

1942 – Before and After Some Reminiscences

Chandras Shah

Prelude

I was nearly ten years old when I was exposed for the first time to the national movement. It was known as congress movement then. Congress was also known locally as *Mahasabha*. Hindu Mahasabha was either not born or not widely known. It was the year of 1930. I was a member of children's wing of the movement. The wing was known as *Vanar Sena*. We used to wonder why this name. We now know just as Ram's army consisted of monkeys we the little monkeys made a part of the army of Gandhi who like Ram lived the values Ram espoused.

Even now I do not know how to fly a kite. As a part of the program of the national movement we undertook the program of Boycott of British Goods in particular and foreign goods in general. We used to go from house to house to collect the clothes to be discarded and used for making bon-fire of all foreign goods. Textiles were the main items but kites too were not spared, especially the string used to fly the kite. We used to do picketing through out the wintry nights to see no one buys and brings the string and kites from any corner of our area. Our area was then Mandvi Street. In the larger program of boycott we used to go to shops for picketing in *Panch kuva mahajan* area... The spirit of the people was preserved fully by the organization wing. No one pinched any item from the collection.

There was a positive program tied to *Vanar Sena*. We were recruited for the program of selling the salt made or picked up by volunteers - *Swatantrya Sainik* - in Dharasana, a place like Dandi where Gandhiji picked up. Dandi and Dharasana were far apart. Also, as a part of positive program we used to spin yarn at home for making Khadi hand spun hand woven cloth. My grand mother had a spinning wheel which was traditional and out of use. We pulled it out from the back room and started using it. We were required then to make our own slivers from which we could spin yarn. We used to take this yarn to Gandhi Ashram where they had hand looms. All this was much before *Yeravada Chakra*. *Yeravada Chakra* was a mobile spinning wheel. (It is said the idea was given by Gandhiji when he was in jail in Yeravada near Poona, now Pune). When new spinning wheel was made available we used to carry it with us to places and used to have mass spinning programs too in public places. Especially on occasions like Gandhi Jayanti (then known as *Rentia Barash*, (a day in Indian Calendar)., and observation of Jalianwala Baug a week to protest the massacre committed by British army. .

Through out the period prior to 1942 there was a program of intellectual doctrinaire. A group of intellectuals used to hold study circles. The leaders used to discuss with groups of youngsters the history of British rule and the economic ruin of the country. Leaders included then locally well-known intellectuals. They were, Prof. M.L.

Dantwala, Prof. C.L. Gheewala, Dinkar Mehta, Kanu Machhar, Ranchod, Vasant Hegishte etc. all were located in Ahmedabad

We used to read regularly the Gandhian literature. My father was an employee of the Imperial Bank, now known as State Bank of India. Being an employee of a semi-government institution he was implicitly bound by the Government rules which included not participating in the activities like the national movement. He was at heart nationalist. He used to subscribe to Navageevan and then to Harijan Bandhu (Gujarati version of Harijan (English)) I used to read the weeklies at home and English version at college library. I still recall that early morning when the Harijan copy had just arrived carrying the article by Gandhiji titled, "Quit India". I was thrilled and went out and discussed the content with all friends.

Gandhiji made an impact on all aspects of life. Especially the impact on literature was the most. We used to read patriotic poetry and prose by leading writers of those years. Meghani in Gujarat and Tagore at national level made an impact. We read cover to cover the History of National Congress written by Pattabhi Sitaramaiya. Literature by and for Arvind Ghosh also had an influence on us. His imprisonment in a small prison cell and his enlightenment had impressed me.

Somewhat detailed prelude is meant to provide the background that prepared the youngster in the spirit of nationalism and especially in the spirit of national movement of Satyagraha. The training of decade long period made the 1942 movement a powerful uprising possible. Particularly, these were formative years that prepared me for active political participation subsequently. During this period I widened my political involvement. I started a group of young boys and girls who were taught gymnastics. And I joined Gym at two levels one that taught the lower level leaders and the other city level gym. I also joined rifle club. Patriotic leaders ran the entire movement. That put me in touch with higher-level leaders. Once I had invited Morarjibhai Desai to address a meeting of area people. He came and addressed the group of over 100 persons.

