring them in even though the League had withdrawn its acceptance of the Cabinet Mission Plan. In this he was supported by Attlee and his ministers who felt the danger from the Congress was now over. This was on 25 October 1946, within fifteen days of communal trouble breaking out in Noakhali. The League's capacity to foment communal violence had brought them into the government. The British were afraid that civil war would result if the League continued on the path of direct action.

The hope of the government was, of course, that the principal parties would adopt a stance of moderation once they became involved in running the administration. This did not ensue. The League did not forsake direct action. It did not send its best men to the Interim Government, except Liaquat Ali Khan, indicating its attitude that the real task lay outside. Ghazanfar Ali Khan, one of the five League ministers in the government, publicly declared that the Interim Government was merely another front of direct action for the League. This

prompted protest by Vallabhbhai Patel who demanded the speech be withdrawn before Khan took the oath of office. This had no effect on the Viceroy and Khan went on to invoke Mohammed bin Kassim and Mahmud of Ghazni and threaten that a few lakhs of Muslims will overwhelm crores of Hindus. A month later, another League minister declared at the New York Herald Forum that the struggle for Pakistan will now be carried on within as well as outside the government. Speeches were followed up by action in the Punjab, where League members of the Interim Government took part in the civil disobedience movement against the coalition ministry headed by Khizr Hayat Khan, the leader of the Unionists. Again Nehru protested to the Viceroy about this improper behaviour but to no avail. Elsewhere, to a colleague, he described “members of the Central Government being leaders of revolt in the provinces” as “fantastic”.

Non-cooperation was the policy adopted by the League in its functioning in the Interim Government. Attempts by the Congress to lessen the powers of the Viceroy by meeting informally before the Council meeting were stymied by the League. Decisions by the Congress ministers, especially regarding appointments, were questioned as partial. Liaqat Ali Khan’s budget was designed to upset the capitalist class, some of whom were supporters of the Congress. In later years Congress leaders were to describe the complete non-cooperation by the League in the running of the Interim Government as the factor that convinced them that there was little alternative to accepting the division of the country.

Gandhi’s stand was different. He had told the British government from the beginning that there cannot be a coalition government between two incompatibles. They had to choose one of them. About the Constituent Assembly, he believed Congress should go ahead and form a Constituent Assembly when they had the strength to do so and frame a constitution for the areas it represented. An assembly under British auspices was a non-starter.

What Congress finally found impossible to accept was the League’s refusal to join the Constituent Assembly. This amounted to rejection of the long-term aspect of the Cabinet Mission Plan. Elections to the Assembly had been held and the Congress had sent its representatives, while keeping the door open for the League. This was despite His Majesty’s Government clarification on the grouping clause (in the 6th December 1946 statement) upholding the League’s interpretation and the Congress accepting this. The League later demanded dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, indeed, scrapping of the entire Cabinet Mission plan, at the Karachi session of its Working Committee on 31 January 1947. But such was British propping up of the League that it continued to be in the Interim Government till 19 July 1947.

23.8 PAKISTAN DEMAND AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

The demand for Pakistan, raised in Lahore in March 1940, acquired stridency by the summer of 1946. At the convention of Muslim League legislators at Delhi from 7 to 9 April 1946 it was clarified that Pakistan would be one nation though geographically spread across two regions. Unity of India was to be opposed by the sword if need be. Interestingly, Firoz Khan Noon threatened that if British impose unity, Muslims will be forced to wreak devastation worse than the deeds of Halaku Khan did. Jinnah made an appeal to Prime Minister, Attlee, to “avoid

compelling the Muslims to shed their blood” (6 July 1946). The League went one step further and withdrew its acceptance of the 16 May 1946 statement. Direct Action was declared to achieve Pakistan and to end domination by the British in the present and Caste Hindus in the future. Jinnah declared, “Today we have said goodbye to constitutions and constitutional methods.” And he ended with “We also have a pistol”.

The Council of the Muslim League had removed doubts, if there were any, about the sovereignty and integrity of the contemplated nation. (In later years, some scholars were to argue that Jinnah did not contemplate Pakistan as one nation or a sovereign one, it was only a bargaining counter.) The two parts in the north-west and east would comprise one nation, Pakistan, which would be a sovereign nation. Around this time Jinnah gave up constitutional methods and adopted the technique of Direct Action to reach his goal. This was based on his understanding of the clout of the Congress over the British and that the British government generally listened to troublemakers. It is worth noting that neither the British nor the Congress took Jinnah’s threat of bloodshed and rioting very seriously. Nehru misjudged the League’s ability to take to Direct Action, in his belief that reactionary landlords opposed to social change could hardly be expected to make revolution. Nehru challenged Jinnah to go in for civil disobedience, mockingly concluding: “I would like to see a revolution in India called by Mr. Jinnah. It is one thing to call for a revolution and another to carry out a revolution.” This was underlined by Jayakar who reported Patel’s conversation with some members of the Cabinet Mission in which he said that “the Congress could create more trouble than Jinnah’s 100 mullahs”.

