

# Mahatma Gandhi and the National Movement

## Mahatma Gandhi

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The Indian National Movement from 1919 to 1947 is also known as the Gandhian Era primarily because the period was dominated by Gandhi and his policies.

### Gandhi: Early Life

- Gandhi was born in 1869 at Porbandar in the Kathiawar district of Gujarat. He went to England in 1888 to study Law.
- From 1893 to 1914, he practised law in South Africa. He witnessed racial discrimination in South Africa and soon became the leader of a struggle against racist authorities in the country.
- He formed the Natal Indian Congress to fight against the racist policies of the South African government. It was here that the unique technique of Satyagraha evolved. Gandhi's Satyagraha was based on truth and non-violence.
- Gandhi returned to India in January 1915 and made an extensive tour of the country in the next three years. In 1917 and 1918, he was involved in three significant struggles—in Champaran (Bihar), in Ahmedabad and in Kheda in Gujarat.



Gandhi

The following methods were used by Gandhi during the freedom struggle:

**Satyagraha:** It was based on truth and non-violence. It was a fearless, truthful and peaceful technique aimed at fighting injustice. Gandhi differentiated between passive resistance and the principle of Satyagraha—while the former does not exclude the use of physical force, the latter is against the use of any kind of force.

**Principle of Non-violence:** Gandhi's principle of non-violence was laid down on the principle that no kind of injury should be caused either by words or by action. Gandhi opined that non-violence is a positive and an active force.

**Swadeshi:** Swadeshi means to produce all the necessary goods within the country. Gandhi believed that the use of swadeshi goods would make India self-sufficient and self-reliant. He stressed upon the use of the charkha and khadi.

**Mass Movement:** Gandhi made the Indian National Movement a mass movement. He provided leadership to the masses who followed him irrespective of their caste, class or religious differences.

### Champaran Satyagraha (1917)

The peasants at Champaran in Bihar were bound by law to grow indigo on 3/20 part of their land. They had to sell indigo at fixed rates (which were extremely low) to European planters. The indigo cultivators invited Gandhi to look into their miseries and take up their cause. The district administration banned his entry into the district. Gandhi offered Satyagraha due to which an enquiry was ordered into the miseries of indigo cultivators.

### Ahmedabad Satyagraha (1918)

Gandhi provided leadership to the mill workers in Ahmedabad in a strike against mill owners who refused to pay higher wages to the workers. He went on a hunger strike. The mill owners finally had to bow down and agreed to give 35% hike in salaries to the workers.

## Kheda Satyagraha (1918)

The crops in 1918 failed in Kheda, and the farmers were not in a situation to pay land revenues to the government. They requested the government to waive off their revenues, but their pleas went unheard. Gandhi took up the cause of the Kheda peasants and offered Satyagraha. Finally, the government was forced to look into their demands and arrived at a settlement with the peasants. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel also played a significant role in the Kheda Satyagraha.

These struggles brought Gandhi into close contact with the masses.

## Non-Cooperation Movement

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The Congress supported the British government during the First World War. India contributed significantly to the War by supplying men and materials in the hope that self-government would be granted to them by the British government by the end of the War. However, after Britain won the First World War, it passed many Acts and laws (such as the Rowlatt Act) which aimed at suppressing the Indian National Movement. The Congress thus decided to launch the Non-Cooperation Movement.

### Causes Leading to the Beginning of the Non-Cooperation Movement

#### Khilafat Movement:

- The Sultan of Turkey was regarded as the 'Caliph' or the religious head of the Muslims. Most of Muslim sacred places were located within the Turkish Empire. In the First World War, Britain was fighting against Turkey. This led to a wave of indignation among the Indian Muslims.
- The Muslim population in India started the Khilafat Movement under the leadership of Muhammad Ali and Shaukat Ali. They formulated three-point programmes which included that the Ottoman Caliph should retain his empire, the Caliph should be left with adequate territories to enable him to defend the Islamic faith and the Arab lands should remain under the Arabic rule.
- To Gandhi, the Khilafat Movement offered him an opportunity to unite the Hindus and the Muslims. He advised the Khilafat Committee to adopt a policy of non-cooperation with the government.
- The Khilafat Non-Cooperation Movement thus started on 31 August 1920.

