The basic concern of politics in pre-independent India centered round the goal of achieving India’s freedom from the stronghold of British imperialism. ‘The Quit India Movement of 1942 is a landmark in India’s struggle for freedom. It was the last and undoubtedly the bitterest fight for freedom ever waged against the British in India. This revolutionary movement came after the passing of the Quit India Resolution by the All India Congress Committee at Bombay on 8 August 1942. It was on this historic day, Mahatmaji gave his mantra of “Do or Die” calling upon the people to ‘either free India or die in the attempt’. It was here that he talked with the tone beset by danger - entangled in a life and death struggle in the Second World War. Over and above, Gandhi also came out like an angry lion calling upon the people to ‘Do or Die’ for the cause of India’s independence.

This change in Gandhiji’s mind-set provides an interesting field of study to historians and political scientists concerned with Gandhian political strategy and dynamics.

This article is an attempt to understand Gandhi’s mind as a nationalist which primarily accounted for the Quit India Resolution and for his death defying call of “Do or Die” calling upon the people ‘either to Free India or die in the attempt’.

This article has three parts. The first part briefly highlights the AICC Resolution of 8 August 1942 passed under Gandhi’s leadership and his “Do or Die” speech on the occasion where he talked like an uncompromising nationalist with almost a revolutionary elan. That apart, the nature

Mahatma Gandhi and the Quit India Movement - A Study of Gandhian Strategy and Dynamics

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and character of the Quit India Movement which witnessed violent upsurge of the masses and a grim determination of an enslaved people to throw off the foreign yoke will be highlighted. The second part seeks to provide an explanation to the uncompromising and almost revolutionary passion for freedom which animated Gandhi at the time. It will be submitted that Netaji and his strategy was possibly one of the factors which shaped and moulded the mind of Gandhi to not only approve of a struggle for freedom during the war itself but to take an uncompromising stand against British imperialism. The third part reflects upon the relevance of his “Do or Die” spirit in to-day’s India.

Part -1

The All India Congress Committee which met at Bombay adopted a resolution on August 8, 1942 sanctioning “the starting of a mass struggle on non-violent lines on the widest possible scale under the leadership of Gandhiji. The Committee demanded the complete withdrawal of the British power from India. Although the Congress had not yet made any preparation for the envisaged mass struggle, this resolution popularly known as ‘Quit India’ resolution was in effect a call for an open revolt against British Rule. Gandhiji’s address on this occasion breathed the spirit and fervour of an uncompromising nationalist with a restless passion for freedom and an inflexible determination to achieve it. He was not for any bargain or compromise with Viceroy and was to be satisfied with nothing short of complete freedom. “Here is a Mantra — that I give you — The Mantra is “Do or Die” we shall either free India or die in the attempt” - - Freedom is not for the coward or the faint hearted.”

Gandhiji’s death-defying and revolutionary call of “Do or Die” was virtually an open challenge to British rule in India. It was an ultimatum to the British to Quit India. Mahatma Gandhi of course wished to talk to the Viceroy before commencing the actual struggle. But British Government which preferred ‘suppression to discussion’ arrested in haste Mahatma Gandhi and other members on August 9 in the early hours of the morning which enraged the Indian masses and culminated in a violent upsurge against British rule in India. In fact ‘the fury of the people burst the dykes and turned on the instruments and symbols of British rule’. Even though the Viceroy and British imperial authorities unjustly blamed Gandhi and the Congress for this upsurge of violence it is “the repression let loose by the police” which is said to have goaded the people to indulge in acts of “Violent fury”. This has been the view of Horace Alexander, a well-known British journalist who toured India during the period. May be, had Gandhi remained at liberty, he would have prevented his followers and the people to curb the general violence and disorder which characterized the Quit India Movement. But our national destiny ordained it otherwise. As has been said “By an irony of history both Gandhi and the Government had as if conspired to bring about this violent revolution”.

