

GS Foundation 2024: Modern India

Handout 40: From 1942 to 1944

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Quit India Movement (August Revolution) (1942-45)

"Whatever the consequences to India, her real safety and that of Britain too lie in orderly and timely withdrawal from India."

Mahatma Gandhi

"No empire intoxicated with the red wine of power and plunder of weaker races has yet lived long in this world and the British Empire, which is based on organised exploitation of physically weaker races of the earth and upon a continuous exhibition of brute force, cannot live, if there is a just God ruling the universe."

Mahatma Gandhi

The failure of the Cripps Mission opened a new phase in India's struggle for freedom. Gandhiji had hitherto been hesitant in launching a mass movement against the British as they were busy fighting a global war. But, after the failure of the Cripps Mission, Gandhiji asked for complete British withdrawal from India. He made it clear that if the British failed to withdraw from India, he would not hesitate to launch a mass movement.

Deteriorating war situation on the eastern frontiers of India provided added urgency. As the **Japanese invasion of India appeared imminent**, a feeling grew that at the critical moment the British authorities might just leave the Indian people to their fate.

Causes for the Quit India Movement:

- The new popular mood of August 1942 caused by the rout of the British by the Japanese in S.E. Asia. The people came to believe firmly that the British rule was ending.
- Calculations by the Congress leaders.
 - Leaders like Gandhiji believed that the presence of British in India was inviting Japanese invasion because there was no such hostility b/w India and Japan.
 - Majority of the congress leaders, including Gandhi, began to calculate India's national interest in the event of an Allied defeat, which was very much on the card in the mid-1942.
 - When Europeans could not face the Japanese, they evacuated the whites and native were left behind at the mercy of Japanese forces. Indian leaders knew that scenario in India would be no different. Gandhiji decided to launch a mass movement against British rule, so that India could prepare its defense against possible Japanese invasion by expelling British from India.

- The arrogant behaviour of most of the foreign soldiers (British, American and Australian) stationed in India.
- The steeply rising inflation and the acute shortage of food stuffs caused by the war. The British, who were successfully managing the war economy at home, did not make any serious effort to do same in India.
- It had been more than 10 years of launching a mass movement against British. The anti-British discontent was reaching revolutionary proportions. Gandhiji knew that if a mass movement was not launched immediately the morale of people would get shattered. So, in spite of opposition from many Congress leaders, he decided to launch a mass movement.
- British provocation before and after the passage of the 'Quit India' resolution by the Congress were equally responsible for the Revolt of 1942.
- **AICC Meeting, Allahabad** (April-May 1942) and **CWC Meeting, Wardha** (14 July 1942)
 - It proposed **non-violent non-cooperation with the Japanese army**.
 - It simultaneously **called for a speedy British withdrawal** from India.
 - Once again **Gandhiji accepted the leadership of the Congress**, as it had broadly veered around his views. Now, Gandhiji started preparing for a new mass movement.
 - There was a remarkable change in Gandhi's attitude, and he seemed to be in a uniquely militant mood. He realised that the moment of his final engagement with the Raj has arrived.
 - Gandhi wrote in May 1942. *"Leave India to God... If that is too much then leave her to anarchy. This ordered disciplined anarchy go, and if there is complete lawlessness, I would risk it"*.
- Historic **AICC meeting in Bombay** (8 August 1942) (Gawalia Tank Maidan)
 - Approved **Quit India Resolution**.
 - Gandhi's speech, which followed the Resolution, clearly indicated the nature of the movement which he was to lead.
 - "I, therefore, want freedom immediately, this very night, before dawn, if it can be had.....I am not going to be satisfied with anything short of complete freedom.....Here is a mantra, a 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....".

- The Quit India Resolution clearly brought about a new shift in the attitude of the nationalists. Gandhi demanded a **complete and immediate withdrawal** of the British from India. The stage was now set for the climax.

Initial Government Crackdown:

- Even before the Congress resolution of 7 August, the government had made **elaborate preparations for the suppression** of the movement.
- **Defence of India Rules**, along with several other ordinances, were issued to impose strict control over all walks of our national life.
 - On the next morning of 9th August, **all prominent leaders, including Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, Azad, were put behind bars**, even before the movement was formally launched.
 - As a precautionary measure, even the **district leaders of the party were arrested**. This was followed by the **arrest of many political workers all over the country**.
 - **Many newspapers**, including the National Herald, Amrita Bazar Patrika as well as Gandhi's Harijan were banned.
 - All the branches of the **Congress were banned**. All Congress organisations were declared unlawful, and their funds were confiscated.
 - **Special courts** were set up to deal with the criminal cases. Some of them were even referred to the military courts.