#### Rowlatt Act

- To suppress the rising national sentiments in the country, the government passed the Rowlatt Act which empowered it to imprison any person without trial. The Act gave the government the following powers:
  - To arrest a person without any warrant
  - To try a person in seclusion
  - To suspend the right of Habeas Corpus
- Gandhi launched a movement against this unjust Act. Shops were closed and workers of the railway workshop went on strike. Rallies protesting against this Act were organised in various cities.
- Alarmed by the large participation of people in the movement, the government arrested prominent leaders from Amritsar, and Gandhi was barred from entering Delhi. On 10 April 1919, the police fired on a peaceful procession. People retaliated by attacking banks and railway stations.



A pictorial representation of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre

#### Jallianwala Bagh Tragedy

On 13 April, a large crowd assembled at Jallianwala Bagh protesting against the arrest of some of their leaders who criticised the government for passing the Rowlatt Act. General Dyer blocked the exit of the bagh and fired on the

unarmed crowd. This resulted in the death of about thousand people.

The killing of innocent people at the Jallianwala Bagh shocked the entire nation. People in many north Indian towns protested against the brutal killings at Jallianwala Bagh. The government brutally suppressed these protests.

## **Objectives of the Non-Cooperation Movement**

At the Kolkata Session in 1920, the Congress passed the resolution of the Non-Cooperation Movement. Its main objectives were

- To attain self-government within the British Empire
- To force the government to annul the Rowlatt Act
- To force the British to restore the old status of the Sultan of Turkey

## **Programmes of the Movement**

The Non-Cooperation Movement emphasised on the use of swadeshi and boycott programmes. Some of these were

- To boycott government-run schools, colleges and courts
- To boycott foreign goods
- To resign from nominated seats in local bodies
- To surrender titles and honorary offices
- To popularise the use of swadeshi and khadi clothes
- To establish national schools and colleges in India as an alternative to government schools and colleges
- To unify the Hindus and the Muslims and to work for the emancipation and upliftment of women

## **Course of the Movement**

People enthusiastically participated in the Non-Cooperation Movement.

- Many eminent lawyers such as Dr Rajendra Prasad and Motilal Nehru gave up their practice.
- Students left government-run schools and colleges.
- The Congress boycotted the elections to the legislatures.
- People started spinning cloth by using the charkha.
- The Jamia Millia Islamia was established as a national university.
- Many eminent Indian personalities such as Rabindranath Tagore renounced their titles and awards.
- Shops selling foreign goods and liquor were picketed.
- When the Prince of Wales visited India in 1921, people boycotted his visit.

## **Repression of the Movement**

- The government severely suppressed the movement. All important leaders except Gandhi were arrested and imprisoned.
- Processions and public meetings were banned.
- The Khilafat and the many volunteer organisations under the Congress were declared illegal.

## **Suspension of the Non-Cooperation Movement**

The Non-Cooperation Movement was suspended by Gandhi because of the incident which occurred at Chauri Chaura in Uttar Pradesh. A procession of about 3000 people marched to the Chauri Chaura police station. After being fired upon, the mob turned violent and set the police station on fire killing 22 police men. This incident shocked Gandhi as he wanted to gain freedom by following the methods of non-

violence. He withdrew the movement on 12 February 1922. He asked the Congressmen to focus on constructive activities such as working for the removal of untouchability, Hindu Muslim unity etc. Gandhi's decision to suspend the movement was criticised by several leaders such as Motilal Nehru, Lala Lajpat Rai and S. C. Bose.