16 August 1946 was declared as Direct Action Day. Trouble first broke out in Calcutta where a Muslim League government, headed by H. S. Suhrawardy, abetted the rioters. The slogans in Calcutta were *Larke lenge Pakistan*, *Lekar rahenge Pakistan*. Early Muslim initiative was met by Hindu retaliation and in the end 5000 people were killed. While Gandhi saw the Calcutta violence as bordering on civil war, Vallabhbai Patel spoke of the “black and inexcusable crimes” which went beyond riots. Jawaharlal Nehru compared the League’s government in Bengal with that of Hitler. Patel added that such a government would not exist for a day in a civilized country. Latter day scholars like Ayesha Jalal shifted responsibility for the violence in Calcutta on to the *mullahs* and *pirs* who were brought in to make Direct Action effective.

The effect of the happenings in Calcutta on the Viceroy was predictably to buttress his view that the Muslim League must immediately be brought into the Interim Government. Nehru in turn characterised this as “shaking hands with murder” and said they would have nothing to do with it. Far from revoking Direct Action after the tragedy in Calcutta, some League leaders went on to speak of “Jihad to achieve freedom for Islam in India”. Jinnah himself warned that the impending installation of a Congress Interim Government would result in unprecedented and disastrous consequences.

The communal trouble in Noakhali and Tippera in East Bengal began on 10 October 1946. Apart from killings, which had been witnessed in Calcutta, abduction of women and forced marriages and conversion by force were distinctive features. The topography of the region made communication difficult and assisted the troublemakers while making the task of the officials out to contain

the violence difficult. In any case, the government showed little interest in controlling the situation. The Governor mistrusted the Premier, Suhrawardy and top civilian and army officials admitted to inaction and communal bias. The Secretary of State contributed to condoning the government by charging the Hindus with exaggerating what had happened.

This was a cruel reality for the Congress leaders in the Interim Government to accept; that they were powerless to stop the reign of terror that prevailed in East Bengal. Nehru was so upset by this situation of responsibility without power that he contemplated retirement. It was precisely this sense of helplessness and the situation of an impasse that the League intended to create. Fortunately for the Congress, there was Gandhiji.

Gandhiji went to Noakhali on 6 November 1946, after having sent the Congress President, Kripalani and his wife Sucheta, ahead to report on the situation. Gandhi's way was different from his colleagues in the Interim Government. His first priority was to bring the Hindus and Muslims together, inspire confidence among Hindus and get the Muslims to repent for their deeds. At a wider level, he wanted his experiment with building non-violent communal unity to be such that it could be made to work across the country. His understanding was that *ahimsa*, which had worked well against the British, had not worked satisfactorily in Hindu-Muslim relations and needed to be refurbished. Predictably, he saw this as his personal failure and vowed to subject himself to purification to root out the imperfection.

During his stay in Noakhali he held prayer meetings and visited Hindus and Muslims in their homes. He exhorted Hindus to return home. For him, living in clusters with other Hindus was a worse fate than death as it implied accepting the two-nation theory. Similarly he opposed the demand that Hindu officials be posted in Hindu dominated areas, pointing out this was showed a communal mentality. Both these stances have enormous importance for us today when dealing with communal violence today in India. After the initial period of surveying the area and assessing the problem, Gandhiji settled in a village and gave up all conveniences, including the company of his associates. The intention was to remove the flaw in society by searching for the imperfection in himself. This flowed from his belief, "as in the microcosm, so in the macrocosm". While his efforts to get Muslims to repent and Hindus to return to their homes and practise their faith met with some response, Noakhali was so strife torn and polarised that even Gandhiji had to accept that his mission was only a partial success. Hostility from Muslims continued, Hindus could not pick up confidence to return to their homes and colleagues in the Congress party were keen to have him back in Delhi and guide the negotiations at a crucial period in the country's history. The Governor of Bengal said somewhat dramatically, "It would take a dozen Gandhis to make the Muslim leopard and Hindu kid lie down together again in that part of the world."

