

THE NATIONAL MOVEMENT AND MAHATMA GANDHI (1915 - 34)

The Nationalist Movement of India - An Introduction

In India, the rise of nationalism was intricately linked with the opposition of colonialism. The revolt or Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 was the first war of Indian independence.

People realised that they were experiencing a common suffering under the oppressive British colonial rule. This understanding brought the different groups together in their anti-colonial struggle.

The event which proved instrumental in the history of the Indian Freedom Struggle was the First World War India was forced to participate in the First World War in which the British for increasing their defence expenditure levied new taxes on Indians.

Common people were the forced to enrol in the army to fight in the First World War.

During 1918 India was hit by crop failure and shortage of food grains followed by famines and outbreak of influenza.

This harsh social and political situation set the stage for the beginning of the nationalist struggle in India. The Indian freedom movement gained momentum with the coming of Mahatma Gandhi in 1915.

He had successfully tested novel ideas of non-violence and anti-colonial struggle in South Africa. He had fought for the civil He motivated diverse social groups to rise above petty differences of caste, creed, religion, region and work single-mindedly towards the common goal of freedom.

Satyagraha - Ideals and Implementation

Mahatma Gandhi infused a new life into the Indian Freedom Movement and had successfully used Satyagraha and non-violence in South Africa.

Satyagraha literally means an appeal for truth and is passive resistance used powerfully to appeal to the conscience of the oppressor.

Mahatma Gandhi successfully organised Satyagraha Movements in different parts of India. Mahatma Gandhi used the concept of Satyagraha for mass mobilisation and political movements against the injustice of the government.

In 1916, Mahatma Gandhi visited the poor peasants of Champaran district in Bihar. The British used to force the peasants of Champaran to cultivate indigo instead of food

crops.

The villages in Champaran were very unhygienic and affected by social evils like the pardah system and untouchability. Mahatma Gandhi started a drive to improve the infrastructure of villages in Champaran. He started a Satyagraha movement against the oppression of peasants.

In 1917, Mahatma Gandhi visited the Kheda district in Gujarat people of which were also stricken with poverty and social evils.

Mahatma Gandhi along with Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel, garnered mass support and organised a Satyagraha against the tax burden.

Another Satyagraha movement was organised by Mahatma Gandhi in Ahmedabad in 1918 to support the demands of the cotton mill workers.

Successful implementation of Satyagraha motivated the Indians and also paved the way for the other nationalist movements in future.

Rowlatt Act and Jallianwallah Bagh Massacre

The Satyagraha Movements by Mahatma Gandhi achieved their desired objectives and were a great success.

To control such movements, the British proposed the Rowlatt Act in 1919. The Rowlatt Act aimed to curb the political activities in the country and equipped the courts with the power to detain political prisoners without trial for two years.

Mahatma Gandhi opposed the Rowlatt Act by starting a peaceful Satyagraha. He suggested a Civil Disobedience beginning with a hartal on 6th April 1919.

The British were threatened that this mass movement could break all lines of communications in the country and so they decided to suppress the nationalists. Several local leaders were arrested and Mahatma Gandhi was prohibited from entering Delhi.

On 13th April 1919 several villagers had gathered at the Jallianwalla Bagh in Amritsar to attend a cattle fair on the occasion of Baisakhi. General Dyer blocked all the entry points to the ground and without any prior warning, opened fire on the hapless crowd.

The merciless firing continued for 10-15 minutes leaving hundreds of people including women and children dead and wounded.

The Jallianwalla Bagh massacre triggered many protests, strikes, and clashes with policemen and attacks on Government buildings, across North India. The British

Government suppressed these protests and humiliated the Satyagrahis.

Launch of Non-Cooperation Movement

Mahatma Gandhi in his book Hind Swaraj suggested that if Indians resolved not to cooperate, the British rule would get abolished. The fall off the British rule will pave the way for Swaraj or self-governance.

In March 1919, the Ali brothers, Muhammad Ali and Shaukat Ali formed the Khilafat Committee in Bombay to garner support for the Turkish Khalifa. Mahatma Gandhi realised that Khilafat movement could be used to unite Muslims and Hindus for the common cause of a national movement.

He hence launched the Non-cooperation Movement in support of Khilafat. To gain maximum reach and success, Mahatma Gandhi proposed a stage by stage strategy implementation for the movement:

- The movement had to begin with a surrender of titles, honours and honorary posts by people.
- Planned to shun or boycott Civil Services, Army, Police, British Courts and Legislative Assemblies, School and Colleges and British goods.
- The British goods were to be replaced by domestic goods or Swadeshi to promote the native cottage industries.
- In case of government suppression, Civil Disobedience Movement will be launched.
- Mobilization of popular support.