The countrywide response of the people, the ‘dizzy heights of revolutionary fervour’, ‘the massive avalanches of popular energy and the grim determination of the people to throw off the foreign yoke is said to have hastened the British decision to Quit India’. Even though Gandhiji did not lead this movement, the people at large lived upto his magic mantra of ‘Do or Die’ and actualised it in their grim determination to make India free. In a way, it is Gandhi who fathered this mass upsurge being the prime-mover of the Quit India Resolution and the ‘Do or Die’ Mantra which electrified the people to their very depths
and fight for India’s freedom with reckless abandon.

Part – II

As has been said, the Quit India Resolution which was adopted under Gandhiji’s leadership sanctioning a mass struggle for freedom was a departure from his earlier stand when he said: “we do not seek our independence out of Britain’s Ruin. That is not the way of non-violence. Why did Gandhi change his stand? What led him to approve of a struggle against the British when it was still involved in a ruinous life and death struggle though ‘it is not the way of non-violence as per his own admission? It appears that one important factor which shaped, moulded and radicalised the mind of Gandhi to adopt the strategy of a struggle was the impact of Netaji Subhas who during the Second World War often said “England’s difficulty is India’s opportunity and it is the time opportune to launch upon our struggle for freedom.” That Gandhi in a way was influenced by Subhas in this respects is evident from what he is reported to have said to an American journalist in response to his question as to why he could not wait for Indian freedom till the end of the war. Gandhi significantly said: “Go and ask Subhas, Such a passion for freedom animates us to-day’.

From what has been said above, it appears that the Mahatma and the Indian National Congress were ultimately influenced by his constant and consistent clamour, appeal and persuasion to the effect that Congress should utilise the favourable international situation and launch upon a struggle during the war itself when Britain was in difficulty.

This view point was constantly harped upon by Subhas which needs to be summarized and linked up to the Quit India Resolution for a struggle against British Raj.

(i) Subhas’s European sojourn in 1930s and his study of European politics from close quarters made him foresee the inevitability of an European war and Britain’s involvement in it. In view of this impending war he as the Congress President in 1938 made an open propaganda that Indian National Congress should prepare the people for a national struggle to synchronize with the coming war in Europe. This call for struggle was of course resented by the pro-ministry group who were not prepared to be disturbed from their ministerial and parliamentary assignments.

(ii) When he was re-elected as President in 1939 he proposed at Tripuri in March 1939 that Congress should forthwith serve a 6 months ultimatum to the British demanding independence for India failing which Congress should launch upon an all-out struggle to oust the British from India. It was, however, opposed and thrown out by Gandhi wing and Nehru.

(iii) When Second World War commenced in September 1939 as per his prophetic insight and Britain got involved in a life and death struggle, Subhas considered it as a welcome opportunity to strive and struggle for India’s freedom since every blow to Britain in Europe will weaken her grasp on India and facilitate the achievement of freedom.

(iv) Gandhi unlike Subhas was not interested to launch any struggle at the time. He believed that any movement when Britain was in difficulty will derogate from his doctrine of non-violence. As has been said about his mind at the time — it was against the tenet of non-violence to create difficulties for one’s opponents when he is beset by dangers.

(v) It is significant that Subhas was surprisingly invited to help in the formulation of the war policy of Congress inspite of his
differences with Gandhi following his reelection as Congress President against the will of Gandhi. In the meeting he reiterated his appeal to the Congress to launch upon an immediate national struggle. It, however, could hardly cut any ice with the Congress High Command.

(vi) Though as late as the Ramgarh session of March 1940, the Indian National Congress remained indecisive as regards its war policy; Bose persisted in his efforts to radicalize, revolutionize and activate the Congress to take to the path of immediate struggle. At the Anti-Compromise Conference in March 1940, Subhas with a mind to move the Congress for a struggle criticized Congress inaction and gave a call for an immediate national struggle. Unlike Nehru who did not approve of exploiting Britain’s position, Subhas as a cold blooded nationalist said “India must in this grave crisis think of herself first”.

