The Tripuri Crisis of 1939

The 52nd session of the Congress was to be held at Tripuri near Jabalpur in March 1939. Through his long years of prison and exile Subhas Bose had earned a reputation and had been a unanimous choice. As the President of the Congress in 1938. But during his years in office he took hardly any interest in problems of organization and gave no clear lead in many matters that came up before the Working Committee. In 1939, he decided to stand again - this time as the spokesperson of militant politics and radical groups. Bose's campaign "centered on the charge that the Right-wing were about to enter in to a compromise with the British Government and that negotiations had reached such a stage that a prospective list of ministers for the federal cabinet has been drawn up." This and other charges that he and his supporters labeled against what they called "the right wingers" and "compromise wallas" sounded wild and totally false against leaders with long public service and commitment. Subhas, as the biographer of Nehru suggests, could not get along with Gandhi, which was not just difference of viewpoint.

Jawaharlal Nehru too differed with Gandhiji just as much, but they had a mutual understanding. Gandhi writing to Nehru had indicated this: "we know that neither of us can do without the other, for there is a heart union between us which no intellectual differences can break". With Subhas Bose there was no such affinity, and when he announced early in 1939 his intentions to seek reelection, we do not find Gandhi very comfortable. He in fact encouraged another candidature by Subhas Bose there.

Subhas Bose's campaign witnessed articulation of a series of disparate grievances, and was in no way a unified leftist challenge to the Right-Wing that he claimed it to be. He declared that he represented the "new ideas, ideologies, problems and programmes" that had emerged with "the progressive sharpening of the anti-imperialist struggle in India". The presidential elections, he declared, should be fought among different candidates "on the basis of definite problems and programmes".

Rajendra Prasad, a confirmed Gandhian, had an entirely different perception over the whole issues. He believed that these kinds of thoughts and ideas were contrary to professed ideals of the Congress. No wonder he, along with Sardar Patel, J.B. Kripalani and four other members of the Congress Working Committee, issued a counter statement, and declared that the talk of ideologies, programmes and policies was irrelevant in the elections of a Congress president. These were evolved by the various Congress bodies such as the AICC and the Working Committee, and that the position of the Congress President was just like that of a constitutional head that represented and symbolized the unity and solidarity of the nation. In his opinion, therefore, Subhas Bose's entire conduct was contrary to the usual practice evolved within the Congress over the years. He also held Subhas Bose responsible for precipitating the crisis as he did not consult Gandhi or the Working Committee in this matter.

It appeared that Subhas Bose himself was seeking reelection but he never spoke his mind to the Working Committee. He had been elected unanimously for the Haripur session at the instance of Gandhi himself. Even now, if he had expressed his wish to Gandhi and all of us, we might have somehow accommodated him.

However, the occasion for accommodation did not present itself and the rift between those who accepted Gandhi or Subhas Bose widened further. The two groups had drifted quite apart from each other which were, indeed, quite an unfortunate development. That difference had crystallized and...

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1 S. Gopal, Jawaharlal Nehru, op. cit., p. 241.
2 The problematic of "compromise" characterized the left wing attitudes to Gandhian strategy and this crystallized around Bose's campaign for reelection to the Presidentship of the Congress for second term.
4 S. Gopal, Jawaharlal Nehru, op. cit., p. 241.
5 Gandhi in May 1939, quoted in Tendulkar, Mahatma, Vol. 5, p. 95.
7 Ravi Vasudevan, op. cit., p. 372.
8 Ibid.
almost reached a stage beyond reconciliation was evident. To quote Rajendra Prasad:

When the Working Committee next met m Bardoli, where Gandhi ji used to spend a month in winter, we informally discussed the issue again and it was generally agreed among us that Maulana Azad should be elected. Maulana Azad consented but no one spoke of this to Subhas Bose. He also never touched on the subject but we only heard that wherever he went he had been canvassing support for his own candidature.12

