

## QUIT INDIA – A SHORT HISTORY OF A 'DO OR DIE' NATIONAL STRUGGLE

### Context:

- ▶▶ 77<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Quit India movement was observed on August 8th, 2019. Every year 8 August is celebrated in India as August Kranti Din.

### Introduction:

- ▶▶ Perhaps the simplest, and the most powerful, slogan of the Indian National Movement was “Quit India”, the call and command that Mahatma Gandhi gave to the British rulers of India 77 years ago.
- ▶▶ For the masses of this country, his exhortation was: “Do or die”.
- ▶▶ Their response to the Mahatma's call scripted a glorious chapter in India's Freedom Struggle, unparalleled in its heroism, sacrifice, and commitment in the face of the most savage and ruthless repression ever unleashed by the British colonial state on the Indian people.
- ▶▶ The Quit India Movement started on August 9, 1942, and set in motion a chain of events over the following five years, which finally ended with the British leaving India.

### The Build-Up to the Movement

- ▶▶ Various factors came together to create the perfect storm in which Gandhiji gave his call of Quit India were as follows:

#### 1. The failure of the Cripps Mission in April 1942

- ▶▶ In December 1941, Japan had attacked Britain's colonies in Asia, and advanced rapidly through Burma, the Malay peninsula, the Dutch East Indies (modern Indonesia), Singapore, and parts of Papua New Guinea, causing heavy losses, and taking huge numbers of prisoners of war.
- ▶▶ While Hitler still holding the upper hand in the European and African theatres of the War, Franklin D Roosevelt, Chiang Kai-Shek, and leaders of the Labour Party in Britain built pressure on Prime Minister to reach out to Indian leaders for help in the war effort.
- ▶▶ In March 1942, a mission led by Sir Stafford Cripps arrived in India to meet with leaders of the Congress and the Muslim League.

- ▶▶ Despite the promise of the earliest possible realisation of self-government in India, the offer that Cripps placed on the table was of Dominion Status (an autonomous community within the British Empire) rather than full independence.
- ▶▶ This was not acceptable to Gandhi and Nehru, more importantly, the Congress was opposed to a provision that allowed for the Partition of India.
- ▶▶ The failure of the Cripps Mission signalled to the Congress that the British were not interested in honest negotiations with Indians, or to accept any genuine constitutional progress or the right of Indians to determine their future.

## **2. Rising anger and frustration among the people**

- ▶▶ High prices and shortage of goods during the War had led to frustration building up among the Indian people.
- ▶▶ In the east, the government had requisitioned resources, including boats, in preparation for the Japanese invasion, depriving many communities of their means of livelihood.
- ▶▶ Reports of selective British evacuations in areas overrun by the Japanese, taking out the Whites while leaving the local people to the bayonets and brutality of the
- ▶▶ invaders, triggered anger, outrage, and fear that the same would be done in the Indian mainland once the war reached home.
- ▶▶ The Congress was alive to the need for a political response to this public sentiment.
- ▶▶ Gandhi was also concerned that in the absence of effective intervention, demoralisation and fatalism might set in, leading the people to simply collapse in the face of the Japanese invasion, when it came.
- ▶▶ In his mind, this was a reason to launch a struggle, to raise spirits, and mobilise the masses.

## **3. Sense of Britain's vulnerability**

- ▶▶ Popular struggles often draw strength from hope that the desired goal is near. Any perceived vulnerability in the oppressor feeds into this enthusiasm.
- ▶▶ News of the Allied defeats in the War, the arrival of letters from Southeast Asia, and reports and rumours that trains from Assam were bringing in massive numbers of injured and dead British soldiers, created a sense that the end of the Raj was near.
- ▶▶ The great strength of the Empire had been the idea of its permanence and stability; there were now gaps in that belief.
- ▶▶ In many parts of Eastern UP, Bihar, and in the Madras Presidency, people were rushing to withdraw money from banks and post-offices, and starting to hoard coins and precious metals.

- ▶▶ By mid-summer 1942, Gandhi was convinced that time had come to launch a full scale, nationwide agitation against the British.