Noakhali was followed soon by communal trouble in Bihar, especially Patna, Gaya and Monghyr districts. Here Hindus attacked Muslims and around 5000 lost their lives. The Viceroy accepted the League figure of 10 to 20,000 dead and described the Bihar riots as the worst ever during British rule, surely an exaggeration. The League encouraged Muslims to migrate to Bengal in large numbers. Nehru led from the front in suppressing the rioters, even threatening

use of machine guns and bombs. In some instances, those Hindus who defended the actions of the Bihar peasants as righting the wrongs of Calcutta and Noakhali, interpreted Gandhi's actions as anti-Hindu.

Gandhiji could only go to Bihar on 2 March 1947, though he had been disturbed by what had happened since the day he heard about it when *en route* to Noakhali in November 1946. He was in favour of an enquiry into what happened even though some of his colleagues opposed it as it may discredit the Congress ministry at the helm. In Bihar, he saw his task as getting the Hindu peasants to repent for their deeds and create an environment conducive for Muslim victims to return to their homes. Never one to hesitate to harness the positive aspects of faith, he referred to the doings as *paap* (sin) and sought to invoke *pashchaataap* (repentance) for them.

However horrific the violence in Calcutta, Noakhali and Bihar, it paled in comparison with the happenings in Punjab, beginning with Rawalpindi and engulfing the province thereafter. Tragically, the country was now thrown into the vortex of civil war, a qualitatively new phase and type of violence. This will be taken up in the next Unit.

23.9 SUMMARY

Various factors – exhaustion in the War, unavailability of suitable British persons to serve in army and administration in India, and the growing protests in India against the colonial rule convinced the British government that it would not be possible to hold India for long. However, they wanted to retain connections with India by keeping it within the Commonwealth. Initially, they wanted to keep India unified. The Congress also sincerely wanted a unified country. But the violence unleashed by the Muslim League in its demand for Pakistan made it difficult for the Congress to force the unity solution. A series of communal riots in Bengal and Bihar and growing communalisation made the situation in 1946 extremely volatile.

23.10 EXERCISES

- 1) Write a short note on the Simla Conference.
- 2) What were the results of elections in 1945-46? What did they prove?
- 3) Discuss the political situation in the country in the wake of the 'Direct Action' call given by Jinnah and the Muslim League.

UNIT 24 TOWARDS FREEDOM-II*

Structure

- 24.1 Introduction
- 24.2 Terminal Date for Withdrawal from India
- 24.3 The Move towards Partition
- 24.4 Why Did Congress Accept Partition?
- 24.5 Summary
- 24.6 Exercises

24.1 INTRODUCTION

This Unit covers the period from the appointment of the new Viceroy to the achievement of independence. A time limit for British withdrawal was announced to bring urgency to the picture. The Cabinet Mission Plan cannot be retrieved despite talks in London in December 1946. Mountbatten comes out as the last Viceroy and soon moves to announcing partition of the country. The date for withdrawal is advanced to 15 August 1947. Congress moves to accepting partition while continuing to reject the two nation theory. Gandhiji too accepts partition, while calling for people not to accept it in their hearts.

24.2 TERMINAL DATE FOR WITHDRAWAL FROM INDIA

An important aspect of the British Government's decision to withdraw from India was the way it was presented. It was to come across as a step forward in the planned devolution of power, not as forced dissolution of imperial power. Accordingly, the 2nd January 1947 draft of the statement to be made by His Majesty's Government spoke of "the final stage in their achievement of self government", which "for the past thirty years...has been the policy of successive British governments."

At the heart of the new policy initiative was the appointment of a new Viceroy. It was announced that **Mountbatten was the last Viceroy**, and that the British would leave India by June 1948. In interviews for Lapierre and Collins' *Freedom at Midnight*, many decades after his term in India, Mountbatten asserted ownership of the idea of the time limit. However, this was incorrect. Wavell, the penultimate Viceroy, Prime Minister Attlee and members of the Cabinet were already in favour of a specific date for withdrawal, though for different reasons. Mountbatten insisted on its announcement, to convince the Indian public that the government meant business.

In December 1946, talks were convened by Prime Minister Attlee with Indian leaders to reconcile their opposed interpretations of the Cabinet Mission plan. Congress saw the plan as an alternative to partition and accepted compulsory

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grouping of provinces. This was partly because NWFP and Assam, despite having Congress governments, were placed in the sections which would make up Pakistan. In contrast, the Muslim League was all for grouping of provinces and accepted the Mission scheme in as much as compulsory grouping implied Pakistan. However, the London talks failed to bring agreement. The impasse remained despite Congress accepting His Majesty's Government's pro-League interpretation of the Mission scheme in the 6 December 1946 statement.