(vii) When Subhas could not move Gandhi or Congress to launch an immediate national struggle for the over-riding goal of India’s freedom, he and his Forward Bloc ventured upon to launch an anti-British and anti-war campaign on 6th April 1940. At the second session of the All India Forward Bloc held at Nagpur on June 18, 1940, Subhas gave the Rallying Cry “All power to the Indian People”. He sought to galvanise the masses into action. He told the people that it was high time to make an immediate demand for the transference of power to them through a provisional national Government.

(viii) Subhas who now realized that neither he nor anybody could move the masses effectively without Gandhi’s blessings and leadership, met Gandhi at Sevagram in June 1940 in his final attempt to persuade Gandhi to launch some immediate mass movement.

Though Subhas, could not convince Gandhi in his view point that it was the time opportune to launch upon a mass struggle for freedom in June 1940 in his last meeting, the individual Satyagraha movement seems to have been some concession to Subhas and the radicals though of-course it was not a mass movement. However, what is more significant is the change in Gandhiji’s mind towards Subhas and possibly his view point after he escaped from the country in 1941 in his quest for Indian freedom through an armed struggle. Abdul Kalam Azad in his book ‘India wins Freedom’ points out that Gandhiji’s admiration for Bose coloured his view point about the war situation and was somewhat responsible for the failure of Cripps mission. Sri Azad who was a close confidant of Gandhiji and an active participant in the Congress drama of those days saw that Gandhiji’s mind was now moving from the extreme of complete inactivity to that of organized mass effort. The process had perhaps began earlier but it became clear after Cripps left.

Abdul Kalam Azad has underlined four important things with regard to Subhas and Gandhi. Firstly, Subhas Bose’s escape impressed Gandhiji greatly and after that some change was marked in the outlook of Gandhi towards Subhas. Secondly, Gandhiji’s admiration for Subhas coloured his view about the war situation and he was becoming more and more doubtful about Allied Victory. Thirdly, Gandhiji’s admiration towards Bose was one of the factors which clouded the discussions during the Cripps Mission. Fourthly, Gandhiji’s mind was moving from the extreme of complete inactivity to that of organized / mass effort.

Subhas after his escape from the country in his quest for freedom, proclaimed time and again that the Axis powers would win the war. Here in India Gandhiji’s mind was moving in the
same direction. How does one explain this similarity of outlook? It calls for a deeper probe into the factors and forces which shaped and moulded his mind but then partially and to some extent, Subhas phenomenon might have interacted upon Gandhiji’s mind to determine his attitude towards the outcome of the war.

Gandhiji’s attitude towards the Cripps proposals of 1942 which held out the promises of dominion status after the war was absolutely stiff and uncompromising. He said to Cripps “why did you come if this is what you have to offer? If this is your entire proposal to India, I would advise you to take the next plane home”

Bose who was outside the country during the Cripps proposals negotiations, exposed the inadequacies of this plan to his countrymen in a broadcast from Azad Hind Radio, Germany on March 25, 1942. The proposals contained nothing that is fundamentally new. The essence is dominion status within the empire which is to be realized only when the war is over. Over and above, he cautioned our countrymen- that the real intention of the British Government is to split India into a number of states—— “I am doubtful whether India will even look at such an offer” said. Did Gandhi listen to Bose’s broadcasts from outside the country? Was he in anyway, influenced by him? The similarity of outlook appears quite significant in this connection.

The tone and temper of Gandhiji’s mind during this time is very significant. He had no patience to either believe in future British promises or independence after the war. ‘I want independence now’ he said in no uncertain terms. Gandhi, in a way, was now stiff and uncompromising so far as the question of India’s freedom was concerned. There was a clear mark of erosion of faith in the goodness of British imperialism. In March 1940, Gandhiji had stated “compromise is in my very being”. The position he had now reached was materially different. Abdul Kalam rightly observed that there was “a shift from the extreme of inactivity to that of organized effort” or as it were a shift from stagnation to mobility. No more did he seem averse to the idea a struggle as was marked in his attitude in the beginning of the war. His mind was now evolving towards an uncompromising struggle. The tone and temper was virtually revolutionary - moving in the direction of a struggle - a mass struggle quite akin to the soul and spirit of Subhas.

