

Quit India Movement

From the beginning of the year 1939 the war clouds had started gathering on the horizon. And from the end of April in 1939 onwards, Mahatma Gandhi had started thinking of the next mass Satyagraha. He was deeply reflecting on its form and agenda. As the world drew closer to the Second World War, India found herself on the crossroads.

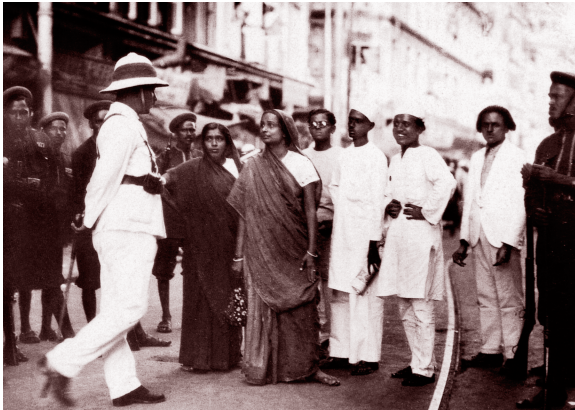


Suddenly, there was a new urgency and passion in Gandhi's speeches and writings. While writing about the "Quit India" programme in the 'Harijan' he answers some of the questions raised by journalists. Many of his readers asked him, "Are you not inviting the Japanese to attack India by asking the British rulers to withdraw?"

Gandhi replied in the Harijan on May 3: "I am not. I feel convinced that the British presence is the incentive for the Japanese attack. If the British wisely decided to withdraw and leave India to manage her own affairs in the best way she could, the Japanese would be bound to reconsider their plans. The very novelty of the British stroke will confound the Japanese, dissolve the subdued hatred against the British, and the atmosphere will be set

up for the ending of an unnatural state of things that has dominated and choked Indian life."

"When even the 'enemy' is in dire distress, should he not be given some quarter?" asked an Englishman. "In asking us to withdraw, are you not inviting your own people to bend the knee to Japan, knowing full well that you have not the non-violent strength as a country to resist any foreign aggression or domination?" Gandhi replied.



One of the questions often asked is how Gandhi, the advocate of non-embarrassment of the opponent, sponsored a movement, which involved at least some embarrassment.

Gandhi said: "I am not only speaking for the Congress but for all who stand for national freedom, unadulterated independence. I should tell all of them that if I said now: "No embarrassment to the British..."; therefore, if I exercised that self-suppression at this critical moment it would be suicidal."

It was in such an atmosphere that the idea of 'Quit India' Movement was taking shape. The demand was: 'simply declare that India is free to carry on non-violently and openly the anti-war propaganda. That India is free to preach non-cooperation with the Government in their war effort, and we will have no civil disobedience.' If even this was not accepted then the Congress could not but act.

Gandhi's argument was that in Britain, conscientious objectors of war were exempted from conscription and were even allowed to profess their faith in public but were not permitted to

carry their opposition to the length of endeavouring to persuade others to abandon their allegiance to war or to discontinue their war-effort. But the situation in India was different, and Gandhi told the Viceroy frankly that his concessions were not sufficient in the present condition of India. He declared that if the Congress was to die, it should die in the act of defending its faith in the principle of peaceful methods.

Then followed the inauguration of the Satyagraha campaign. Gandhi laid down very strict rules and drew up a pledge. He wanted 'quality' this time. He said he would not offer civil disobedience himself, as that would cause much embarrassment. He chose Vinoba Bhave, an ideal choice, as the first Satyagrahi.

When the movement overgrew its frames, becoming a form of mass struggle, Gandhi decided to cancel this action. He did so a second time. Earlier when the impetus of the awakened masses had almost, during the non-cooperation movement, brought them to the brink of a countrywide anti-colonial uprising, and then it took a violent turn at Chauri Chaura. Jawaharlal Nehru had resented Gandhi's decision to withdraw the non-cooperation movement on this occasion, the launch of which he described as a 'Himalayan Blunder'.



