

## How the Gandhian Thought Fostered Nationalism in India

Ujjawal Kumar Singh, Research Scholar, Department of History, Indira Gandhi National Tribal University, Madhya Pradesh

### ABSTRACT

*Mahatma Gandhi was one of the chief political and spiritual leaders of India and the movement for independence. He was the pioneer of 'Satyagraha-resistance' to tyranny through mass civil disobedience and non-cooperation. These mass movements were firmly founded upon the principles of 'ahimsa' or absolute non-violence-which not only led India towards independence, but at the same time inspired worldwide movements for civil rights and political freedom. He was imprisoned for many years, on numerous occasions, in both South Africa and India but he never bowed before oppression and exploitation. He is well known around the world as 'Mahatma' (holy soul/saint), an honorific first applied to him by Rabindranath Tagore. He is officially honored in India as 'Bapu' or the Father of the Nation; his birthday, 2 October, is commemorated as 'Gandhi Jayanti', a national holiday, and worldwide as the International Day of Non-Violence.*

### Keywords

Colony; East India Company; Imperialism; Indian National Congress; Nationalism

### INTRODUCTION

The economic policies followed by the East India Company<sup>1</sup> and later on by British Crown led to the rapid transformation of India's economy into a colonial economy whose nature and structure were determined by the needs of the economy of Britain. The economic policies pursued by the colonial government in India were

concerned more with the protection and promotion of the economic interests of Britain rather than with the development of the Indian economy. Such policies brought about a fundamental change in the structure of the Indian economy and transformed India into mere supplier of raw materials and consumer of finished industrial products from Britain. Their policies led to the commercialization of Indian agriculture, which in the final run led to the realization of Indian economic structure.<sup>2</sup> Early nationalist leaders of Indian freedom struggle concluded that the decay of traditional industries, inadequate development of modern industries and increasing dependence of the people on agriculture during the British period were largely due to the overall impact of British policies. There was no reason for the development of nationalism here; however, the spirit of nationalism emerged in India owing to the impact of the British rule. R. Coupland remarks, "*Indian Nationalism was the child of the British Raj, and the British authorities blessed its cradle.*" This opinion is not justified because in spite of a range of diversities, there was a deep-seated unity in India for which its people always felt proud of being Indians

Gandhi first employed non-violent as the basic instrument of opposition as an expatriate lawyer in South Africa. In Durban, he initiated the resident Indian community's struggle for civil rights. Gandhi urged the Indian population in South Africa to join the war through his extensive writings in *Indian Opinion*, as "*If the Government only realized what reserve force is being wasted, they would make use of it and give Indians the opportunity of a thorough training for actual warfare.*" The experience and exposure in South Africa made an immense impact on Gandhi and thereafter he advocated that the masses had immense capacity to participate in and sacrifice for a cause that moved them. He was able to unite Indians belonging to different religions and classes, and

<sup>1</sup> The English East India Company (EIC), initially known as, *Governor and Company of Merchants of London trading into the East Indies* or *United Company of Merchants of England Trading to the East Indies*, was an English joint-stock company formed on December 31, 1600. Acting as a monopolistic trading body, the Company actively engaged in politics and emerged as an agent of British imperialism in India from the early eighteenth century to the mid of nineteenth century.

<sup>2</sup> Commercialization of agriculture is a process where peasants start producing agricultural products primarily for sale in distant markets, rather than to meet their own need or to sell in local markets. These agricultural products were needed by the British industries or could fetch cash gain to the British in the European or American market, e.g. cotton, indigo, jute, etc.

men and women alike under his leadership. He also came to realize that at times the leaders have to take decisions unpopular with their enthusiastic supporters. Henceforth, he was able to evolve his own style of leadership and politics and new techniques of struggle on a limited scale, untrammelled by the opposition of contending political currents. Gandhi evolved the technique *Satyagraha* during his stay in South Africa. It was based on truth and non-violence. Its basic tenets were (a) a satyagrahi has not to submit to what he considered as wrong, and always remain truthful, non-violent and fearless; (b) he should be ready to accept suffering in his struggle against the evildoer; (c) even while carrying out his struggle against the evildoer, a true satyagrahi would love the evil-doer; (e) a true satyagrahi would never bow before the evil, whatever the consequence, and lastly only the brave and strong could practice satyagraha, which was not for the weak and cowards.

