



Post -The Tripuri Episode: The World War II and Congress' Response

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Abstract: *As most of the Indian know that the Tripuri episode of the National Freedom Struggle was a great turning point in the History of Congress, revealed the fact that Gandhian group is the core to the Congress & no person against this group could survive in it. But, after this episode, all political & international scenario in & around India drastically changed as on 1st of September, 2nd World War broke out & the British declared India at war with Germany. It was not only the World War-II, but the provincial & communal politics of Indian subcontinent perverted in a manner that was held never before. This article articulates these all scenario in an interlinked manner.*

Keywords: *The Tripuri Congress, 2nd World War, Gandhian Group, Communal Politics*

Scenario after Mid of 1939

The war clouds had been gathering over Europe and Rajendra Prasad was conscious of its implications for India. In his Presidential address at the meeting of the All-India Congress Committee held at Bombay from 24 to 27 June 1939, he had cautioned the people against the impending danger. "The danger of world war", he said, "is ever present and it might materialize in the course of a few months". So he asked the people to "be ready to meet this crisis and to resist all the attempts to drag us into war, and thus give effect to the declared policy of the Congress". He further observed that "the first and most urgent problem for the Congress, is, therefore, to purify the organization and make it a disciplined, and effective instrument of the people's will" and for the "service of the nation", so that "in the trials to come the Congress may be fully prepared to carry India's cause to a successful conclusion".¹

The crisis came soon when the World War II broke out on 1 September 1939 when Hitler had invaded Poland. Two days later on 3 September England declared war against Germany. Immediately without consulting the Congress or the elected members of the central legislature, the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, declared India to be a belligerent power and called upon her "to play a part worthy of her place among the great nations of the world".² Gandhiji's reaction was highly emotional. He met the Viceroy and after an interview issued a statement "expressing sympathy with Britain and advising India to offer unconditional help to her".³

To discuss the situation the Congress Working Committee met at Wardha from 10 to 14 September to which, in keeping with the nationalist tradition of accommodating diversity of opinion, Subhas Bose, Acharya Narendra Dev, and Jayaprakash Narayan were also invited. As Rajendra Prasad was then not quite well, Gandhiji specially sent Mahadev Desai to Ramgarh to take him to Wardha. Jawaharlal Nehru also returned to India on the eve of this meeting. Sharp differences emerged in this meeting. Gandhiji was for taking a sympathetic view of the Allies. He believed that there was a clear difference between the democratic states of Western Europe and the totalitarian Nazi state headed by Hitler.⁴ The Socialists and Subhas Bose argued that the War was an imperialist one since both sides were fighting for gaining or defending colonial territories. Therefore, the question of supporting either of the two sides did not arise. Instead the Congress should take advantage of the situation to wrest freedom by immediately starting a civil disobedience movement.⁵ Jawaharlal Nehru had a stand of his own. He made a sharp distinction between democracy and Fascism. In his opinion the War was the result of the inner contradictions of capitalism maturing since the end of World War I. He, therefore, argued that India should neither join the War till she herself gained freedom nor take advantage of Britain's difficulties by starting an immediate struggle. Rajendra Prasad had also reservations:

¹ Quoted in K. K. Datta, *Rajendra Prasad*, p.165.

² *Ibid.*, p. 166.

³ Rajendra Prasad, *op. cit.*, p.493.

⁴ Bipan Chandra, *India's Struggle for Independence*, p.448.