Long ago when somebody said to Gandhi that there were no examples of mass satyagraha in history, he replied that that need not deter him. On the eve of the 1942 movement Gandhi was amidst the Kamataka workers in Bombay, one of the workers said that there was not a single instance in history where swaraj had been won by non-violence.

Gandhi simply smiled and said: "We are writing a new history".



That shows that Gandhi was not only original in the application of Satyagraha to mass conflicts but also he was intensely conscious of the fact that it was an original method.

In December 1941, Japanese planes swooped on Pearl Harbour.

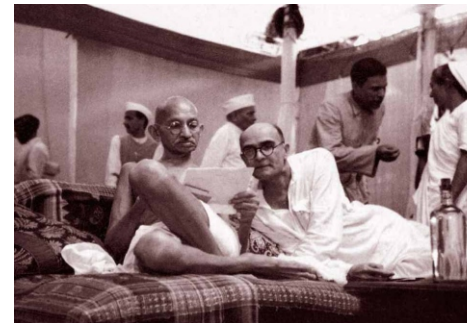
It was at this time that Sir Stafford Cripps, the man who was reputed to have brought Russia into the war and was considered the likely successor to Winston Churchill, flew to India with his scheme of political reform. Sir Stafford began his work in auspicious circumstances. He was a good friend of Jawaharlal Nehru. His views on Indian problem breathed an air of freshness and his radicalism was in sympathy with the aspirations of Young India.

But what a disappointment! The Churchillian impression was stamped indelibly on the Cripps proposals. Gandhi promptly described it as a 'post-dated cheque'. Cripps, however, in his last statement maintained that he never agreed to any major departure from the present constitution and said that that the National Government proposed by the Congress would put in power an irresponsible Executive irremovable for all practical purposes. Sir Stafford left India in a huff.

At this psychological moment, Gandhi began the 'Quit India' campaign. He infused new life amongst the masses with the mantra of 'Do or die'.



On the evening of August 8, when what is known as the "Quit India" resolution was passed by the all-India Congress Committee, Gandhi said: "We must look the world in the face with calm and clear eyes, even though the eyes of the world are bloodshot to-day. He told his countrymen and women to go ahead and offer yourself on the altar of ultimate sacrifice to win freedom for India.



On 8 August 1942, the All India Congress Committee held its meeting in Bombay and after giving due consideration to all points of view endorsed the Working Committee's resolution. The operative part of the A.I.C.C. resolution said: "The Committee resolves, therefore, to sanction for the vindication of India's right to freedom and independence, the starting of a mass struggle on nonviolent lines on the nonviolent strength it has gathered during the last twenty two years of peaceful struggle. Such a struggle must inevitably be under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi".



Gandhi in his speech mentioned that he was in no hurry and that he would seek an opportunity to see the Viceroy and negotiate with him. But before the next day dawned, on 9 August Gandhi and all the Working Committee members were arrested. Within a week every one who mattered in the organization was arrested and locked up without trial. Then followed the rule by ordinances, firings, lathi charges, and even bombings from aeroplanes were reported from some places. At some centers, people, driven to desperation, attacked railways and the police. The Government states that on the whole about 56 people succumbed to the fury of the mob.



It is estimated that more than 2000 unarmed and innocent people were shot down and about 6000 injured by the police and the military; tens of thousands wounded by lathis; about 1,50,000 were jailed and about 15 lakhs of rupees were imposed as collective fines; there is no record of tortures, burning of houses, looting and other atrocities by the police and the military.

The mass awakening and mass revolt witnessed throughout India and the predominantly nonviolent way the vast masses conducted themselves during the "Quit India Movement", apart from a few acts of unorganized violence, was something remarkable and incomparable with anything anywhere in the world. What shape the movement would have taken had Gandhi's hands not been on the lever is another matter. The way in which people including a large number of women, a prominent name amongst them being that of Aruna Asaf Ali faced brutal violence even without his guidance and without



the guidance of any important leader, and carried on the struggle for months during the Quit India movement is worth studying from the point of view of social dynamics. It will ever remain an important chapter in the history of nonviolent resistance if not of pure and unadulterated Satyagraha.