After his return to India in 1915, he successfully organized the common masses including peasants, farmers, and urban laborers in protesting excessive land-tax and discrimination at every stage of administration. After assuming leadership of the Indian National Congress in 1921, Gandhi led nationwide campaigns for erasing poverty, expanding women's rights, building religious and ethnic solidarity, and for curtailing untouchability. Throughout the course of mass movement, he stressed over establishing economic self-reliance and political freedom without any hindrance. With an objective of attaining *Swaraj*, he demonstrated the nationwide agitation through non-cooperation (1919), protesting the British-imposed salt tax with the *Dandi Salt March* in 1930, and later in calling for the British to Quit India in 1942.

Gandhi advocated for non-violence and truth in all situations, and appealed that others do the same. He lived modestly in a self-sufficient approach and wore the traditional Indian *dhoti* and shawl, woven with yarn that he himself had hand spun on a *charkha*. He ate simple vegetarian food and undertook extensive fasts as an instrument of self-purification and social protest. In 1915, Gandhi returned from South Africa to live in India. He spoke at the conventions of the Indian National Congress, but was primarily introduced to Indian political scenario by Gopal Krishna Gokhale, whom Gandhi regarded as his political preacher.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The proposed study focuses on the political and socio-economic condition of India in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It portrays how the East India Company captured

the political power in India and how their exploitative policies and programmes had inspired the people to define and achieve their national identity. This study also interprets the era of mass movements led by Mahatma Gandhi and narrates how the course of independence movement was promoted by the philosophy of Gandhi.

## METHODOLOGY

An elaborative research methodology was used to investigate and interpret the genesis and growth of nationalism in India. The researcher has relied on both primary sources as well as secondary sources for collection of data. Primary data has been gathered from archival records; whereas secondary data is based on analysis and discussions.

## GANDHI: COMING ON THE FRONT SIDE

During the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Gandhi made his political advancement through various activities. His efforts in South Africa were well known not only among the educated but also among the masses. He decided to tour the country the next one year and see for himself the condition of the masses. During 1917 and 1918, Gandhi was involved in three Struggles in Champaran, Ahmedabad and Kheda-before he launched the Rowlatt Satyagraha. The *Champaran Satyagraha (1917)* is coined as the 'First Civil Disobedience' where Gandhi was requested by Rajkumar Shukla to look into the problems of the indigo planters of Champaran (Bihar). In this region, the European planters were forcing the peasants to cultivate indigo on 3/20 of the total land (*Tinkathia system*).<sup>3</sup> Besides, the peasants were also compelled to sell the produce at prices fixed by the Europeans. In the initial stage of this movement Rajendra Prasad, Mazhar-ul-Haq, Mahadeo Desai, Narhari Parekh, and J.B. Kripalani accompanied Gandhi. With their assistance, he reached Champaran to explore the ground reality of the matter, however, as a reaction the British authorities ordered him to depart the area at once. Gandhi defied the order and stayed there face the punishment. It is quite praiseworthy that the notion of passive resistance or civil disobedience against an unfair order was a novel technique at that time. Finally, the authorities retreated and permitted Gandhi to make an enquiry. Moreover, the

<sup>3</sup> It is mention worthy that when towards the end of the nineteenth century German synthetic dyes replaced indigo, the European planters demanded high rents and illegal dues from the peasants in order to maximize their profits before the peasants could shift to other crops.

British Government appointed a committee and nominated Gandhi as a member to resolve the grievance. Gandhi was able to induce the authorities that the *tinkathia system* should be abolished and that the peasants should be compensated for the unlawful dues extracted from them. As a compromise with the planters, he compelled the administrators that 25 per cent of the money taken should be compensated. In this way, Gandhi had won the first battle of civil disobedience in India.

In the beginning of 1918, the Ahmedabad Mill Strike agitation was headed by Gandhi, which is regarded as the 'First Hunger Strike.' Gandhi intervened in an argument stuck between mill owners of Ahmadabad and the workers over the issue of discontinuation of the plague bonus. Gandhi requested the mill workers to go on a strike and demand a 35 per cent augment in their wages. On this, the employers came to an agreement to grant a 20 per cent bonus. Gandhi advised the workers to stay non-violent and remain on strike. He undertook a fast unto death to reinforce the workers, but the fast also had the effect of putting pressure on mill owners who finally agreed to give the workers a 35 per cent increase in wages. This was the second victory of Gandhi against oppression and exploitation.