Jawaharlal Nehru's room during his incarceration in Ahmednagar fort where he wrote Discovery of India (1942–1945)

The sudden arrest of our national leaders, followed by other draconian repressive measures, **failed to dampen the freedom-spirit** of the people. On the contrary, as the news of these arrests spread, tension mounted everywhere. The response of our people was instantaneous and spontaneous. The severe police repressions on peaceful public demonstrations proved to be counterproductive.

Phases of the Movement:

- **First Phase (9-15 Aug):**
 - Massive and violent but quickly suppressed.
 - Predominantly urban in nature. The first response to the government's repressive measures came from the **urban areas**.
 - Included spontaneous meetings, hartals, demonstrations, processions, strikes and clashes with the police and army in most cities. Public life came to standstill.
- **Second Phase (15 Aug – 30 Sept):**

- Focus being shifted to the countryside.
- Militant students fanning out from urban centres to rural areas in order to lead peasant rebellions and to destroy communications on a large scale.
- **Third Phase (Oct – Dec):**
 - Characterized by terrorist activity by educated youth directed against communications.
 - Least formidable: Such activities no longer posed serious threat to the British rule.

Characteristics of the Movement:

- **Region-wise**, the movement was very widespread.
 - **Four nerve-centres** of the movement were Bihar and U.P, Midnapore, Orissa and Maharashtra-Karnataka.
 - In these areas the movement took the form of a mass rebellion with elements of populism.
- The **working class** came openly in support of the movement.
 - In places like Lucknow, Kanpur, Bombay, Nagpur, Ahmedabad, Madras, Delhi, and Jamshedpur the working class struck work as they favoured a national government.
 - The textile mills of Ahmedabad and the Tata Steel Mills of Tata Nagar were closed for quite some time in support of the movement.
- **The students** played a major role in the demonstrations and processions.
 - Students spread the message of 'Quit India' by **writing slogans on the walls**, and even on the trees. They organized **mass meetings, distributed leaflets, pamphlets, and other revolutionary literature**. They **boycotted schools and colleges** and at many places hoisted our national flags by pulling down the Union Jack.
- **Women** played a commendable role in this movement.
 - **Matangini Hazra**: a peasant widow of 72 years, was remarkable. She led a crowd to occupy the Tamluk police station during the August movement.
 - **Kanaklata Barua** and **Bhogeshwari Phukanani**: was shot dead by police while leading a procession with national flag in **Assam**.
- Many **parallel governments** were set up, replacing the British administration.



- For some time, they took over the administration and virtually ran the government. Though they could not be sustained for a long time in the face of excessive use of force by the imperial administration, but for people's morale their psychological impact was tremendous.



Ballia	Eastern UP	Chittu Pandey (Lion of Ballia)
Tamluk Jatiya Sarkar	Midnapore	Satish Chandra Samanta
Satara Prati Sarkar	Maharashtra	Nana Patil (Kranti Simha), YB Chavan

Participation:

However, the spread of the movement was uneven. While the Congressmen were in jails, almost all other parties opposed the Quit India movement-although for different reasons.

- The movement was **weak in Madras Presidency and Punjab**.
- QIM was opposed by a large section of the political elite, viz., the Akali Dal, Liberal Party, the Unionist Party, Ambedkar-led Scheduled Caste Federation, the Indian Muslim League, and even by the Hindu Mahasabha.
- **Muslim League** opposed it because it was now working closely with the British and saw it as a great opportunity to seek favours from the government.
- **The communists** opposed it because at this time Soviet Union was at war with Germany- and hence an ally of Britain- and the communists did not want British war efforts to be hampered by agitations in India.
- **Ambedkar** opposed Mahatma Gandhi's decision, in August 1942, to launch QIM. He declared that the "patriotic duty of all Indians" was rather to prevent such movements from creating "anarchy and chaos which would unquestionably help and facilitate the subjugation of this country by Japan". From 1942 to 1946, he remained as a member of Viceroy Executive Council.
- **The business class** remained aloof. **Landlord** were with the government because of the prominence of socialist ideas within Congress at this stage.
- Except in Mysore, the movement was also **weak in Princely India**.

Gandhiji's 21 days Fast (10 Feb – 3 Mar 1942)

- Since the beginning of the movement, the Government was squarely blaming the Congress for all the violence that was let loose in the country. It **accused Mahatma Gandhi of inciting violence**.
- **Gandhiji tried to explain** that the movement was designed to remain non-violent. He refused to condemn popular violence because he saw it as a reaction to the state's much greater violence.

