

# THE SECOND WORLD WAR AND THE CONGRESS

**T**he Second World War began on 1st September, 1939. Two days later, the Viceroy of India declared war against Germany without consulting or taking into confidence the Indian leaders. Indian troops were sent to the various theatres of war for the defence of the British Empire.

## Congress Reaction

After having done all this, the Viceroy started consultations with the Indian leaders. The Working Committee of the Congress met at Wardha in September, 1939 and after prolonged deliberations, a resolution was adopted in which it was declared that if the war was "to defend the status quo, imperialist possessions, colonies, vested interests and privileges, then India could have nothing to do with it. If, however, the issue was democracy and a world based on democracy, then India is intensely interested in

it. If Great Britain was fighting for the maintenance and extension of democracy, then she must necessarily end imperialism in her own possessions and establish full democracy in India." The British Government was called upon to declare its war aims "in regard to democracy and imperialism" and also to declare whether those aims were "going to apply to India and to be given effect to at present."

Almost a year later, another resolution was passed by the Congress at Ramgarh in which an offer of co-operation in the war was made provided India's demand for independence was conceded and a provisional National Government responsible to the then Central Assembly was formed at the Centre. On 8th August, 1940, the Viceroy issued a statement in which it was declared that the new Constitution of India would primarily be the responsibility of the Indians themselves. However, it was made

clear that Great Britain "could not contemplate transfer of their present responsibilities for the peace and welfare of India to any system of Government whose authority is directly denied by large and powerful elements in India's national life, nor could they be parties to the coercion of such elements into submission of such a Government." It was also declared that after the war a "representative Indian constitution-making body would be set up and the Indian proposals as to its form and operation would at any time be welcome." The Congress was wholly disappointed with this offer.

## Individual Satyagraha

In September, 1940, the AICC resolved that the self imposed restraint of the Congress could not be carried to the extent of self-extinction. It was decided to launch Satyagraha in support of the modest demand and the issue of freedom of

speech. On October 17, individual satyagraha commenced and Vinobha Bhave was the first nominee. Pandit Nehru was to follow him but was arrested on October 31, 1940, and was sentenced to 4 years' imprisonment.

This campaign was of a most restricted character so that the British Government might not be embarrassed in their hour of trial. The campaign thus, went on smoothly for 14 months. There was no attempt directly to interfere with the Government's war effort. Many of the leaders were later released. The war was drawing near India's border.

### The Cripps Mission

The spectacular success of Japan and the pressure of the allies of Britain, during the early months of 1942 forced the British Government to make a serious attempt to end the deadlock in India. On March 11, 1942, Mr. Churchill announced that Sir Stafford Cripps, a member of the

War Cabinet, would go to India to explain certain constitutional proposals. Sir Stafford Cripps arrived at Delhi on March 22, 1942, and left Karachi for London on April 13, 1942.

The declaration of the British Government contained the following provisions: (1) An elected constitution-making body would be set up in India after the war; (2) Provision would be made for the participation of the Indian States in the above constitution-making body; (3) The British Government would accept and implement the constitution-making body; but any Province of British India should have the right to reject the new constitution; (4) Revision of treaties with Indian States would be necessary; and (5) Until the new constitution could be framed, the British Government would remain responsible for the defence of India. It will be seen that the provision about the non-accession of Provinces to the Indian Union and the arrangement about defence was quite unacceptable to the Congress.

On April 2, 1942, the Working Committee adopted a resolution explaining the causes of its rejection of the Cripps Scheme. It was observed: "To take away defence from the sphere of responsibility at this stage is to reduce that responsibility to a farce and a nullity, and to make it perfectly clear that India is not going to be free in any way and her Government is not going to function as a free and independent Government during the pendency of the war." In his 'Discovery of India' Pandit Nehru made it clear that Lord Linlithgow and the Civil Services sabotaged the Cripps Plan. The rejection of the plan by the Congress was followed by its rejection by the League, of course, for other reasons. Mahatma Gandhi remarked that the Cripps' offer was a post-dated cheque on a crashing bank. He is stated to have told him thus: "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." Sir Stafford's reply was: "I will consider that." □