⁵ *Op. cit.*



The question before us was what attitude to take on the issue of the war. Should the Congress help the war effort and, if so, should the help be unconditional or modified by some conditions? In this violent conflict, how could the Congress, with her declared policy of non-violence, render any help?⁶

Gandhi toned down his stand when he found that his position was not supported by even his close followers such as Sardar Patel and Rajendra Prasad. Consequently, he decided to support Nehru's position which was adopted by the Working Committee. The Working Committee strongly condemned the ideology and practice of Nazism and Fascism and expressed its protest against India being drawn into war without the consent of the Indian people and issued a statement on 14 September urging the British Government "to declare in unequivocal terms what their aims are in regard to democracy and imperialism and the new order that is envisaged, in particular, how these are going to apply to India and to be given effect to in the present"⁷ with a view to enabling India help Britain in her war effort. To quote Rajendra Prasad:

The Working Committee resolution, however, made it perfectly clear that if the British Government could declare its aims in a satisfactory manner, the Congress would be forced to help the war effort. Many people in India, and there were many Congressmen too, were sympathetic towards Britain at that time and if she had adduced some proof, as her leading statesmen and newspapers were shouting from housetops, that she was really fighting for democracy, the whole of India would have been behind her unreservedly. But actually, Britain was fighting a war for the defense of the British Empire, although to win over the sympathies of wavering nations, it was claimed to be a war to save democracy.⁸

The course of the freedom movement and its strategy at this stage appears to have got entangled with question of support or no support for the war efforts. After the Working Committee's resolution Rajendra Prasad met Lord Linlithgow twice as Congress President, once along with Jawaharlal Nehru and the second time with Gandhiji and Mohammed Ali Jinnah. The Viceroy was then meeting representative Indians of all schools of thought with a view to enlisting India's help in the war. But Rajendra Prasad was very sure that he had made one serious mistake. As soon as the war began, without consulting anyone, he had declared that India too was on the side of Britain in her war with Germany. The Central Assembly was then in session and popular ministries wherein office in eleven provinces, but he did not deem it important or necessary that their views should be invited, as if the war were not a matter of concern for any individual or institution in India. The demands of the Congress were two: First, besides clarification of British war aims, it wanted Indian independence to form part of the post-war plans of the British Government; and secondly, the Congress demanded that Indian representatives should be given certain administrative powers at the Centre with immediate effect so that they might be able to carry on the Government according to the wishes of the people and thus be able to render genuine help in the war effort. To appease Indian political parties, Lord Linlithgow proposed to appoint two more Indians on his Executive Council so as to give Indians a majority voice in the Council. He was, however, not willing to countenance any constitutional changes for the duration of the war. Whatever proposals he made were to be fitted within the framework of the Government of India Act, 1935.

Even if the declaration of future independence were not pressed, thought, Rajendra Prasad, immediate transfer of certain rights was absolutely necessary to enthuse the Indian people and to enable them to extend willing help to Britain. In the words of Rajendra Prasad:

Always a supporter of democracy as against imperialism, it wanted British imperialism to evolve into genuine democracy in order that all her possessions and colonies might become free. Of course, Britain never deprecated that ideal of ours and, in fact, she agreed that independence was the ultimate aim of her policy. She only pleaded that India and the other colonies were not at that time fit to govern themselves and that, therefore, she considered it her duty to retain in her hands the responsibility of governing them and preparing them for ultimate self-government. Indians, did not accept this position and that was the cause of our conflict with Britain.⁹

The Muslim League's view was that it could extend cooperation to the Allies on recognition of the League as "the only organization that can speak on behalf of Muslim India and an assurance that no declaration regarding the question of constitutional advance for India would be made without the consent and approval of the All-India Muslim League nor any constitution be framed and finally adopted by His Majesty's Government without such consent".¹⁰ The League further, with a view to distancing itself from the Congress, had started criticizing the functioning of the Congress ministries.

Rajendra Prasad, as president of the Congress, in order to remove the apprehensions of the League, wrote a conciliatory letter to Jinnah on 5 October 1939:

In the resolution of the Working Committee of the All-India Muslim League, passed recently in Delhi, reference has been made to Provincial Governments. It is stated that Provincial Autonomy in several Provinces has resulted in the domination of the

⁶ Rajendra Prasad, *Autobiography*, p. 493.

⁷ Quoted in K. K. Datta, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

⁸ Rajendra Prasad, *Autobiography*, p. 494.