- When he failed to convince the Government that the people's violence was **in response to violence of the Government**, he decided to undertake a **21 day fast**. The fast was directed against the violence of the state.
- **Tremendous pressure** was brought on the Government to release Gandhiji while he was on fast:
 - Many **people returned the honors** conferred to them by the Government. Prominent among them was Allah Baksh Khan, the Premier of Sindh.
 - **Three members of the Viceroy's Executive Council**, namely, HP Modi, N R Sarkar and MS Aney followed suit and **resigned**.
 - Gandhiji's fast gave a new momentum to the movement as it **inspired several freedom fighters** to keep the flag of the movement flying.
 - Outsiders and inmates alike participated in sympathetic fasts. People travelled in secret to Poona to offer Satyagraha outside the Aga Khan Palace, where Gandhiji was imprisoned.
 - Thousands of letters and telegrams were sent to the government from people from all walks of life, including students and youth, men in trade and commerce, lawyers, ordinary citizens, and labour organisations, demanding his release.
 - It had **evoked worldwide interest** in India's cause. It put the case of Indian independence on the world agenda.
 - Newspapers such as the Manchester Guardian, New Statesmen, Nation, News Chronicle, and Chicago Sun, as well as the British Communist Party, citizens of London and Manchester, the Women's International League, the Australian Council of Trade Unions, and the Ceylon State Council, demanded his release from across the seas.
- **But the Government stuck to its position** and refused to release Gandhiji.
 - The Viceroy and his officials, on the other hand, were unmoved. They arrogantly refused to show any concern for Indian feelings.
 - Winston Churchill's statement to his Cabinet, *"this our hour of triumph everywhere in the world was not the time to crawl before a miserable old man who had always been our enemy."*
 - The Government brought out a pamphlet '**Congress Responsibility for the Disturbance of 1942-43**' blaming the Congress and its leader Mahatma Gandhi for violence during the movement.

The fast achieved the following purposes:

Gandhiji got the better of his opponents and refused to die. The fast had accomplished exactly what it had set out to do. The public mood was lifted, anti-British sentiment was heightened, and political activity was made possible.

1. Public morale was raised.
2. Anti-British feeling was heightened.
3. An opportunity was provided for political activity.
4. Government's high-handedness was exposed.

Subsequently, Gandhiji was released on 6 May 1944 on health grounds.

Suppression of the Movement:

The Government let loose a **virtual reign of terror**. Winston Churchill, British PM, said in the Parliament (September, 1942), *"the disturbances were crushed with all the weight of a Government... large reinforcements have reached India and the number of white soldiers now in that country, although very small compared to its size and population, are larger than at any time..."*

- The **government imposed collective fines** on 173 occasions, collecting over Rs one crore in fines from the people.
- With the arrival of the **military and mounted police**, a reign of terror was let loose. In many places **villages were looted and burnt, women were raped, men were slaughtered, and children were tortured**.
- All kinds of forces including **firing by machine-guns from the air** were used against the people. According to the Government's own records police firing was resorted to on 601 occasions in which hundreds of people lost their lives.
- More than a **hundred thousand people were put behind bars** in the course of the movement. Nearly 25,000 people were convicted and were sentenced to various periods of imprisonment. About 50 people were awarded the death sentence. According to unofficial estimates, at least 10,000 people lost their lives in the course of the movement.

Bipan Chandra says, *"India had not witnessed such intense repression since the Revolt of 1857."* In face of such massive repression, it was not surprising that the Government succeeded in suppressing the major chunk of the movement by the end of 1942. Thereafter, the movement went underground.

Underground Phase of the Movement:

- **Congress Socialist Party** led by **Jayaprakash Narayan (JP)**.
 - The prominent socialist leaders who were in the forefront in underground resistances **were Rammanohar Lohia, Ram Nandan Mishra, Acharya Narendra Dev, Basawan Singh, Achyut Patwardhan, Aruna Asaf Ali, Usha Mehta** and others.
- The revolutionary movement in **Bihar** was strengthened by the presence of **Jayaprakash Narayan**.
- In **Bombay**, **Usha Mehta** and **Rammanohar Lohia** organised a secret **Radio Station** to broadcast the message of the movement.
- **Attack on the symbols of the government** like police stations, courts, post offices and railway stations.



However, the movement declined due to several factors:

- The chief weakness of the movement was **lack of coordination**.
 - It was a loose decentralized type of movement. There was no central command after the arrests of leaders to direct the movement in various provinces.
- There was **no proper organization and programme of action** in the movement.
 - Organization meant secrecy which had no place in Gandhi's notion of non-violent Satyagraha. When the first phase of the campaign was over, there was no further programme placed before the people.
 - Jayaprakash Narayan cited the instance of Ballia and some other places where the people had captured power but had no clear plan of future action.
- **Lack of funds** was another weakness of the movement.
- The movement was weakened **by various dissident voices** from within India.
 - Indian communists openly opposed the movement and did everything to help the British war-effort.
 - Muslims, excepting the small group of nationalists followed the advice of the Muslim League. They condemned the movement and kept aloof from the struggle.
- Most importantly, the movement went down in the face of **brutal repression** undertaken by the police and the military.