Gandhi ji's nominee was Maulana Azad, who, however, withdrew his candidature soon as he learnt that there would be a contest. Subsequently the proposal came forth, just before the election, to nominate Patti ban Sitaramayya, and a communication in this regard was sent telegraphically by Sardar Patel to Rajendra Prasad, who was at Patna at that time, for his endorsement. The contest, therefore, was to be between Subhas Bose and Sitaramayya now. It was the first time that there was a contest for the election of the President. However in the ensuing election Subhas Bose was elected on 29 January by 1580 votes against 1377. The highest number of votes he got from Bengal was 404.13

Gandhi ji declared that Sitaramayya's defeat was "more mine than his".15 He also indicated the role of bogus membership etc. in the election. Gandhi ji was not in a happy mood, to say the least.

For Rajendra Prasad the issue involved was ideological in nature. It was, he thought, "contest between those who believed in Gandhi ji's ideology and those who did not." He, along with his like-minded group had an apprehension "that things might change and that a new Congress President might come in who would formulate his own programme and carry the organization with him". He felt hurt and viewed the defeat of his group in terms of inability of Sitaramayya to represent Gandhi ji, at least, symbolically:

If Maulana Azad had agreed to stand, we had no doubt that he would have been returned by a large majority because the common Congressman liked him and did not want to break with the Gandhian programme. But the people were unable to see a symbol of Gandhi ji in

Subhas Bose and Sitaramayya, and so in the election which ensured, Subhas Bose won by a large majority.16

The election of Bose aggravated the crisis further ahead of the Tripuri session of the Congress.17 Bose actively indulged in propaganda against Sardar Patel and the majority of the top Congress leadership, whom he branded as Rightists. He accused that the "old guard" were conspiring with the Government and working for a compromise on the question of federation, and had even drawn up a list of prospective central ministers and, therefore, not wanting a leftist as the president of the Congress 'who may be a thorn in the way of a compromise and may put obstacles in the path of negotiations".18 He announced that the "Right" and the "Left" were in confrontation and demanded the immediate issuing of an ultimatum to the Government and launching of a struggle. He had, therefore, appealed to Congressmen to vote for a leftist and 'a genuine antifederationist'.19 In his autobiography, Subhas Chandra Bose put forth his thinking of the period more bluntly. "As Congress president, the writer did his best to stiffen the posposition of the Congress Party to any compromise with Britain and this caused annoyance in Gandhi circles who were then looking forward to an understanding with the British Government."20 The Gandhians, he wrote, "did not want to be disturbed in their ministerial and parliamentary work' and 'were at that time opposed to any national struggle".21

This was, indeed, a acrimonious campaign which was bound to drive a fissure in the Congress at a critical juncture when war clouds were hovering over the horizon.

Subhas Bose had underestimated Gandhi ji and his followers who welcomed a break and brought about it in their own way. This group pointed out in a statement: "Subhas Babu had mentioned his opposition to the federation. This is shared by all the members of the Working Committee. It is the Congress policy.22 And subsequently on the eve of the meeting of the Working Committee, which was to be held at Wardha, twelve members of it, including Rajendra Prasad, resigned from it as they "did not see eye to eye with the President".23 The three members who remained on the Working Committee were Bose himself, his brother Sarat and Jawaharlal Nehru. To quote Rajendra Prasad:

We did not see eye to eye with the President and we thought it better to let Bose himself draft the resolutions because the main burden of the Congress organization would have to be borne by him and his supporters in future. Further, we did not want to embarrass him by our presence in the Working Committee. It would have looked improper also if we, as the Working Committee, were to oppose the official...

12Ibid., p. 480.
13According to Sitaramayya, there was nothing wrong in Subhas Bose becoming President for the second time. However Gandhi ji wanted Maulana Azad to be the President as this might have eased the communal situation and help to solve the communal problem. In his own words: "The writer was informed by Gandhi ji as he was departing from Bardoli that it was his (Gandhi ji's) intention to take the crown of thorns that year on his (wri ter's) head if Maulana had not agreed. But fortunately, he had agreed the previous morning and left for Bombay. The next day Maulana revised his opinion in Bombay and decided to withdraw. By that time, it seemed three nominations were announced in the press. Subhas Babu's, the Maulana's and the writer's, the last without his knowledge and therefore with with withdrawal in Bombay. Shortly after, however, it had to be restored at the Maulana's instance as he had decided to withdraw himself and then hastening from Bombay to Bardoli announced his own withdrawal. This left the writer and Subhas Babu in the field. The contest was unintended and unexpected at least on the part of one of them." Pattabhi Sitaramayya, The History of the Indian National Congress, Vol. II (1935-1947), Bombay,1947, p.105.