This was the period when I came in contact with leaders who played a stellar role in the national movement after 1942; they were Jyanti Thakor, who came to be known as *shaher suba* – city chief operating underground, Niru Desai, Ramaniklal Shah, Jayanti Dalal and many others. Niru Desai was to me my mentor then and life time guide and friend.

The Congress socialist paksha started working as an official group much later but their influence on me last for a life time Communist party came out of congress and established itself as CPI during the 1942 movement. Dinkar Mehta, Kanu Machhar etc moved out of the congress during the movement time. They preferred to side with Russia.

1942 and After

The first call for the movement came on August 8 with the soul stirring address of Gandhiji in Bombay, now Mumbai. Next day with a small group of young boys I went to

villages roaming around.. I did not move incognito. I was not an important person like the leaders who had gone to jail during 1930 movement. I moved about for a week talking to people in rural areas to take up the cause of freedom. After the week I was picked up by the police and sent to Sabarmati jail. I was under detention. Being less important person I got the minimum imprisonment then – fifteen days.

But that was the beginning. Soon after coming out of the jail I got busy with the Satyagraha movement. There were two factions in the movement. One would prefer to follow the pure Gandhian method satyagrah; the other would not mind compromise with the pure non-violent resistance. I was inclined towards the former.

Once, an announcement was sent out for a public meeting giving date, time and location. But they sent out a word surreptitiously changing the location. I told the organizers that I shall show up at the declared location. I gathered a group of people with me and showed up at the location previously announced and the posse of police huddled us in the police van and drove us to the police station and from there to *katcha* or interim prison. Subsequently we were sentenced for three months with a penalty in cash. If we add two months of waiting, the imprisonment was for five months. My father came to see me in jail. He wanted to test me if I wanted to be out he would arrange. He knew I would not like to avail of his offer. The matter ended there. After I came out of the jail second time I was selected to lead a group of young volunteers to demonstrate in Pune where Gandhiji had undertaken fasts against the severe violence perpetrated by the Government forces against the *satyagrahis*. Our group was arrested and sentenced and sent to *yervada* prison. Sentence was again around three months. We had to wait for two months as we did earlier. By this time Gandhiji was released from the Agakhan palace where he was detained along with his close associates.. During the period of his internment he had lost his dearest assistant Mahadev Desai and his wife - Kasturba. His health also had deteriorated. Soon after the Government realized the futility of hanging on to the insolvent empire. They decided to release the political leaders,

During the height of movement the underground movement had gained strength. All noteworthy leaders those who went to underground remained outside and were in charge of the movement. They used to hold meetings and move the meeting locations from place to place. Once it was held in our house. Father knew it but did not object. While this demonstrates strength of his will the earlier instance of his going back on donning the black cap when he realized the white cap would jeopardize his job taken together represent the vast majority of people who sympathized with the movement but would not take the high risk of losing the only source of sustenance for the family. Such scenario was widespread which provided the inner strength for the movement though not the direct support.. But that was also the source of ultimate weakness of the movement..

I am reminded at this stage of a peon working in the Ahmedabad Municipality. He joined the movement burning his boats. He was in jail with us in Yeravada prison. On returning from the jail he found his job was taken away, he was jobless. Some of the friends tried to provide him financial help but he did not succeed in obtaining a decent job and we never

realized how finally his career ended. Like him there were many, many who made the ultimate sacrifice and ended as nonentity.

My wife too was involved in the national movement. She was in Mumbai and was closely associated with Vimala Mehta, wife of G.G.Mehta. She too was detained for fifteen days for demonstrating against the British rule. She was of tender age, a teenager.