The Interim Government was intended to bring about agreement between the Congress and the League by virtue of jointly running the administration. Rather, it became a forum where the League waged civil war by other means. Nehru described the attitude of the League in the Interim Government as 'Non-cooperation from within'. The League opened battle on every front possible to somehow achieve Pakistan. The League members questioned appointments made by Congress ministers as well as most policy decisions. Congress members in the Interim Government found the functioning of the government to be severely compromised. Patel demanded that Leaguers should resign from the government given their intemperate speech.

This went on till 5 February 1947 when Congress members demanded resignation of League members. Though disruptionist tactics of the League members was the main ground for this demand, it was also pointed out that the Muslim League had refused to join the Constituent Assembly which had convened on 9 December 1946. This implied an ambiguous acceptance of the Mission Plan on its part. This in turn meant framing of the constitution was obstructed. The League only accepted the short term aspects of the Plan, namely the formation of an Interim Government, through which it hoped to reach its goal of Pakistan. When the Muslim League Working Committee met at Karachi on 31st January 1947, it asked for the dissolution of the Mission Plan. This was despite the 6 December 1946 statement by the Government accepting the interpretation of the League on grouping and asked Congress to assure that there would be a set procedure for the Constituent Assembly.

The statement issued on 6th December 1946 tried to resolve the conflict over grouping by putting forth the interpretation that the provinces had to necessarily group themselves into three sections and could only opt out afterwards. The government hoped to convince the Muslim League to join the Constituent Assembly. The Congress was divided on accepting the statement. Jawaharlal Nehru in a speech at the AICC meeting on 5th January 1947 proposed a resolution that the statement be accepted. The Congress Socialists and the Hindu Mahasabha opposed the statement. Sarat Chandra Bose feared that acceptance of the statement would mean surrender of rights of the Constituent Assembly and end of provincial autonomy. Congress eventually accepted the statement but urged the need to draft the constitution with agreement and without compulsion.

The ambiguity of the Mission was evident. The Congress perspective was one of regions inhabited by interwoven communities, which ruled out rigid territorial boundaries. However this position was not accepted by the British or by the League. The grouping scheme created problems for Assam in the North-East and Punjab in the North-West. The Congress leader, Bardoloi, feared that if Assam went into the Constituent Assembly dominated by Bengal, the Constitution would be written by Bengal, and Assam would not be able to break out because of

Bengal's numerical majority. Md. Tayabullah of the Assam State Congress feared that grouping would weaken the Congress.

Jawaharlal Nehru made it clear that grouping would not be imposed upon provinces. He was afraid that the Sikhs in the Punjab would get a bad deal in the constitution-making process. The Pratinidhi Panthic Board passed a resolution on 11th January 1947 urging the Congress to support the Sikh demand for communal veto on constitution making. The Muslim League termed the Statement as 'a jugglery of words' in a resolution passed at its meeting in Karachi on 31st January 1947. It withdrew its acceptance of the Cabinet Mission Plan. With this, the Congress members of the Interim Government demanded the resignation of Muslim League members, but this did not happen.

Gandhiji tried to break the impasse with a new proposal to Mountbatten. He gave Jinnah the option of forming the government and offered Congress support. This plan met with protest and support. Eventually, Gandhiji withdrew the plan, declaring to Mountbatten his inability to carry the Congress along. Congress feared its followers would see this as Congress forsaking responsibility and worse, in favour of a person who had not given up the politics of violence and hatred.

For the Congress leaders the experience of office in the Interim Government worsened over time, given the obstructionist attitude of the League. Congress leaders felt it best to control some part of the country rather than have their writ run thinly over the whole country. Non Cooperation by the League in the Interim Government took the country closer to Partition. Nehru's appeal to Liaquat Ali Khan, the League leader, to meet and discuss differences as the British were fading out of the picture, got no response.

On the one hand, the government's statement was a response to the decline of authority of the colonial state and its instruments; on the other, it was a notice to the League that agreement had to be worked out by the given time limit. The government wanted to convey the message that it was no longer willing to give the League a veto on the political process. The statement was not clear about to whom power was to be transferred. Would India be united or divided? A clause in the statement said that if there was no agreement at the Centre, power would be handed over to whoever was in power in the provinces. The League went ahead to bid for power in the Punjab and overthrew the coalition government. This set Punjab on the path to civil war. Congress was convinced of the intention of the British to quit. Gandhiji said that the Congress provinces, if wise, will get what they want.