### **The launch of the movement**

- ▶▶ In July 1942, at the Working Committee meeting in Wardha, the Congress accepted that the movement must move into an active phase.
- ▶▶ In August, the All-India Congress Committee met in Gowalia Tank Maidan in Bombay to ratify the Working Committee's decision.
- ▶▶ After the meeting on August 8, 1942, Gandhi addressed thousands to spell out that he would take his demands to the Viceroy and reiterated that he is not to be satisfied with anything short of complete freedom.
- ▶▶ Then he gave the mantra 'Do or Die'. He told government servants to openly declare allegiance to the Congress, soldiers to refuse to fire on their own people, and Princes to accept the sovereignty of their own people rather than that of a foreign power.
- ▶▶ He asked the subjects of the Princely States to declare that they were part of the Indian nation, and would accept their rulers if only they agreed to be on the side of the people of India.

### **Mass upsurge across the country:**

- ▶▶ In Bombay, Poona, and Ahmedabad, lakhs of people clashed violently with police on August 9.
- ▶▶ On August 10, protests erupted in Delhi, and across UP and Bihar.
- ▶▶ There were hartals, demonstrations and people's marches in defiance of prohibitory orders in Kanpur, Patna, Varanasi, and Allahabad. The government hit back with brute force and gagging the press.
- ▶▶ The protests spread rapidly into the district towns and villages across India. The police stations, courts, post offices and other symbols of government authority were attacked.
- ▶▶ Railway tracks were blocked, and groups of villagers offered satyagraha at various places. Students went on strike in schools and colleges across India, took out marches, and distributed illegal nationalist literature.
- ▶▶ Mill and factory workers in Bombay, Ahmedabad, Poona, Ahmednagar, and Jamshedpur stayed away for weeks.
- ▶▶ Trains were stopped, taken over, and national flags were put on them. Large crowds of peasants showed up at the nearest tehsil town and attacked government buildings.
- ▶▶ For about two weeks, the government disappeared and police fired at the people who were marching to the secretariat with the national flag.

- ▶▶ European officers were attacked at several places in Bihar. The towns of Gaya, Bhagalpur, Saran, Purnea, Shahabad and Muzaffarpur in Bihar, and Azamgarh, Ballia, and Gorakhpur in UP turned into flaming centres of defiance and protest.
- ▶▶ Official estimates quoted in historical scholarship on the Quit India Movement recorded 250 damaged or destroyed railway stations, and attacks on 500 post offices and 150 police stations in the first week of the protests alone.

### Brutal Repression:

- ▶▶ The government started the crack down on early August 9, 1942. The entire leadership of the Congress was arrested and taken to unknown destinations.
- ▶▶ It was the trigger for a volcano of public anger to erupt.
- ▶▶ The Quit India Movement began spontaneously, without directions or instructions from the leaders of the National Movement.
- ▶▶ The crackdown the rebellion triggered was unprecedented in its sweep and brutality. Police and soldiers fired indiscriminately at unarmed protesters.
- ▶▶ Crowds were machine-gunned by military aircraft swooping low over them.
- ▶▶ Protesters were picked up from the villages and held hostage by police. Collective fines amounting to lakhs were imposed on entire communities, and the sum was realised immediately through plunder.
- ▶▶ There was mass whipping of suspects, and village after village was burnt to the ground in punishment for their residents' actions. In the five months up to December 1942, an estimated 60,000 people had been thrown into prison.
- ▶▶ Some 26,000 people were convicted for small and large offences, and 18,000 were detained under the harsh Defence of India Act.
- ▶▶ There was no official declaration of martial law, but the Army pretty much did what they liked alongside the police.

### Other Key Facts regarding the Movement:

- ▶▶ Several national leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Abdul Kalam Azad, Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel were arrested.
- ▶▶ The Congress was declared an unlawful association, leaders were arrested and its offices all over the country were raided and their funds were frozen.
- ▶▶ The first half of the movement was peaceful with demonstrations and processions. The peaceful protest was carried till Mahatma Gandhi's release.
- ▶▶ The second half of the movement was violent with raids and setting fire at post offices, government buildings and railway stations. Lord Linlithgow adopted the policy of violence.
- ▶▶ The Viceroy's Council of Muslims, Communist Party and Americans supported Britishers.

### Significance of the movement:

- ▶▶ Despite heavy-handed suppression by the government, the people were unfazed and continued their struggle.
- ▶▶ Even though the government said that independence could be granted only after the end of the war, the movement drove home the point that India could not be governed without the support of the Indians.
- ▶▶ The movement placed the demand for complete independence at the top agenda of the freedom movement.
- ▶▶ Public morale and anti-British sentiment were enhanced.

**Source: Indian Express**