Success or failure?

It is true that the movement could not force the British to quit India at once.

- The great significance was that the movement placed the **demand** for independence on the immediate agenda of the national movement. After Quit India, there could be no retreat.
- **Intensity**
 - QIM was the most intense mass struggle of Indian nationalists against British rule. It infused great energy in anti-British struggle. The level of radicalization was carried to revolutionary proportions. It transformed India's struggle against British into an all-out war. It was the fight to finish because it was never suspended or called off.
 - In this struggle, the common people displayed unparalleled heroism and militancy. The repression they faced was the most brutal, and the circumstances under which resistance was offered were most adverse.
- The **magnitude** of the movement was unprecedented. It was one of the biggest mass upsurges in the history of modern India.

- It commenced like a spontaneous revolution because with one call of Gandhiji, lakhs of nationalists jumped into fight against BR. Large scale agitations and demonstrations were witnessed throughout India. It appeared as if people were waiting for their final struggle against colonial British Rule.
- The large-scale mass participation in QIM inspite of the arrest of all national level leaders exhibited the maturity of Indian nationalism. The contribution of local leaders was most important during QIM because they led the anti-British struggle from front.
- The role of women was remarkable during QIM. Leaders like Aruna Asaf Ali led the anti-British struggle from front while Usha Mehta established a secret congress radio to transmit nationalist message.
- The launching of QIM carried the level of nationalist awaking to new heights. Even the civil servants and armed forces got infected with the spirit of nationalism.
- British administration was completely paralyzed by Nationalist activities at many places. Parallel governments were formed at Satara, Balia and Tamluk.
- It transformed the anti-British struggle into a true pan India movement because for the first time the national movement was extended to native states.
- **Loyalty to Government suffered considerable erosion.** This also showed how deep nationalism had reached. The complete breakdown of law and order in many places and the rise of independent governments of the Indian people made the British realise that their days in India were numbered.
 - The British, though, thought succeeded in surprising the revolt, realised the advantages of trying for a negotiated settlement rather than risk another confrontation as massive and violent as this revolt.
- In terms of its **ideological import**, it made a subtle departure from earlier Gandhian movements: It was a kind of open people's rebellion, in which participants were free to use all means at their disposal except overtly causing physical violence to the wielders of the imperial power. Though non-violence was to be its guiding norm, the people were not supposed to make a fetish of it.
- In terms of **impact**, it stood out from all earlier movements as it virtually gave a deathblow to the British rule in India. It certainly demolished the very foundation of the British rule in India. It gave a loud and clear message to them-pack up and go home by the first available plane.
- The movement put the Indian struggle on the **world agenda**.
 - The Indian struggle, standing on a high moral pedestal, turned out to be the trailblazer for the oppressed and the enslaved people of the world. It is not for nothing that Indian independence started a process of decolonization leading to the freedom of many enslaved people in the post-war period.

QIM shook the foundations of British Rule, as a result of which the British Indian empire came to an end within five years and British had to transfer power into Indian hands.

Famine of 1943

It resulted in the deaths of some three million people due to malnutrition or disease.

While many famines are the result of inadequate food supply, the Bengal famine did not coincide with any significant shortfall in food production. According to the Indian economist **Amartya Sen**, who himself witnessed the famine as a nine-year-old boy, the famine was the result of an **entitlement failure**. In other words, the distribution of the food supply throughout Bengali society was hindered primarily by economic factors that affected the ability of certain groups of people to purchase food.

Events in 1942 had a relatively minor impact on the supply of food. After Burma (Myanmar) and Singapore fell to Japan in 1942 in the midst of World War II, **rice exports** from those countries were halted. A **cyclone** in October 1942 also **damaged the autumn rice crop** and put pressure on the following year's crop because, to survive, many subsistence farmers had to consume grain meant for planting. Still, the 1942 halt in rice imports to India did not cause the famine, and the 1943 crop yield was actually sufficient to feed the people of Bengal.

It was **ultimately special wartime factors** that caused this difficult situation to become a disastrous famine.

- Fearing Japanese invasion, **British authorities stockpiled food to feed defending troops, and they exported considerable quantities to British forces in the Middle East.**
- They also **confiscated boats, carts, and elephants** in Chittagong, where the invasion was expected. This deprived fishermen and their customers of the ability to operate and generally inhibited the sort of low-level commerce upon which many Bengalis relied for survival.

In the wake of these actions by the British, anxiety about shortages caused **hoarding, speculation, and consequent price inflation** that put even a basic subsistence diet beyond the means of many of Bengal's workers.

The **government's failure to halt rice exports or seek relief supplies** from elsewhere resulted in a disaster that killed millions of people.