15On 31 January 1939 Gandhi ji issued the following statement: 'Mr. Subhas Bose has achieved a decisive victory over his opponent. Dr. Pattabhi Sitaramayya, I must confess that from the very beginning I was decisively against his re-election for reasons in which I need not go. I do not subscribe to his facts or the arguments in his manifesto. I think that his references to his colleagues were unjustified and unworthy ....And since I was instrumental in inducing Dr. Pattabhi not to withdraw his name as a candidate when Maulana Saheb withdrew, the defeat is more mine than his.' JAR, Vol. I, 1939, p.320.

17According to S. Gopal, this was only the beginning of the crisis. To quote: "With his re-election Bose believed that his hour as charismatic leader had arrived. Impatient, willful and endlessly ambitious, he decided to press home his victory. He ignored the fact that many local and regional factors for which he could take no credit had played a part in the election. He stressed only that there was widespread dissatisfaction with the older leaders and believed that he had been chosen to replace them. Incapable of the wider view, he tended to see most events in relation to his own career." S. Gopal, op. cit., p. 242.
19Crossroads, pp.91-2, cited in Bipan Chandra, etc., India's Struggle for Independence, p.444.
21Ibid.
22Tendulkar, Mahatma, Vol.5, p. 28.
23The other member of the Working Committee were Sardar Patel, Jairamdas Daulatram, AcharyaKripalani, Shankarrao Deo, Jnanalal Bajaj, Bhalabai Desai, Abu Kalam Azad and Pattabhi Sitaramayya.See JAR, Vol. I, 1939, p. 320.
Jawaharlal Nehru held a somewhat similar position. He had felt distressed with Bose's aspersions on his colleagues. To quote him:

“I do not know who you consider a leftist and who a rightist. The way these words were used by you in your statements during the presidential contest seemed to imply that Gandhiji and those who are considered as his group in the Working Committee are the rightist leaders. Their opponents, whoever they might be, are the leftists. That seems to me an entirely wrong description. It seems to me that many of the so-called leftists are more right than the so-called rightists. Strong language and a capacity to criticize and attack the old Congress leadership is not a test of leftism in politics ... I think the use of the words left and right has been generally wholly wrong and confusing. If, instead of these words, we talked about policies it would be far better. What policies do you stand for? Anti-federation, well and good; I think that the great majority of the members of the Working Committee stand for that and it is not fair to hint at their weakness in this respect.”

The real differences lay in the realm of policy and tactics between Subhas Bose and 'Gandhian' members or so-called Rightists. As Bipan Chandra argues, “they were partially based on differing perceptions of the political reality, and differing assessments of the strength and weakness of the Congress and the preparedness of the masses for struggle. Differing styles regarding how to build up a mass movement were also involved.”

Not only Jawaharlal Nehru but even the socialists distanced themselves from Subhas Bose over this issue. Though they did not agree over the entire resolution of Govind Vallabh Pant yet they abstained over it. Jayaprakash Narayan who spoke on their behalf said:

“Our Party voted for Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose, but from the very beginning we had made it clear that our vote did not mean a settling of the issues between the Rightists and the Leftists. We voted for Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose, because we preferred him to the other candidate, namely Dr. Pattabhi. We then never expected that it would lead to schism in the Congress. Our party does not and will not participate in this quarrel. I am convinced that this could have been averted. We tried our best to prevent it. We failed and we were disappointed.”