⁹ Rajendra Prasad, *Autobiography*, pp. 495-6.

¹⁰ K. K. Datta, *op. cit.*, p. 168.



Hindus over the Muslim minorities whose life and liberty, property and honour are in danger, and even their religious rights and culture are being assailed and annihilated every day under the Congress Governments in various Provinces. Pandit JawaharlalNehru also informed me that you mentioned this matter to him in the course of a recent conversation. We feel that these charges are wholly unfounded and are based on misapprehensions and one sided reports that might have reached you and the League We feel strongly, and I am sure, you will agree with us, that such charges, when seriously made, should be enquired into and either substantiated or disproved. We would like this course to be adopted in regard to any specific instance that that are put forward. If you agree, we could request the highest judicial authority in India, Sir M. Gwyer, Chief Justice of the Federal Court, to enquire in to this matter. In the event of his not being available, some other person of a similar status and judicial position might be approached".¹¹

The Congress at no stage had denied the support but what it wanted was a clear-cut assurance that imperialism would be over in the colonies and thereafter full democracy would be established in India. The talk about democracy, it thought, was a hollow promise and it would be never applied for India and other suppressed nations of Asia and Africa. What Rajendra Prasad, therefore, wanted was an announcement in plain language regarding that and an assurance to that effect to the people of these areas and some powers transferred to them as a practical proof of future good intentions.¹²

But Jinnah was in no conciliatory mood as he wrote back: "... I have already placed the whole case before the Viceroy and the Governor-General and have requested him to take up the matter without delay as he and the Governors of the Provinces have been expressly authorised under the Constitution and are entrusted with the responsibility to protect the rights and the interests of the minorities".¹³

His meetings with the Viceroy bore not fruit and he convened a meeting of the Working Committee in October 1939 to decide the next step. Rajendra Prasad thought that the position of the Congress ministries in the provinces had now become untenable and the question was whether it should be allowed to continue. A section of Congressmen wanted the Congress ministries to continue as they believed that by remaining in power in the provinces, the Congress would be able to render some help to the people, undo any hand caused to them by the war and derive the maximum advantage from any good that the war might bring. But the majority, however, thought that if the war situation grew more serious, the Central Government would take more and more responsibility on itself and the provincial Governments would be rendered powerless. There was no chance of having any Indians of influence on the Executive Council to safeguard the interest of the provinces. The Executive Council itself would be powerless and would be able to do nothing beyond toeing the line for the Viceroy and the Member for War. The public would be expected to contribute to the War Fund and, as voluntary help could not be thought of, the provincial Governments would be in the invidious position of having to resort to pressure in the collection of funds, which was contrary to the principles of popular administration. Withdrawing from provincial Governments would be far preferable to facing such an untenable position of responsibility without power. The Working Committee, therefore, decided that in the event of the British Government's reply to its demands being unsatisfactory, it would have to advise the Congress ministries to resign.

The All-India Congress Committee met at Wardha in between 9 to 10 October and ratified the position of the Working Committee as stated above. Rajendra Prasad forcefully elaborated the position of the Congress and a long quotation from what he said is worth mentioning here to make his position more clear. He said:

The present war, we are aware, is being waged by England and France against Germany. The declared objective is to free Europe from the constant fear of Nazi aggression and generally to secure freedom for all nationalities. We have expressed our detestation of Nazi method of aggression. We have also expressed our sympathy in unmistakable terms with all those countries which have, from time to time, been made the victims of unprovoked attacks. We protested when Abyssinia was attacked. We expressed our sympathy with the democratic forces in Spain. We protested against the conquest and annexation of Czechoslovakia. We have expressed our sympathy with all the suffering nations. We have thus made our position perfectly clear. What we want is clarification of the position of the allied and particularly of England. We are aware that in the past there have been occasions when the avowed objects for which a war was fought were not the real objects.