Gandhiji’s conversation with Louis Fischer, an American journalist on June 7, June 8 and June 9 unfolds the mind of Gandhi. The way his mind was working at the moment can be put under three broad heads.

(a) He had developed a soft corner for Subhas.
(b) In a way he spoke the language of Subhas. His revolutionary impatience for Swaraj and his action oriented motivation breathe the spirit of Subhas.
(c) Gandhiji’s attitude towards non-violence seems to have undergone some change in his latest and new mood which is very important from the standpoint of understanding Gandhian strategy and dynamics.

Gandhiji seemed to have developed a soft corner for Subhas as was testified by Abul Kalam Azad. The same spirit now vibrates in the conversation of Louis Fischer with Mahatma Gandhi.

Louis Fischer expressed his sense of shock before Gandhiji for his telegram of condolences for Subhas’s reported death and his regret for a man who went to Fascist Germany
and collaborated with it. Gandhi, however, defended Bose as “a patriot of patriots”. He was even not prepared to pay any heed to Fischer’s apprehension that Subhas might succumb to the lure of Fascism and make India free but fascist” on the other hand, he did not hesitate to condemn British rule on the same score of fascist proclivities.

Gandhiji’s mind was veering towards a struggle against British Raj which was so often harped upon by Subhas almost uninterruptedly in different forums and meetings. In a way Gandhi now represented his revolutionary impatience for Swaraj and his action oriented motivation. “Men who have held office in Congress may not rise to the occasion (Gandhiji looked pointedly to Nehru when he said this). I will go ahead nevertheless and address myself directly to people”.

Gandhiji has now lost faith in British goodness. As per his latest mood, it is action and action alone that matters to him. He affirmed: “— I say that the British will understand not while we are reasoning but when we begin to act. That is British history, they are impressed by action and it is action that we must take now”. This is virtually what Subhas tried to impress upon Gandhi in his last meeting with him in June 1940 appealing him to act and launch upon the struggle for freedom when Britain was in difficulty. It appears that Subhas finally succeeded in radicalizing the mind of Gandhi to decide for a strategy of struggle against British Raj during the war itself which got reflected in the Quit India Resolution and his “Do or Die” call.

That, there was some change in Gandhiji’s mind which did not fully conform to an absolutely rigid and doctrinal adherence to the doctrine of non-violence of yester years is evident from his answers to some seminal questions of Louis Fischer. Louis Fischer’s questions and Gandhiji’s answers are submitted below in view of its importance from the stand point of Gandhian strategy and its dynamics.

Fischer: Q. What would be nature of the ‘impending Civil Disobedience movement’?

The Mahatma: A. In the villages, the peasant will stop paying taxes. They will make salt despite official prohibition - their next step will be to seize the land.

Fischer: Q. Whether the peasants were to seize the land “with violence”.

The Mahatma: A. “There may be violence but then the landlords may cooperate”. There may be fifteen days chaos” but “I think we could bring that under control”.

Fischer: Q. In case ‘your impending Civil Disobedience movement develops a violent phase, as it has sometimes in the past years, would you call it off?’

The Mahatma: A. In my present mood, it would be incorrect to say that no circumstances might arise in which I would call off the movement. In the past, however, I have been too cautious. That was necessary for my own training and for the training of my collaborators. But I would not behave as I have in the past”.

Those words of Gandhi are very significant. Here Gandhi appears to be more a pragmatic nationalist than an ethical absolutist with unbending, rigid and doctrinal adherence to non-violence even at the cost of India’s paramount goal of freedom. Like Subhas, Gandhi now thinks of freedom as of over-riding consideration ‘Our first problem is to get rid of British rule for me the paramount problem is the ending of British domination’.
That Gandhi at the time showed some flexibility in his attitude towards non-violence is evident from what he said further on 8th July, 1942. “I do not want rioting as a direct result but if in spite of precautions rioting does take place it cannot be helped”. On 14th July, 1942, Gandhi told a group of Journalists that there was absolutely no room for compromise or negotiation unless the British recognized India’s independence. “There is no question of one more chance. After all this is open rebellion.