The direct action in Punjab brought about the downfall of the coalition ministry. The trouble in the Punjab began on 24th January 1947, when the ministry prohibited the volunteer bodies of the Muslim League and the RSS. The League called for a mass 'civil disobedience movement'. League leaders courted arrest in protest against the attack on the Muslim National Guards. They saw this as an attack upon the party. The government decided to withdraw its order four days later. The coalition ministry in Punjab, with Khizar Hayat Khan Tiwana of the Unionist Party as its premier, resigned on March 3rd 1947. Negotiations were carried on to get the Muslim League to form the government amidst opposition from sections of Sikhs and Hindus. The demand for partition of the province by the Hindu and Sikh minorities picked up in the context of the League's extra-constitutional assault on a duly elected ministry.

The Congress Working Committee accordingly passed a resolution on 8 March pointing out that the provinces of Punjab and Bengal would be partitioned if the country was partitioned. If Muslims could not be coerced, non-Muslims could not be coerced too. By March 1947, and after the Rawalpindi riots, it became obvious that the Sikhs preferred partition of the province to domination by Muslims. By the beginning of April, Central Legislative Assembly members conveyed to Nehru their opinion that there was no alternative to partition.

The demand for partition of Bengal went back to the riots in Calcutta and Noakhali in 1946 when Hindus grew to distrust the Chief Minister. The communal disturbances in Bengal since 1946 centred on Calcutta, Noakhali and Tippera. There were killings and looting in cities like Calcutta, Rajshahi and Dacca. Violence was especially directed against women. On 5th March 1947 the Legislative Assembly called for action against the rioters. There was talk of dividing the province into Hindu and Muslim majority areas. This was more so among the minorities distrustful of the government. Gurkha policemen were attacked by Muslims, and Hindus targeted Punjabi Muslim policemen believed to have been brought in by the Chief Minister to Calcutta.

The Viceroy thought that the partition of provinces would reveal the limits of Pakistan and tried to convince Jinnah to this effect. Jinnah, on the other hand, saw the demand for partition of provinces as a bluff by Congress. Jinnah argued against the partition of these provinces on the ground of the cultural unity of Bengalis and Punjabis. Mountbatten turned the argument on Jinnah, saying that Jinnah's arguments about Bengali and Punjabi culture applied even more to the whole of India. He promised to revise his ideas about the partition of India. In the words of the Viceroy, Jinnah demanded his Pakistan be made viable and threatened to demand the partition of Assam. If Punjab and Bengal did not join the Constituent Assembly, while some parts of these provinces did, partition of Punjab and Bengal would ensue. This is how Nehru explained the decision of the Congress to demand the partition of the two provinces to Gandhiji. The division of provinces was the only answer to the Pakistan as demanded by Jinnah. Nehru made the comment that obviously the two nation theory was not meant to be applied in Punjab and Bengal.

Then came up the campaign for united Bengal, begun by Suhrawardy, the League premier of Bengal, and supported by the Viceroy. Gandhiji was against partition on any account. He was hence optimistic about the United Bengal scheme as it would question the two-nation theory. But on 9 June 1947 All India Muslim League Council accepted the 3rd June plan, which included partition of Bengal. It clarified that it was not in favour of the partition of the province but accepted it as part of the plan as a whole.

24.3 THE MOVE TOWARDS PARTITION

For the first two months after coming to India, Mountbatten tried to build agreement between the political parties. Very soon he realised that the Mission Plan was over. He found Jinnah stubborn about getting Pakistan and impossible to argue with. The alternatives before Mountbatten were few and he soon came around to the view that Partition was to be implemented.

The 3rd June Plan or the Partition Award advanced the date for withdrawal to 15 August. Boundary Awards were to be announced on or after 15 August 1947. When the date of 15 August 1947 was announced, there were only 72 days to quit and divide. This was to prove totally inadequate given all that had to be done. Even the exercise of drawing the boundary was both botched and rushed, with the Chairman, Cyril Radcliffe, drawing criticism across the board. Delaying announcement of the Boundary Commission awards to a period after the date of independence compounded the chaos and mayhem as many a village and town did not know which side of the border it was on. People found themselves on the wrong side of the border on 15 August 1947 and flags of both India and Pakistan were flown in areas claimed by communities pitted against each other.