## Impact of the Non-Cooperation Movement

- It made the national movement a mass movement as people from every profession and walk of life participated in the movement.
- It generated the desire for freedom among the people and inspired them to challenge the colonial rule.
- It fostered Hindu Muslim unity.
- It also promoted social reforms.
- The concept of Swadeshi and the boycott of foreign goods gave impetus to the handicraft and local industries.

The movement however failed in its main motives of attaining swaraj, to obtain an apology for the crime committed at Jallianwala Bagh and in solving the Khilafat problem.

## Civil Disobedience Movement

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Gandhi launched the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1931. The factors which led to the launching of the Civil Disobedience Movement were

### Simon Commission

- The British Government appointed a committee of seven people popularly known as the Simon Commission to look into the need for further constitutional reforms in India.
- The Commission was opposed by the Indians as it had all British and no Indian members in it.
- The Congress in the 1927 session held at Chennai decided to boycott the Commission at every stage. The Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha supported the decision of the Congress.
- Where ever the Commission went, it was greeted with protests and hartals. Brutal repression measures were used by the government to suppress the popular opposition. At Lahore, Lala Lajpat Rai was mercilessly beaten up by the police while opposing the Commission. He died as a result of wounds received because of the police lathi charge.



Protests against the Simon Commission

### Recommendations of the Simon Commission

The recommendations of the Simon Commission were

- To abolish dyarchy and to give autonomy to the Provincial governments. However, the government should be given unlimited powers in certain matters like internal security.
- The number of members in the Provincial Legislative Council should be increased.
- Princely states should also become part of the federal government at the centre.
- The Governor General should have the power to select and appoint the members of his own cabinet.
- British soldiers and officers should remain in Indian regiments.
- High Courts should work under the control of the Central Government.

### Nehru Report

When Lord Birkenhead, the Secretary of State for India, justified the exclusion of Indians in the Simon Commission saying that the Indians are not united and hence cannot arrive to an agreed scheme of

reforms, an All Parties Conference was organised in 1928 to suggest reforms for the country. The Liberal and Assertive Nationalists, leaders of the Muslim League, Hindu Mahasabha and Depressed Classes came together and made Motilal Nehru the Chairman of the Committee. The report which was submitted by the All Parties Conference came to be known as the 'Nehru Report'. The report demanded Dominion Status for India and aimed at finding solutions to the communal problem in the country.

### **Declaration of Poorna Swaraj**

The Congress in the Kolkata Session asked the government to either accept the Nehru Report or be prepared to face the mass agitations. When the government did not accept the Report, the Congress declared 'Poorna Swaraj' or complete independence from British rule as its main objective. This resolution was passed at the Lahore Session of 1929. Jawaharlal Nehru, the President of the Congress Session in 1929, led a procession at Lahore and hoisted the tricolour. The following programmes were adopted by the Congress Working Committee:

- To prepare for the Civil Disobedience Movement
- Poorna Swaraj or complete independence was declared as the main aim of the Indian National Movement
- To observe 26 January as Poorna Swaraj Day or the Day of Independence every year
- All the members of the legislatures had to resign

### **Civil Disobedience Movement**

The Civil Disobedience Movement started with the Dandi March by Gandhi. He began the march from Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi, a small village located at the sea coast of Gujarat. He made salt in violation of the Salt Law and began the Civil Disobedience Movement. He chose salt as the Salt Tax was affecting every section of Indian society, especially the poor. The breaking of the Salt Law at Dandi marked the beginning of the Civil Disobedience Movement.

The programme of the movement were

- To defy the Salt Law by making salt
- Boycott of liquor
- Boycott of foreign cloth and other foreign goods
- Non-payment of taxes and revenues

The Civil Disobedience Movement was different from the Non-Cooperation Movement as the former included non-payment of taxes and land revenues and violation of different laws.



During the early twentieth century, 'charkha' became the symbol of Indian freedom movement.