Jawaharlal Nehru who was very close to Gandhi and was in a better position to understand the working of Gandhi’s mind during those months leading upto August 1942 very significantly wrote “In the conflict between that principle of non-violence which has become his very life-blood and the meaning of existence and India’s freedom, which was a dominating and consuming passion for him, the scales inclined towards the latter — the practical statesman took precedence over the uncompromising prophet”.

Gandhi notwithstanding his rocklike adherence to certain principles like non-violence was also a pragmatist. As it were, he was prepared “to adapt himself to others and to changing circumstances”. He also took into account the strength and weakness of others especially the mass of the people and how far they were capable of acting upto truth as he saw it’.

The Quit India Resolution was passed on 8th August 1942. Gandhiji’s mindset was virtually revolutionary and uncompromising. He “suggested no compromise and his tone was inflexible”. He was now for an all-out struggle against British Raj. “We shall get our freedom by fighting and it cannot fall from the skies” so said Gandhiji. He was even prepared “to fight to the finish even if he stood alone against the whole world. His last message was “we get our freedom or die”

In March, 1939 at the Tripuri session of the Congress, Subhas had proposed that the Indian National Congress should immediately send an ultimatum to the British Government demanding independence within six months and should simultaneously prepare for a national struggle. This proposal for an ultimatum was opposed by Gandhi and Nehru and was thrown out. Subhas had maintained all along that it was only when Britain was involved in war that we could fight it with the maximum chances of success and that Britain’s difficulty was India’s opportunity. When Britain got entangled in war with Germany, Subhas implored Gandhi and the Indian National Congress to launch upon some mass struggle for freedom. To Subhas, this was “India’s golden opportunity” to fight and win Swaraj. Gandhi, on the other hand, considered that any movement when Britain was in difficulty will derogate from his doctrine of non-violence. In fact on September 6, 1939, three days after the commencement of the Second World War, Gandhi had issued a press statement that inspite of the differences between India and Britain on Indian Independence, India should cooperate with Britain in her hour of danger. However, Congress under Gandhiji’s leadership passed the famous Quit India resolution three years later on August 8, 1942 when Britain was still in the midst of a life and death struggle. As we saw, Gandhi ultimately took an absolutely uncompromising stand against British imperialism. His tone and temper clearly smacked of a revolutionary elan quite akin to the soul and spirit of Netaji. In a way, it was a vindication of Netaji’s revolutionary and realistic strategy of fight against the British Raj. So, it is aptly said that the Quit India Movement brought Gandhi and Bose ideologically nearer to each other and marked the climax of Bose’s attempts to radicalize the Congress Organization.
Part - III

The Quit India Resolution of August 8, 1942 and Gandhi’s historic speech with his mantra of “Do or Die” provided the foundation to the unconquerable spirit and determination shown by our people in the Quit India movement to achieve India’s Freedom. This mantra of “Do or Die” which Gandhi gave in the contextual specificity of India’s struggle for freedom does have even a relevance of its own in to-day’s India. The same spirit of grim determination which our people showed to throw off the foreign yoke can now be fruitfully made use of in India’s nation building. The same spirit needs to be revived to fight the demon of communalism which many a time endangers our national unity and integration. The hundreds of thousands of our common people who joined the Quit India Movement being inspired by Gandhiji dreamt of an independent India where there will be no poverty and degradation. The same spirit of determination of “Do or Die”, need to be actualized to remove this sorry state of affairs so as to have nation-Building in the real sense, of the term.

The widening disparity between the affluent and deprived needs to be bridged up for a more humane and just society. It calls for determination - a “Do or Die” spirit which Gandhi generated to achieve India’s freedom. We can be true heirs of Gandhi if the spirit of “Do or Die” gets actualized in these two major areas of India’s nation-building. A great responsibility devolves on the powers that be and on one and all to see an India where we can wipe out every tear from eye which Gandhiji dreamt of.

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