To go back to early June 1947, Mountbatten's intention in advancing the date for transfer of power was to get Congress to agree to dominion status. Secondly, it was to let the British government escape responsibility for the worsening communal situation. The concern of the government was how best to come out of the crisis in the eyes of world public opinion. They did not care what happened to Indians. His Majesty's Government desired a gracious, smooth withdrawal from the colony and setting up relationships with both dominions, India and Pakistan. It could be said that **partition was not only the closing scene of Divide and Rule; it was also the first act of Commonwealth diplomacy**. His Majesty's Government wanted to demonstrate that their policies were characterised by impartiality and fair play. Also, since there was no agreement on a solution, an award was dressed up as an agreed solution. A point worth noting is that the 3rd June Plan was an award, whatever its projection by the British as a plan agreed to by Congress and League.

The British professed that they tried their best to keep India united. In fact, they took the easy way out by trying to please everyone, as Gandhiji pointed out to Mountbatten: "I suggest that the attempt to please all parties is a fruitless and thankless task. In the course of our conversation I suggested that equal praise bestowed on both the parties was not meant. No praise would have been the right thing." The British government did not really make a bid for unity. That would have involved supporting the forces for unity and opposing those against it. This they were not willing to do. They merely dressed up division as the maximum unity possible. As the British did not accept the main proposition of the Congress, namely unity, they limited Pakistan and met other demands of the Congress. For example, its stance on not permitting the princes to be independent, on Hyderabad or on Andaman and Nicobar Islands was accepted.

In mid April 1947, it was decided that provinces would only be allowed to join India or Pakistan, and that they would not be allowed to be independent. His Majesty's Government wanted the option of independence to be kept open, as it was keen that the mode of transfer of power was seen to flow from Indian, rather than British will. The Viceroy on his part was clear that partition must be limited to two successor states, and not lead to Balkanisation.

When shown the proposals in a draft form in May 1947, Nehru reacted in alarm, pointing out that they 'threw overboard the Cabinet plan...invited balkanisation, would provoke civil conflict and demoralise the police and central services'. Large Muslim majority areas would be free to opt out of the Union, something which the Congress had been against. He also expressed doubts over states

entering into treaties with the British if they so favoured, as this could jeopardize the territorial integrity of India. On the other hand, Jinnah stuck to his vision of Pakistan. The chances of a settlement did not appear bright.

Mountbatten proposed that he be the Governor-General of both India and Pakistan to ensure a common link between the two dominions. He was confident that Jinnah would welcome Mountbatten's presence, but Jinnah decided to be Governor-General himself, partly to show his independence from the British. Joint defence machinery was set up to act as a link between the dominions. But the Kashmir conflict in October 1947 ended any future prospects of joint defence.

24.4 WHY DID CONGRESS ACCEPT PARTITION?

Why Congress and Gandhiji accepted Partition is a question which continues to be asked today. Partition is seen as the result of the British policy of divide and rule or the supposedly age-old rift between Hindus and Muslims, depending on the ideological stance of the writer. Some left-wing writers have described independence as a deal between the imperial and Indian bourgeoisie, for which the nation paid the price of partition. Or else, that Congress leaders chose to have a strong centre rather than share power with the League. Or that partition took place because of the Congress leaders' lust for power, leaving the people betrayed and Gandhiji no longer wishing to live for 125 years. Why did Congress and Gandhiji accept partition despite their opposition to the two nation theory and the politics of Jinnah and the Muslim League?

Gandhiji's position was different from Congress but not opposed to it. He proposed to the Viceroy that Jinnah be Prime Minister. Gandhiji's hope was that this would satisfy Jinnah's ambition and help him give up his demand for Pakistan. Gandhi was right in thinking that this appealed to Jinnah's vanity. But by this time Pakistan was bigger than Jinnah. Even Jinnah could not withdraw the demand for Pakistan, had he so wished. Moreover, the Congress leaders felt the proposal was too risky. Handing over control to Jinnah would mean leaving the field open to reactionary forces. Also, many followers of the Congress would see it as betrayal by the party. Accordingly Gandhiji withdrew his offer.

In mid-April 1947, Gandhiji and Jinnah jointly appealed for peace. However, Patel pointed out that Jinnah must withdraw Direct Action for the peace appeal to be effective. Patel's suggestion was that Jinnah was not sincere in his appeal. This assessment was shared by Gandhiji. By the summer of 1947 Congress leaders had realised that it was impossible to conciliate communalism. Nehru described Jinnah as always wanting more. Elsewhere he said of Jinnah, "We are up against something which is neither political, nor economic, nor reasonable, nor logical." Patel was clear that there would be no more appeasement of the Muslim League. He also pointed out that independent India would not have communal weightages or communal electorates.