The Kheda Satyagraha of 1918 is regarded as the First Non-Cooperation. During the Kheda Satyagraha, many young nationalists such as Sardar Patel and Indulal Yagnik became Gandhi's followers. The crops failed in Kheda district of Gujarat because of drought. According to the British Revenue Code, if the yield was less than one-fourth the normal produce, the farmers were entitled to remission. The authorities refused to grant remission in Kheda. After reaching Kheda, Gandhi supported the peasants cause and asked them to withhold revenue. Gandhi established an ashram there, organizing scores of his veteran supporters and fresh volunteers from the region. He organized a detailed study and survey of the villages, accounting for the atrocities and terrible episodes of suffering, including the general state of degenerate living. Building on the confidence of villagers, he began leading the clean-up of villages, building of schools and hospitals and encouraging the village leadership to undo and condemn many social evils, as accounted above. The British authorities, not willing to openly concede the peasants demands, issued covert instructions that only those who could afford to pay should pay the stipulated revenue. Gandhi led organized protests and strikes against the landlords, who with the guidance of the British government signed an agreement granting the poor farmers of the region more compensation and control over

farming, and cancellation of revenue hikes and its collection until the famine ended. Hence, Gandhi induced the British government and at the same time, he was widely successful to foster the notion of nationalism in India. Through his success story at three fronts, Gandhi demonstrated the efficacy of his technique of Satyagraha. He found his feet among the masses and came to have a complete understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the masses. As a result, Gandhi's fame spread all over the nation.

During 1920-22, the British authority was were opposed through two massive mass movements viz. Khilafat and Non-Cooperation. However, these two movements emerged from separate issues but they adopted a familiar programme of political action and agitation, i.e. of non-violent non-cooperation. For Gandhi, non-co-operation and peaceful resistance were the primary weapons in the fight against injustice. In Punjab, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of civilians by British troops caused deep trauma to the nation, leading to increased public anger and acts of violence. Gandhi criticized both the actions of the British Raj and the retaliatory violence of Indians. He authored the resolution offering condolences to British civilian victims and condemning the riots, which after initial opposition in the party, was accepted following Gandhi's emotional speech advocating his principle that all violence was evil and could not be justified.<sup>4</sup> But it was after the massacre and subsequent violence that Gandhi's mind focused upon obtaining complete self-government and control of all Indian government institutions, maturing soon into Swaraj or complete individual, spiritual, political independence.

The Khilafat issue was not in a straight line linked to Indian politics but it provided the instant milieu to the movement and gave an added benefit of cementing Hindu-Muslim unity against the British rule. From the initial

<sup>4</sup> In December 1921, Gandhi was invested with executive authority on behalf of the Indian National Congress. Under his leadership, the Congress was reorganized with a new constitution, with the goal of *Swaraj*. Membership in the party was opened to anyone prepared to pay a token fee. A hierarchy of committees was set up to improve discipline, transforming the party from an elite organization to one of mass national appeal. Gandhi expanded his non-violence platform to include the swadeshi policy -the boycott of foreign-made goods, especially British goods. Linked to this was his advocacy that khadi be worn by all Indians instead of British-made textiles.

phase of development it was quite apparent to the Muslim leaders that the support of the Congress was indispensable for the success of Khilafat movement. Although, Gandhi was in favour of launching satyagraha and non-cooperation against the British Government on the Khilafat issue, however, the Congress was not united on this form of political accomplishment. It is worth mentioning that Bal Gangadhar Tilak was opposed to having a coalition with Muslim leaders over a religious issue and he was skeptical of satyagraha as an instrument of politics. At a special session in Calcutta in September 1920, the National Congress approved a nationwide non-cooperation programme until the Punjab and Khilafat wrongs were removed and swaraj was established. It was announced and accepted that the proposed programme was to include the boycott of government schools and colleges; boycott of law courts and dispensation of justice through panchayats instead; boycott of Legislative Councils; boycott of foreign cloth and use of khadi instead; also practice of hand-spinning to be done; renunciation of government honors and titles; the second phase could include mass civil disobedience including resignation from government service, and non-payment of taxes. During the movement, the leaders and participants were supposed to work for Hindu-Muslim accord, women empowerment and for removal of untouchability. The Non-cooperation movement enjoyed widespread appeal and success, increasing excitement and contribution from all strata of Indian society yet, just as the movement reached its apex, it ended abruptly as a result of a violent clash in the town of Chauri Chaura in February 1922. Fearing that the movement was about to take a turn towards violence, and convinced that this would be the undoing of all his work, Gandhi called off the campaign of mass civil disobedience. Gandhi was arrested on 10<sup>th</sup> March, 1922, and sentenced to six years imprisonment.