The Socialist leaders also did not want a division in the Congress to take place. They made sincere efforts to persuade both Subhas Chandra Bose and the other side to have a rapprochement but finally they also could not succeed. Quoting Jayaprakash Narayan here will give a better picture:

“We went to Subhas Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose and requested him to issue a statement clearing the position. Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose agreed, but the statement he made was not satisfactory. Coming to Tripuri, we approached the other side and discussed with them how a settlement could be effected. Here also our attempt proved abortive. We believed that unless the next Working Committee was appointed in accordance with the wishes of Mahatma Gandhi it will not be possible to maintain unity in the Congress.”

26 Bose to his nephew, 17 April 1939, quoted in S. Gopal, *ibid.*
Owing to the alarming state of his health, Subhash Chandra Bose, the President, could not attend the open session of the Congress. An atmosphere of tension and indecision had prevailed in Tripuri. Bose's supporters were angered by the resignation of the Working Committee as they thought that these resignations were just to place obstacles in their way. But this was not true in the eyes of Rajendra Prasad who thought that the leaders, who had resigned and had difficulty in working with Subhas Bose, had basic differences. According to Rajendra Prasad their "resignation was meant to clarify our position and to avoid a situation in which the programme would be theirs and the responsibility of implementing it would be ours." Gandhi too seemed to agree with this and in fact he had mince no words saying this was the right path when he said: "I rejoice in this defeat" because "Subhas Babu, instead of being President on the sufferance of those whom he calls rightists, is now President elected in a contested election. This enables him to choose a homogeneous cabinet and enforce his programme without let or hindrance".

Its proceedings were conducted without the President in a disturbed atmosphere. Bose had completely misjudged his support and the meaning of his majority in the presidential election. Congressmen had voted for him for diverse reasons, and above all because he stood for militant politics, and not because they wanted to have him as the supreme leader of the national movement. They were not willing to reject Gandhi's leadership or that of other older leaders who decided to bring this home to Subhas.

Govind Ballabh Pant moved a resolution at Tripuri expressing full confidence in the old Working Committee, reiterating full faith in Gandhi's leadership of the movement and the Congress policies of the previous twenty years, and asking Subhas to nominate his Working Committee 'in accordance with the wishes of Gandhi':

"In view of the critical situation that may develop during the coming year, and in view of the fact that Mahatma Gandhi alone can lead the Congress and the country during such as is, the Congress regards it as imperative that the executive authority of the Congress should command his implicit confidence and requests the President to nominate the Working Committee for the ensuing year in accordance with the wishes of Gandhi'.

The resolution was passed by a big majority, but Gandhi refused to impose a Working Committee on Subhas. Instead he asked him to nominate a Committee of his own choice. However Subhas Bose refused to do it as he was aware that he could not lead the organization on his own. At the same time he was also not ready to accept the leadership of the majority. He wanted, as Bipan Chandra argues, Gandhi to be the leader of the coming struggle and at the same time Gandhi to follow the strategy and tactics laid down by him and the left-wing parties and groups. Gandhi, on the other hand, would either lead the Congress on the basis of his own strategy and style of politics or surrender the position of the leader. Acrimony and bitterness only increased after the session and "We had failed to decide any major issue, only an internal quarrel had been fought in the open."

The position of Subhas Bose had become untenable. The President's resolution had been thrown out and a resolution which did not have his support had been passed. What next? Was the question now? If the President stood by the resolution adopted, he would have to form a Working Committee with the concurrence of Gandhi. However Subhas Bose was determined not to implement it.

The attempts at a compromise proved to be non-starter as Subhas Bose would not budge from his position insisting that the Working Committee should be representative of the new radical trends and groups which had elected him. Rajendra Prasad was deeply perturbed over the drift of affairs in the Congress. He wanted a conciliatory rapprochement on the issue. Couple of days ahead of the AICC meeting where Subhas Bose tendered his resignation Rajendra Prasad wrote to Jawaharlal:

"I am also not a little disturbed over the drift of affairs in the Congress. While on the one hand we have this complication in the Congress higher quarter, on the other hand there are visible signs of disruption and demoralization in the rank and file .... As regards tangle with the President I do not know how to solve it. My talk with Subhas Babu was short but he impressed on me that while he did not accept Bapu's viewpoint he was keen on having some sort of settlement particularly in the view of the developing situation in the country and outside. The correspondence between him and Bapu has shown a wide gulf between the two on almost all matters of public policy. But I feel that if the two could somehow and somewhere meet, it might be possible to find a via media."