An alternative to partition was imposing unity by force. P.D. Tandon, Congress leader and Speaker of the UP Assembly and Ram Ratan Gupta, Congressman from Kanpur, propounded this view. Both condemned the "betrayal" by the Congress in accepting partition. But Congress leaders chose to accept Pakistan rather than compel unity. Nehru was clear that use of the sword and the *lathi* (long staff) could not stem the communal forces. It would lead to civil war,

which would have long-term consequences. He stressed this at the All India Congress Committee session on 15 June 1947. A couple of months earlier, Congress President, Kripalani, had told the Viceroy that “Rather than have a battle we shall let them have their Pakistan.” It must be noted that Congress did not have state power at this point in time. Hence imposing unity would have meant fighting it out on the streets against volunteer armies of the communal parties. Hence when partition seemed inevitable, Congress tried to present it as based on the principle of self-determination, rather than as a communal demand. Gandhiji stated that the decision had been arrived at after taking into account the views of the people of all communities, be they Muslims, Sikhs or Hindus. Nehru explained partition as the outcome of the will of some sections to separate from India.

At the Congress Working Committee meeting on 1 June 1947, Congress President, Kripalani reminded the gathering that since 1942 it had been accepted that no part of India would be forced to stay on in India against its will. On 15 June 1947, at the All India Congress Committee session, he again said that acceptance of partition flowed from the clause of no coercion in the Congress resolution on the Cripps Plan. The fact that the settlement was final was crucial for Congress leaders in accepting Partition. Patel accepted the partition award on the ground that there was no further uncertainty. However, he was apprehensive at Jinnah’s communal standpoint in his broadcast over All India Radio and the doublespeak in All India Muslim League’s response, which made settlement unlikely.

The hope of India and Pakistan being reunited after some years reconciled leaders to the reality of division. It was hoped that once passions died down, common interests would bring people together and partition could be revoked. Hence Nehru appealed to people not to accept Partition in their hearts: “We have often to go through the valley of the shadow before we reach the sunlit mountain tops.” However, if the two countries were to be reunited, any measure that cemented Partition was to be avoided. This could be dividing the army, transfer of population or parliamentary sanction for transfer of power to two dominions. The AICC resolution on the 3rd June Plan made it clear that partition was accepted as a temporary measure that would bring violence to an end. This was again repeated in Gandhiji and Nehru’s speeches at the AICC meeting on 14-15 June. It is interesting that Gandhiji, who swore by non-violence, would rather “Let [the] British leave India to anarchy, rather than as a cock pit between two organized armies.”

One positive aspect of Partition for Congress was that they would get a free hand in the rest of the country. Nehru spoke of 80 or 90 % of India moving forward according to the map of India he had in mind. Patel spelt out further what this freedom could be used for — to consolidate the armed forces and have a strong central government. Jayaprakash Narayan, the socialist leader, appreciated the “emergence of a strong Union Centre” that would follow Partition. However, Congress leaders continued to be apprehensive. Nehru felt that the plan could lead to fragmentation. This was because a large number of successor states would be allowed to emerge first and then given the option to unite. The British government wanted to show that provinces and princely states were free to choose their future. But the Viceroy limited fragmentation to partition into two dominions.

Congress accepted partition on the grounds that it reflected the will of the people and that it was the only way out. On 4th June, Gandhiji explained to the audience

at his daily prayer meeting that the Congress Working Committee had agreed to the vivisection of Hindustan as there was no way of getting round the Muslim League. It was not done under threat of violence. They hoped that Partition was temporary and could be undone once the imperialists were out of the picture and Muslim League realised its mistake in demanding Pakistan. Only options left before the Congress were waging an anti-communal struggle and using force, both of which could not be taken up. In the end, Partition was accepted by Congress as the failure of its strategy to draw in the Muslim masses into the national movement.

Gandhiji's reading of the communal situation was that both Hindus and Muslims had moved far away from non-violence. During his prayer meetings, he was asked why he did not start a mass movement. Those who asked him to give the call believed that a movement could either be against the British, whose fallout would be Hindu-Muslim unity or it could be an anti-communal movement. They believed that both movements would bring about unity. However, the potential of anti-communal struggle was limited as both the party cadres and the ordinary people had become communalised. Gandhiji was aware of his limitations: 'I have never created a situation in my life... People say that I had created a situation, but I had done nothing except giving a shape to what was already there. Today I see no sign of such a healthy feeling. And therefore I shall have to wait until the time comes.'