After a lot of debates the Non-Cooperation Movement was adopted by the Congress during the Nagpur conference in December 1920. Under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership Non-cooperation-Khilafat Movement began in full force.

Simon Commission and the Civil Disobedience Movement

In 1922, the Chauri Chaura incident is considered as an Act of Violence and completely shook Mahatma Gandhi and other Congress leaders.

In Chauri Chaura, a peace demonstration to picket a liquor shop turned violent when policemen opened fire, killed and injured some satyagrahis. In reaction, the police station was set on fire where the policemen had locked themselves burning many of them alive.

In February 1922, Mahatma Gandhi took back the Non-Cooperation Movement owing to the widespread of violence. Moti Lal Nehru and Chittaranjan Das formed the The Swaraj Party within the Congress in 1922. Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhash Chandra Bose opposed this formation and stressed on full independence

based on socialist ideas.

The growth of the National Movement was influenced by two factors;

- The worldwide Economic Depression and
- The formulation of the Simon Commission under Sir John Simon.

The Simon Commission was a statutory commission aimed at looking into the constitutional system of India and suggest changes. It was an all-white commission without any Indian representation.

In 1928, when Simon Commission came to India all parties protested against it. To pacify the leaders, Lord Irwin the Viceroy gave a vague offer of Dominion status to India and also proposed a round table conference.

In the Lahore session of the Congress, in 1929 Jawaharlal Nehru declared the demand for Purna Swaraj. The call of Purna Swaraj did

not create much enthusiasm among people.

Mahatma Gandhi discovered salt was a common ingredient in the food of both rich and poor. He viewed the tax on salt and the monopoly of the Government on its production as downright oppressive.

On 31st January 1930, he sent a letter to Lord Irwin stating eleven wide ranging demands of various classes of India. The launch of Civil Disobedience was also stated.

On refusal to negotiate by the British, Mahatma Gandhi launched a salt March from Sabarmati Ashram to the coastal town of Dandi in Gujarat.

On 6th April Mahatma Gandhi broke the salt law manufactured salt by boiling sea water. This marked the beginning of the Civil Disobedience Movement.

The Non-cooperation movement aimed at bringing the British Government to a standstill by refusing to cooperate with them. The Civil disobedience movement was more assertive and aimed at non-cooperation with the British as well as an open violation of oppressive British laws.

Important National Events Between 1922 – 1939

On the 4th February, 1922, the peasants of Chauri Chaura, set fire to a police station, killing 22 policemen. Gandhiji, saddened by this incident, called off the Non-Cooperation Movement as this was against his ideals of non-violence and satyagraha.

With the end of the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Congress called upon its supporters to take up constructive work in villages. A group of radical leaders like Chitta

Ranjan Das and Motilal Nehru wanted to fight the elections and make their presence known to the government.

Gandhi's managed to gather huge support of the masses in the mid-1920s. Two prominent organizations, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) were formed during this period.

Bhagat Singh and his comrades formed the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA) in 1928 to fight against the colonial rule. In 1929, the Congress, under Jawaharlal Nehru, vowed to fight for complete independence or Purna Swaraj, and observed 26th January, 1930, as Independence Day.

On the 12th March, 1930, Gandhiji led a non-violent march from the Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi to protest against the salt tax imposed by the colonial government. On reaching Dandi, Gandhiji collected sea water and boiled

it to produce salt, thereby breaking the salt law.

The government declared provincial autonomy in many provinces and declared elections in these provinces in 1937. The Congress formed governments in 7 out of the 11 provinces.

Two years after the Congress formed the government, the Second World War broke out in 1939. The Congress was ready to support the colonial government in the war in return for complete independence at the end of the war. The British government didn't give in, leading many Congress leaders to resign from the ministries in protest.

Gandhi-Irwin Pact and Round Table Conference

Under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, the Civil Disobedience Movement spread across

the country like wildfire. The British got worried by the growing popularity of the movement, and so arrested all prominent Congress leaders.

In April 1930, Abdul Gaffar Khan, a political and spiritual leader and follower of Gandhiji was arrested. Demonstrations and protests followed to oppose Gaffar Khan's arrest which was suppressed by the British.

The British government dealt with the protestors with an iron hand. Around 10,000 Satyagrahis were arrested and small children and women were thrashed by the police.

Mahatma Gandhi decided to call off the Civil Disobedience movement in 1931. On 5th March 1931, Mahatma Gandhi entered into a pact with Lord Irwin the viceroy of India known as the Gandhi-Irwin Pact. He agreed to participate in the Round Table Conference to

be held in London.

In December 1931, Mahatma Gandhi visited London but came back disheartened as the negotiations did not reach any final decision.

On his arrival in India, he found that several Congress leaders had been arrested the Congress was declared an illegal party. Mahatma Gandhi hence re-launched the Civil Disobedience Movement but it lost its momentum by 1934.