The last Great War, fought with slogans of self-determination and 'making the world safe for democracy' did not fulfill any of these objects. We are, therefore, naturally doubtful if the professed aims of the present war are its real aims. India at the present moment is not an independent country. If it were independent, it would have considered whether it should join the present war. Many other countries which sympathize with Poland have not joined the war and with the best wish in the world to save the cause of democracy, we might have decided in favour of neutrality. If India is asked to help in a war for restoring and guaranteeing the freedom of Poland, is it any wonder that India should ask to be made free before she can render any help. It is no question of bargaining or taking advantage of difficulties of England. It is a simple and straight forward question that India asks. What part or lot can she have in a war waged for the freedom of other countries when her own freedom is denied to her by people

¹¹ Rajendra Prasad to Jinnah, 5 October 1939, in Syed Sharifuddin Pirzada, ed., *Quid-i-Azam Jinnah's Correspondence*, New Delhi, 1981, p. 322.

¹² Rajendra Prasad, *Autobiography*, p. 496.

¹³ Jinnah to Rajendra Prasad, in Syed Sharifuddin Pirzada, ed., *Quid-i-Azam Jinnah's Correspondence*, pp.322-23.



who are fighting for freedom and democracy in Europe? We want a straight answer to that question. We have also said that a mere declaration will not satisfy us. We want that declaration to be given effect to the extent it is possible under present conditions. We see that there are individual groups, parties and communities in India who have put forward their own claims to be considered. If the British Government and statesmen once make up their mind to deal fairly with India -and to give effect to the ideas which they profess in regard to the war, it should not be difficult for them to evolve a formula that can satisfy all parties and groups.¹⁴

The British Government's response was utterly unsatisfactory. Linlithgow, the Viceroy, had held discussions with no fewer than 52 Indian leaders of different points of view, including Gandhiji, Rajendra Prasad, Jawaharlal Nehru, M.A. Jinnah and the Chancellor of Chamber of Princes. He issued a statement on 17 October in which he harped on the old rhetoric of the existence on the differences among Indians, the Muslim League and the Princes. As regards the objectives of the British Government in entering the war, he repeated the statement of the Prime Minister made on February 6, 1939, that their Government were seeking no material advantage for themselves and were not aiming only at victory, but looking beyond it to laying the foundation of a better system which will mean that war is not to be the inevitable lot of each succeeding generation.

About India's future constitutional position, he reiterated the old pledge for the grant of Dominion Status and stated that the intention of the British Government was "to further the partnership between India and the United Kingdom within the Empire to the end that India may attain her due place among the great nations of the world." He was not for any constitutional changes during the war. But to meet the exigencies of the war situation, he suggested the addition of two more members to his Executive Council who, however, were to have no independent powers but were to be mere heads of departments. He also referred to the formation of a War Advisory Body "representative of all major political parties in British India and of the Indian States."¹⁵ For the future, the promise was that at the end of the War the British Government would enter into consultations with 'representatives of several communities, parties, and interests in India, and with the Indian princes' as to how the Act of 1935 might be modified. As an immediate measure, he offered to set up a consultative committee whose advice might be sought by the Government whenever it felt it necessary to do so.¹⁶

The reaction of the Indian people and the national leadership over the Viceroy's statement was sharp. 'The Congress asked for bread and it has got a stone', remarked Gandhiji.¹⁷ Rajendra Prasad described it as "disappointing but not all surprising". He said, "There is no room left for anyone to doubt that British policy remains what it has always been and that all talk about democracy and resistance to aggression is not meant to apply to India."¹⁸ The working Committee, meeting on 23 October, rejecting the Viceroy's offer decided not to support the War, and called upon the Congress ministries to resign as a protest. Rajendra Prasad thought that "if the Congress ministries had stuck to the office ... they would have been compelled to do things repugnant to the principles and ideologies of the Congress, and unless they wanted to stay as yes-men they would have been forced to resign anyway".¹⁹ However the Congress leadership still stayed its hand and did not give a call for an immediate and a massive anti-imperialist struggle. Infact, the Working Committee resolution of 23 October warned Congressmen against any hasty action. After all any idea of a German victory was unthinkable:

Nevertheless, I cannot say that I would have liked Britain to be defeated in the war. I could not certainly reconcile myself to a German victory. Germany had invaded Czechoslovakia because the latter was weaker. At that time Hungary and Poland could not resist the temptation of throwing themselves on the fallen victim to share in the spoils with Germany. When, therefore, Poland's turn to face Hitler's hordes came, I could not help feeling at first that the Poles were merely reaping what they had sown. But when, later, the German army, in a sweep, took Denmark, Norway, Holland and Belgium, I was deeply distressed, because Hitler made it clear that he would not let any weaker nations survive. My feeling of anger against the British for denying India her rights was somewhat assuaged and I somehow felt that it was our duty to help the British in defeating Germany and stop there.²⁰

The Congress Ministries resigned early in November 1939 the Governors assumed control of legislative and administrative powers within the provinces. No settlement took place and the constitutional deadlock continued. Rajendra Prasad and other leaders of the Congress had genuine sympathy for Great Britain in that crisis and hour of adversity and they were prepared to render all possible assistance to her. All that they wished was a clear assurance from the British Government that India would be given freedom after the war. "I can say", noted Rajendra Prasad, "that there was no bitterness in the heart of any Indian

¹⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 166-7.

¹⁵Bipan Chandra, et al, *op. cit.*, p.449.

¹⁶*Ibid.* In a private communication to Zetland, the secretary of State, Linlithgow was to remark a few months later; 'I am not too keen to start talking about a period after which British rule will have ceased in India. I suspect that day is very remote and I feel the least we say about it in all probability the better'. Subsequently on 18 October, Zetland speaking in the House of Lords stressed differences among Indian, especially among Hindus and Muslims. He branded the Congress as a purely Hindu organization. It, thus, became clear that the British Government had no intention of loosening their hold on India during or after the War and that it was willing, if necessary, to treat the Congress as an enemy.

¹⁷*CWMG*, Vol.70, pp.267-80.

¹⁸Quoted in K. K. Datta, *Rajendra Prasad*, p. 169.

¹⁹Rajendra Prasad, *Autobiography*, p. 498-99.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 499.



against the British and a large majority of Indians really thought it their duty to help Britain. They only wanted certain powers to enable them to carry out that duty. Without these powers the people could not be enthused".²¹

In December 1939, the Congress Working Committee decided to celebrate Independence Day on 26 January 1940 with a special significance. The thought was to emphasize India's national will to freedom, and start a preparation for the struggle. Rajendra Prasad, as President of the Congress, used this occasion to issue an appeal for Independence Day celebrations in which he outlined two important points. First he exhorted everybody to engage in self-introspection so that future struggle could be carried on more effectively.

Let this day, therefore, be a day of stock-taking. Let us search our hearts if we have not by our individual and national conduct prolonged our agony. Let us ask ourselves if we have been true to our high ideals, our noble oppose and the pure means which we have kept before ourselves to achieve our aim. Let each one ask himself, have I taken away every tinge of communalism from my life? Have I considered persons of other faiths and other views as my blood brothers? Have I as a Hindu done my little bit to wipe off the blot of untouchability? Have I allowed my individual ambition to stand in the way of the advancement of members of weaker communities? Have I been true to the masses? Have I lightened their burdens? Have I in my daily requirements and purchases remembered the starving millions distributed through the seven lacs of villages? Have I by my personal example given them an idea of what they could do to help themselves?²²

And secondly he highlighted the dangers of the War and asserted the superiority of the non-violence:

The world is in the throes of a destructive war that threatens the very foundation of civilization. If the war is carried on by all parties with tainted motives, we may despair of any humane and equitable world order. What we do in the crisis is, therefore, not only of importance to ourselves but to the world. If by our nonviolent means we can put an end to our internal strife and attain freedom, we will have proved to a doubting world that it can yet be saved without the aid of death-dealing instruments of war. We can do this only if we are true to our ideals and true to the leader who has placed this great weapon of non-violence in our hands. It is the weapon which even in weakness and defeat saves an individual and a nation their self-respect. Let us stick fast, therefore, to the anchor of non-violence. Let our non-violence be not of the weak but of the strong, fortified with the moral justice of our cause.²³

The next session of the Congress was to be held at Ramgarh in March 1940 in Bihar and Rajendra Prasad, and being the President of the Congress, had got little time to devote for its arrangements. He had also been elected Chairman of the Reception Committee of the Ramgarh session so as to avoid a contest among different contenders. He had, indeed, a tough time ahead making arrangements for the session and looking after the affairs of the Congress. Nevertheless he never shrugged off from the responsibilities and went ahead with the best of his abilities.

The Government's refusal to accept the Congress suggestion precipitated talk of immediately launching a mass civil disobedience movement. By the time of Ramgarh session of the Congress sharp differences had grown on this issue. Gandhiji and the dominant leadership, including Rajendra Prasad were not in favour of it immediately.

They advanced three broad reasons for not initiating an immediate movement. Firstly, they thought that since the cause of the Allies - Britain and France - was just, they should not be embarrassed in the prosecution of the War. Secondly, the lack of Hindu-Muslim unity was a big barrier to a struggle and in the existing atmosphere any civil disobedience movement could easily degenerate into communal rioting or even civil war.

And lastly, they felt that there did not exist in the country an atmosphere for an immediate struggle. The Congress organization was weak and had been corrupted during 1938-39 and there was indiscipline and lack of cohesion within the Congress ranks.

Under these circumstances, they argued, a mass movement would not be able to withstand severe repressive measures of the Government. They were, therefore, of the opinion that an intensive political work among the people was required for the time being to prepare them for struggle. This view was summed up in the form of resolution of the Working Committee, which Rajendra Prasad convened at Patna from 28 February to 1st March 1940. The resolution, after reiterating the Congress position on the War and asserting that 'nothing short of complete independence can be accepted by the people', declared that the Congress would resort to civil disobedience 'as soon as the Congress organization is considered fit enough for the purpose, or in case circumstances so shape themselves as to precipitate a crisis'.²⁴

At Ramgarh session at the first sitting of the Subjects Committee of the Congress on March 17, Rajendra Prasad moved the main resolution on India and the War Crisis, as prepared by the Working Committee. His resolution was seconded by Jawaharlal Nehru and accepted by an overwhelming majority. Also as the Chairman of the Reception Committee he delivered the welcome speech and presented a brief survey of the history and glories of ancient Bihar with the hope that past might shed some

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 500.

²²*RPCSD*, Vol. 5, pp. V-VI.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴*CWMG*, Vol. 71, Appendix VI.



inspiring lessons for the present. The main resolution on war crisis, passed by Congress, gave a clarion call to the people to be prepared for the inevitable struggle under the leadership of Gandhiji.

He had no doubt in the efficacy of the position adopted by the Congress and accordingly, after getting relieved of the Presidency plunged himself into implementing it. About a month after the Ramgarh session of the Congress, he joined a volunteers' training camp at Sonepur in North Bihar for a week from 20 April. The total strength of the campers was 291, of whom 147 were members of the Provincial Congress Committee. Besides spinning and organizing spinning classes Rajendra Prasad used to give discourses to the people every day on Charkha, technique of Satyagraha and allied matters. He laid great stress on constructive work as a means for training men "in the art of self-control and discipline, the essential qualities of a Satyagrahi".²⁵ Such camps were organized also in the other districts of Bihar.

Conclusion: At the last but not the least, it can be concluded that whatsoever took place after mid-1939, most of them had partially been influenced the Tripuri episode. This episode determined the path of later incidents, most of them influenced the future path & destine of struggling India in storming days of 2nd World War.



²⁵ K. K. Datta, *op. cit.*, p.174.