It has often been said that Gandhiji was ignored by his colleagues in the talks with the British ministers over transfer of power. Some argue that Gandhiji was helpless because of his disciples' alleged lust for power. It is sometimes said that Gandhiji was alienated from the Congress. However, Gandhi was not neglected by his colleagues, as often argued. His opinion on significant policy matters was sought even when he was in Noakhali by the Congress President, Kripalani and Nehru. They went there to meet him and persuade him to come to Delhi. Nehru appealed to Gandhiji when the latter was in Noakhali: "But I have an overwhelming feeling that vital decisions are being made and will be made in Delhi affecting the whole of our future as well as of course the present, and your presence at such a moment is necessary." Gandhiji acceded to his request subsequently but explained his position: "But I proceed the other way. I had learnt when still a child the formula, "As in the microcosm, so in the macrocosm." He hoped that if ahimsa could be shown to work in one small place, it could provide the answer to the problem of Hindu-Muslim unity in the entire country. In Delhi he met the Viceroy and participated in the Congress Working Committee meetings of 1 May, 25 May, 2 June and in the AICC meeting of 14 & 15 June 1947.

However, before the Congress leaders and Gandhiji came to accept partition, Gandhiji put in all he could to stop the communal violence. He toured the riot affected areas of Noakhali and Bihar from October 1946 to April 1947, applying balm to the victims of both Hindu and Muslim communal violence. The weapons he used were those of non-violence and 'satyagraha'. He wanted to dispel the fear and distrust between the communities. Complaints of Hindus in Noakhali and Muslims in Bihar were alike. Communal attitudes even permeated relief and rehabilitation work, as refugee camps in Bihar became centres of League propaganda. What was remarkable was the courage of those Hindus or Muslims who stood by Gandhi.

While Gandhiji's efforts were heroic, their impact was limited. Hindu refugees were slow to cast off fear and return to their villages. Muslims were hostile to him in Noakhali and elsewhere. Critics and colleagues alike were critical of his methods. Hindu and Muslim communal organisations expanded their influence in the atmosphere of communal distrust. If we look at the challenge posed by Hindu communal forces, we find that it took two forms, majority assertion and minority fears. Assurances could not take care of the insecurity of minorities. Hindu communal elements pressurised the Congress to place the interests of Hindus first and function as a Hindu body. After the creation of Pakistan on the basis of the two nation theory, the demand for a Hindu state became more strident. The demand then was for Congress to accept it was a Hindu, not a national body. Interestingly this was the same as the position of the government that the Congress should accept that it was a caste Hindu body. Congress leaders had refused to do so, recognising this was an issue of legitimacy, of its national character, not one of pragmatism as made out by those who argued for this. Even when it accepted the creation of Pakistan as unavoidable in the given circumstances, the Congress did not accept the two nation theory, the communal principle on which Pakistan was demanded.

India became independent on 15th August 1947. Nehru made his 'tryst with destiny' speech at the midnight session of the Constituent Assembly on the night of 14th August 1947. The session began with the singing of *Vande Mataram* and the President's address. The next morning messages of congratulations were received from countries across the world. Gandhiji spent the day in Calcutta, praying, fasting and spinning. Political prisoners were released to mark the coming of freedom. Public ceremonies were held in all major cities to mark the day. Most celebrations on this day took note of the harsh reality of partition. 15 August 1947, then, was an occasion for both mourning and celebration. It marked independence and partition, which in turn reflected the success and failure of the anti-colonial movement—success in wresting independence, and failure in not being able to bring the majority of Muslims into the national movement.

24.5 SUMMARY

The period 1945-47 was one of the most volatile in Indian history. Anti-colonial popular upsurges, huge demonstrations against colonial rule, elections which starkly revealed a communal division in the country, decision by the British to leave India, large-scale communal riots in Bengal and Bihar, acceptance of partition by all major parties, followed by even bigger riots in Punjab, and finally the attainment of independence were all witnessed in such a short time-span. The dawn of freedom elicited contrary reactions – triumph and anguish and the creation of new identities and the questioning of old ties. In this Unit, we have tried to convey a sense of the period which was extremely decisive in the long history of our country.

24.6 EXERCISES

- 1) Why did the Congress accept the partition of India?
- 2) What did Gandhi do to pacify the sentiments during the riots of 1946? How far he was successful?
- 3) Discuss the role of the Muslim League during this period.

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