Rajendra Prasad, though he was one the most prominent Gandhian and one to take on Subhas Bose's challenge and resign from the Working Committee, was however hopeful of an amicable settlement on the entire issue. He appears to have discussed the matter with Jayaprakash Narayan, representing the socialists as well, as they also did not want a rupture within the Congress at this juncture. He was so keen on a settlement and continuance of Subhas Bose as the President of the Congress that he even suggested postponement of the proposed AICC meeting of Calcutta so that a rapprochement could have been worked out between him and Gandhi. This is clearly borne out by the letter Rajendra Prasad wrote to Nehru on 19 April 1939:

"For that purpose the All India Congress Committee meeting has to be postponed till such time as they can meet. JayaprakashBabu was telling me that he had suggested this to Subhas Babubut he was not prepared to postpone the meeting unless Gandhi asked him to do so. Gandhi is not likely to do so in view of the clear views he has expressed in his letters. So far as I am personally concerned you may take it that I shall do whatever is possible, if I can be shown a way out. The difficulty is in finding the way, and if Subhas Babu and Bapu could meet, it is possible a way might open out. Please let me know what transpires between you and Sub has Babu, if it is not awkward for you to do so."

Though the proposed meeting between Subhas Bose and Gandhi and consequent postponement of the AICC meeting did not materialize, Rajendra Prasad's made it point to visit ailing Sub has Bose at the time of the AICC meeting in Calcutta. He visited him at Jhamadu Colliery where he was

32 Rajendra Prasad, Autobiography, p. 482.
35 Rajendra Prasad, Autobiography, p.484.
36 Ibid.
37 Rajendra Prasad to Nehru, 19 April 1939, RPCSD, Vol. 3, p. 48-49.
38 Ibid.
convalescing under the care of his brother. He could not touch upon any issues in question as Subhas Bose’s “state of health would not permit us to discuss these matters with him”. However Rajendra Prasad found Bose “in no mood to implement the Congress resolution”. Subhas Bose did not attend the AICC meeting on the first day and on the second day he sent in his resignation when it became clear that he did not enjoy the confidence of the AICC. Subhas Bose, in his resignation letter, put entire blame on Gandhi for his inability to constitute the new Working Committee after his re-election:

“I regret very much that since the Tripuri Congress I have not been able to announce the personnel of the new Working Committee. But this has been due to circumstances beyond my control. Owing to my illness, I could not proceed to meet Mahatma Gandhi, in lieu thereof, I started correspondence with him. This enabled us to clarify our ideas and viewpoints, but did not bring us to settlement. When I realized that correspondence had proved ineffective, I wanted to make frantic effort to meet Mahatma at Delhi but that effort also failed.

After Mahatmaji arrival in Calcutta we have had prolonged conversations but unfortunately they did not lead to any solution. Mahatmaji’s advice to me is that I should myself form a Working Committee leaving out the members who resigned from the previous Working Committee. This advice I cannot give effect to for several reasons. To mention two of the principal reasons, I may say that such a step would be contrary to the directions in Pantji’s resolution, which provides “inter alia” that the Working Committee should be formed in accordance with the wishes of Gandhiji and should command his implicit confidence. Unfortunately for us Mahatmaji felt unable to nominate the Working Committee.”

Putting the entire blame on Gandhi, Subhas Bose did not spare those also who had resigned from the Working Committee. The gulf had widened so much so that though Gandhiji visited Calcutta at the time but he did not attend the AICC meeting and preferred staying away at Sodepur while others were in the city. Gandhi had by now made up his mind which he expressed in his letter to Subhas Bose:

“The views you express seem to me so diametrically opposed to those of the others and my own that I do not see any possibility of bridging them. I think that each school of thought should be “able to put forth its view before the country without any……mixture. And if this is honestly done, I do not see why there should be any bitterness ending in civil war.