## THE MINDSET OF GANDHI

Throughout his whole life, from his South African days onwards, Gandhiji grappled with the dilemma of masses-leaders dialectic. And the foundation of his politics was the immense reliance on the capability of the masses to fight with fearlessness, self-sacrificing spirit, courage, and moral strength. In 1933-34, when a large section of Congress leaders and participants tended to get demoralized by the government repression of the Civil Disobedience Movement, Gandhi urged them not to give way to despair. He said that, *"The nation has got energy of which you have no conception but I have."* At the same time, he said, a leadership should not put an undue strain on the energy. Similarly, when in June 1942, the American

journalist Louis Fischer asked him how he hoped to organize a movement against the potent British Empire, Gandhi replied that, *"I will appeal to the people's instincts. I may arouse them."* Hence, Gandhi truly realized that a mass movement had to be based on the vigorous participation of the people. It was only with the might of the dumb millions that the British rulers could be challenged.

Throughout the course of the widespread mass movements, Gandhi exhorted Indian men and women, rich or poor, to spend time each day spinning *khadi* in support of the independence movement. This was a strategy to inculcate discipline and dedication to weed out the unwilling and ambitious, and to include women in the movement at a time when many thought that such activities were not reputable activities for women. In addition to boycotting British products, Gandhi urged the people to boycott British educational institutions and law courts, to resign from government employment, and to renounce the British titles and honors. He wrote in the *Young India* in January 1922 that, *"We must first make good the right of free speech and free association. We must defend these elementary rights with our lives."* He then went on to explain what these rights meant as, *"Liberty of speech means that it is unassailed even when the speech hurts; liberty of the Press can be said to be truly respected when the Press can comment in the severest terms upon and even misrepresent matters. Freedom of association is truly respected when assemblies of people can discuss even revolutionary projects."* Similarly, in 1939, he wrote that, *"Civil liberty consistent with the observance of non-violence is the first step towards Swaraj. It is the breath of political and social life. It is the foundation of freedom. There is no room there for dilution or compromise. It is the water of life. I have never heard of water being diluted."* In June 1942, When Louis Fischer asked Gandhi that, *"What is your programme for the improvement of the lot of the peasantry?"* He replied that, *"The peasants would take the land. We would not have to tell them to take it. They would take it."* And when Fischer asked that, *"Would the landlords be compensated,"* Gandhi replied that, *"No, that would be fiscally impossible."* Fischer then asked that, *"Well, how do you actually see your impending civil disobedience movement."* Gandhi replied that, *"In the villages, the peasants will stop paying taxes. Their next step will be to seize the land."* *"With violence?"* asked Fischer. Gandhi replied that, *"There may be violence, but then again the landlords may cooperate. They might cooperate by fleeing."*



Gandhi's commitment to the women's cause is also well-known, but not the fact that he understood that the extent of women's liberation was dependent on their occupying the space outside the home. The Civil Disobedience Movement marked massive participation by women in *prabhat pheries*, public demonstrations, picketing of foreign cloth and liquor shops and the salt, forest and other demonstrations. But the active movement came to an end with the Gandhi-Irwin Pact in March 1931. Gandhi then called Mridula Sarabhai and other Women political activists and told them that, "I have brought women out of the kitchen. It is your task now to see to it that they do not get confined there again."

## CONCLUSION

Gandhi led millions into active politics and mass movements. But he was clear that the springs of their activity did not lie with him but with themselves. He was able to grasp the basic dialectic of leader-masses relationship. A leader, he said, gives political and ideological direction to a movement and provides it an organizational structure, but a movement arises and develops only when it is based on and expresses the urges of the masses and their consciousness. No leadership can create a movement at will and then persuade the masses to join it. He was a profound political leader and thinker who constantly experimented with truth and therefore changed and developed his understanding of society and social change. Gandhi's thought and activities were in constant evolution.

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