### **Progress of the Civil Disobedience Movement**

- People participated in the movement in large numbers. Salt Laws were violated all over the country. The people in Maharashtra, Karnataka and Central Provinces refused to obey the Forest Laws. People in eastern India refused to pay the chaukidari tax.
- People boycotted foreign goods, held demonstrations, picketed liquor shops and carried on the campaigns against British rule.
- The pathans in northwestern India under the leadership of Khan Abdul Gahaffar Khan (also known as the Frontier Gandhi) led a non-violent struggle. They organised a society of 'Khudai Khidmatgars' and were also known as 'Red Shirts'.
- The movement also became popular in the eastern parts of the country where people from Manipur and Nagaland joined the struggle against the British.

## **Repression of the Movement**

The government repressed the movement brutally. Over 90,000 Satyagrahis along with several Congress leaders were imprisoned. Congress was declared illegal and restrictions were imposed on nationalist press. When there were demonstrations by the pathans against the arrest of Ghaffar Khan, the police refused to open fire on the protesting mob. Many police officers were severely punished for refusing to open fire on the mob. Protestors at Delhi and Kolkata were fired at.

## **First Round Table Conference**

The First Round Table Conference was held in London from 12 November 1930 to 19 January 1931. The Congress boycotted the Conference (as it opposed the Simon Commission), but other political parties and interest groups participated in the Conference.

## **Gandhi Irwin Pact**

The government started negotiations with Gandhi (who was in jail) to bring an end to the Civil Disobedience Movement. This resulted in signing a pact between Lord Irwin, the Viceroy of India, and Gandhi which came to be known as the 'Gandhi Irwin Pact'. The government agreed to the following terms:

- To withdraw all ordinances and end prosecutions
- To release all political prisoners except those who were guilty of violence
- To allow peaceful picketing of shops selling liquor and foreign clothes
- To restore confiscated properties of the Satyagrahis
- To allow people living near the coast to make and manufacture salt

The Congress agreed to the following terms:

- To suspend the Civil Disobedience Movement
- To participate in the Second Round Table Conference
- Not to press for investigations into police excesses

## **Second Round Table Conference**

- It took place between 7 September and December 1931. It was attended by Gandhi.
- The British government refused to grant Dominion Status to India. The Conference saw the demand of separate electorates was raised not only by Muslims but also by people of depressed classes, Anglo Indians, Indian Christians and Europeans.

## **Continuation of the Civil Disobedience Movement**

- As the Second Round Table Conference disappointed and failed, Gandhi returned to India. Further, the Great Depression of 1929–30 also hit the Indian farmers hard.
- Gandhi demanded talks with Viceroy Willingdon which was refused.
- The Congress passed a resolution in January 1932 for renewal of the Civil Disobedience Movement.
- Gandhi was arrested, Congress was declared illegal and ordinances were passed giving the government special powers.
- The government brutally suppressed the movement. Gradually, the movement died down.

## **Impact of the Civil Disobedience Movement**

- Though the movement did not bring freedom to the country, it played an important role in deepening the freedom struggle of the people.

- The movement instilled patriotism among the people in the country which did not die down till the country became independent.
- The movement widened the base of the freedom struggle as people from different classes including workers, merchants, tribals and women participated in it.
- The movement popularised new methods of propagandas. For example, the 'Prabhat Pheris' (groups of men and women who roamed in the village and town singing patriotic songs) became popular.
- Many social reforms were initiated as part of the movement. Depressed classes were now given entry into temples and access to wells.
- Women participated in the movement in large numbers, and they became equal partners in the freedom struggle.
- The Government realised the need for passing the constitutional reforms and thus passed the Government of India Act, 1935, which introduced the principles of federation and provincial autonomy.
- The Congress achieved good results in elections to Legislative Assemblies in the following year and to Provincial Legislative Assemblies in 1937.

In short, the Civil Disobedience Movement ignited national feelings among the people and trained them for launching new movements against the British rule.