What is wrong is not the differences between us but loss of mutual respect and trust. This will be remedied by time which is the best healer. If there is real non-violence in us, there can be no civil war, much less bitterness. Taking all things into consideration, I am of the opinion that you should at once form your own cabinet fully representing your views, formulate your programme definitely, and put it before the forthcoming AICC. If the Committee accepts the programme, all will be plain sailing and you should be enabled to prosecute it unhindered by the minority. If on the other hand your programme is not accepted, you should resign and let the committee choose its president. And you will be free to educate the country along your own lines. I tender this advice irrespective of Pandit Pant’s resolution.

My prestige does not count. It has no independent value of its own. When my motive is suspect or my policy or programme rejected by the country, the prestige must go. Indiawill rise or fall by the quality of the sum total of the acts of her many millions. Individual however high they may be are of no account except in so far as they represent the many millions. Therefore let us rule it out of consideration.

Jawaharlal Nehru nevertheless made a last minute effort during the AICC meeting to save the situation. He moved a resolution before the AICC requiring Subhas Bose to withdraw his resignation and nominate afresh the old Working Committee which functioned in 1938. Nehru explained that considering the external and internal situation of the country it was imperative that a way out must be found to end the controversy created by Pant’s resolution. As for the infusion of the fresh blood in the Working Committee he explained that two old members of the committee Jamnalal Bajaj and Jairamdas Daulatram would be resigning for the reasons of health. This would enable Subhas Bose to nominate in consultation with his colleagues two new members from other group’s thus adding fresh blood to the Committee. Jayaprakash Narayan, a socialist, besides Rafi Ahmad Kidwai supported this proposition of Nehru. Subhas Bose found the proposition of Nehru very identical to that made out by Mahatma Gandhi and others; and hence he did not budge from his position:

This resolution is in effect identical with the suggestions made informally by Mahatma Gandhi and other members during my conversations with some members of the Working Committee. Ordinarily Mahatmaji’s word is law to me but where principles are involved, I feel some times unable to accept his advice or suggestion. Subhas Bose, not in a mood of reconciliation, did not relent and refused to bow to the wishes of the majority. Jawaharlal Nehru, getting disgusted with the approach of Subhas Bose, finally withdrew his resolution seeking his continuance as President, and the AICC subsequently accepted the resignation of Subhas Bose. The Congress had been suddenly rendered with no President and not even a Working Committee, plunging the entire organization in to constitutional crisis. Rajendra Prasad observations in this regard are self-explanatory regarding the state of affairs in which the Congress had slipped into:

As Subhas Bose’s position was now untenable, we began to think of his successor. The brutal frankness of Sardar Patel was not liked by Bose and other people. Jawaharlal who was disgusted with the state of affairs, did not want to take up the Presidenship.Maulana Azad who would have been the best choice, had an accident... and so could not be burdened with heavy responsibilities. Neither he was willing to accept the honour.

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41 Ibid., p. 346.
42 As a last step, I tried my best to arrive at an informal solution of the above problem. Mahatmaji told me that the prominent members of the previous Working Committee and myself should put our heads together and see if we could arrive at an agreement. I concurred and we made that attempt. If we had succeeded in coming to a settlement, we would then have come up before the AICC for formal ratification of our informal agreement. Unfortunately though we spent several hours in discussing the matter we could not arrive at a settlement. Ibid.

46 Ibid., p. 348.
Conclusion: At the last but not the least, it can be concluded that the Tripuri Congress held in 1939 was a trendsetting incident of the National Struggle for Independence led by Congress. This was perhaps the 1st & the last episode where the opinion of the leading leaders of the Congress was dismantled by the majority as Subhash Chandra Bose won the Presidentship while Gandhi ji was opposing his candidature. Though Subhash Babu left the post for the sake of respect for Mahatma Gandhi, it reshaped the future policies of the Congress.